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That this Synod request the House of Bishops to commend under Canon B4 an Order of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Partnership or Same-Sex Marriage, indicative of no departure from the doctrine of the Church of England on any essential matter, and furnished with ample safeguards that no parish should be obliged to host, nor minister conduct, such a service.?

Hereford, the least populous and most rural of all the English dioceses, briefly hit the Church of England headlines last October as our Diocesan Synod passed the above motion by the decisive margin of 41 votes to 18. The motion consequently moves to the agenda of General Synod for debate in due course.

Readers of the IC newsletter [and the website news] might be interested in the story leading up to this decision, and might also wish to raise the motion for debate in their own deaneries and dioceses.

In 2011, a number of us realised that our identification as Christians potentially led those outside the Church to believe we held certain non-inclusive views. The Church's leadership maintained an official line against equal marriage (as it had done against civil partnerships earlier) which was quite different from the views held by many of the individual people in its congregations. My own experience as a civil-partnered gay man has been one of complete welcome, inclusion and support, but the lack of official support is undermining, and actively damaging. A gap-year student here some years ago was told by his parents that it must be wrong to be gay 'because the church says so?.

It was clear that those of us who thought differently needed to do so more visibly. The Revd Kay Garlick and I received a positive reception from the Dean of Hereford, and the cathedral subsequently decided to add the strapline 'An inclusive church welcoming everyone?' to its pewsheets, orders of services, music lists and other literature. At the same time, a committee formed to create a 'forum?', and at early meetings involving visiting speakers and discussions, at least sixty people (clergy and lay) from across the diocese signed up and paid an initial subscription.

The forum is not confined to the 'gay issue': talks and discussion have been held concerning disability, women's ministry and mental illness.

The motion calling on the church to provide a form of words following a civil partnership or same-sex marriage was worded carefully, and reflected closely the moves to allow the remarriage of divorcees in the 1970s. Kay, as chair of HDICF, travelled to three deaneries who chose to debate the motion and put the case in favour. All three (Leominster, Ross & Archenfield, and Kington & Weobley) passed the motion, Kington & Weobley doing so unanimously. It is fair to say that we were surprised at how strong the inclusive feeling was, amongst the congregations of what many see as remote and traditional rural parishes.

Having been passed at three deaneries, the motion moved to the diocesan synod for debate in Ludlow on 21 October. The Bishop of Hereford chaired the debate, and all present were aware of the potential implications. Amongst the arguments 'against?' were pleas that we should wait for the bishops of the Church of England to reach their conclusions as well as fears that the diocese was being taken over by a 'politically

correct? ideological group.

Strong arguments were raised in favour of the motion, especially from clergy who had been approached by same-sex couples wishing to celebrate their union in church; it was felt that the church could offer nothing of value to such people, who could so easily become involved with church life after such a service. Part-way through, the Bishop of Hereford, The Rt Revd Richard Frith, ceded the chair and spoke himself, quoting a recent article in The Tablet that had stated that to call same-sex relationships 'disordered' was 'insulting, demeaning and wrong'. He made it clear in subsequent broadcasts on television and radio that he had been enabled to take this position because of the evidence of strong feeling from his own clergy and people in the diocese.

We would be delighted if other deaneries or dioceses wished to debate the 'Hereford' motion. While it remains on the agenda of General Synod, its case would be strengthened if more areas showed tangible and documented support for it. We believe strongly that the core of the Church of England's active congregation is quietly inclusive, and largely content that gay and lesbian people should receive the church's endorsement for their committed and loving relationships. Change to the church's official line can happen, but it sometimes needs to be motivated from the ground upwards!

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