

Response to:

Church Society

An Analysis of

Listening with Love and Faith: Responses in More Detail



LIVING
IN LOVE
& FAITH

PART 1: Response relating to the LLF Questionnaire by Brendan Research

Thank you for the interest shown in the research to produce such a lengthy and detailed *Analysis*. Some of the questions raised appear to stem from not being aware of the remit, or how the four separate pieces of research sit together.

The remit of the *Listening with Love and Faith* report (LwLF) was to “reflect back – as faithfully, impartially and accurately as possible – what those who engaged with *Living in Love and Faith* have said by means of the questionnaire, the focus groups and creative submissions” (p6, LwLF). Brendan Research carried out the questionnaire element of the report, and also the analysis of independent submissions. Brendan Research itself was founded in 2020 (*Analysis*, p2 footnote 5) but our researchers are people with decades of experience in qualitative and quantitative research in denominations including the Church of England. We work with a variety of denominations across the United Kingdom and have no formal connections with the Church of England. A “well-established, independent firm” (*Analysis* p2) was indeed used to conduct this research.

Brendan Research worked closely with the Next Steps Group in order to permit as many people as possible to participate in this listening process. The use of an online survey permitted an unprecedented number of voices to be heard, while hard copies were also made available to those who preferred to respond in that way. The questionnaire was designed with questions chosen to enable answers to the aims of the LLF process, to gauge diversity in responses, and to enable respondents to say what they felt they wanted to through textual responses.

As described in pages 9-12, *Listening with Love and Faith* is a synthesis of the four strands of listening. Each strand was related but distinct, offered a different facet or type of response and was undertaken independently. Appropriate methodology was used in each stage, with topics arising from the data, rather than models being imposed. The qualitative data in the independent submissions were not coded using the same methodological approach to analysis as the open text in the survey (with or without NVivo as the tool to conduct that analysis) because submissions were not responding to the same research questions as respondents were in the survey.

For the questionnaire, NVivo was used to support manual coding of qualitative data by the researchers. As set out in the methodology section of the report, researchers used an iterative, inductive process so that codes emerged from the data. These thematic codes were then used to structure the report.

Where the survey responses were coded thematically, the independent submission data offered a complementary perspective in the longer, more nuanced responses. This required a different methodological approach to analysis as explained on pages 107 and 108 of the technical report, *Gathered Responses in more Detail* (GRmD).

Rather than being a “serious weakness”, constricting the responses and their analyses with an overarching methodology would not have allowed people to respond so freely or the complementary topics to manifest themselves.

Qualification of respondents

The statement that “There was no attempt to ensure that those who responded to the survey were within the Church of England, or that multiple submissions were not made by a single person.” (p1) is incorrect. In the first place, respondents were asked to confirm that their responses were based on their interaction with the *LLF* material, in line with the remit, and additionally to state their diocese. As reported on p18 of the technical report (GRmD) a small number of responses said they were not part of a Church of England diocese.

Secondly, in terms of multiple responses, responses were downloaded weekly from SurveyMonkey to minimize exposure to reduced data privacy environments. On each occasion the data were checked for multiple responses from the same IP address, and textual answers were read and checked for similarity of phrasing that would indicate the same respondent or a campaign. Some duplicate entries, generally someone starting and then re-starting their survey were removed, others were found to be different people from the same household making their own responses.

Finally, with respect to the independent responses, there is the possibility that persons may have submitted more than one response either anonymously or under a false name but that we had only the data available to us to work with was clearly acknowledged this as a limitation in the report; we could not guarantee beyond doubt that these submissions were a faithful summary of views (p109 GRmD). No independent submission indicated explicitly it had been sent in by a church (or an individual from a church) under Extended Episcopal Oversight.

In a related point, in a comment on the focus group, the *Analysis* asks “why did only 112 of the 1,655 people who offered themselves for a focus group respond?” (p14) As we state “The vast majority of these came in after the closing date for the focus groups, but people chose to be added to a reserve list.” (p10, GRmD).

Attribution of quotes

The open questions within the questionnaire allowed respondents to freely volunteer their thoughts and feelings about the course. Themes emerged across the answers to these questions and the selected quotes illustrate these pervasive themes rather looking at each question in isolation. The quotes selected are not accompanied by figures suggesting the proportion of views they represent. This would have been an ill-advised handling of the nuanced language and meanings present in the data. Moreover, as already stated, the purpose of the survey was not to quantify opinions on the subject matter. Rather, the qualitative survey material served to capture the diverse range views and reflections offered by respondents.

That quotes are not attributed has been addressed by the response compiled by Church Army’s Research Unit (CARU),

“To insist that contributions should be attributed and identifiable shows a poor understanding of the research methodology involved. In line with established research practice, we sought to ensure that participants could share their views in confidence and in a place of safe expression. This is all the more necessary with sensitive subjects such as sexuality and faith. [...] A careful reading of our report shows the breadth and the balance of different views that were expressed.”

It is remarkable that Church Society should suggest that the “credibility [of quotations] is reduced by the lack of attribution,” and to suggest that the views of “an older man” or “a young woman from the LGBTQ+ community” should be treated in materially different ways in the analysis. Each offers their response to the *LLF* materials and each response is equally valid.

Responses to “Church Society comment”

There are a number of points listed on page 8, reproduced and replied to as follows:

- *There is no way to be sure that respondents were members of the Church of England, or even professed Christian faith.*
Respondents stated that their responses were based on their engagement with the LLF materials, and stated their diocese. We might note that there is no definition of a “member of the Church of England”.
- *The survey focussed on respondents’ experience of LLF, and did not directly address the issue of whether the church should perform or bless same-sex marriages.*
This was the remit of the survey as is made clear throughout our report.
- *There was a low level of participation*
That almost 6,500 people chose to respond in this way is an unprecedented number.
- *The low level of participation makes the exercise vulnerable to campaign groups on all sides of the argument.*
Responses were checked weekly for “campaign-type” responses and duplicate responses. There was no evidence found for e.g. automated responses or very similar wording used across responses.
- *There were widely varying participation rates across dioceses (Carlisle only mustered 27 responses) and the results are skewed towards those dioceses with a higher rate of participation.*
The remit of the survey was to hear from those who had engaged with LLF, and different dioceses engaged with the materials at different rates. The materials were available for anyone to download and use without restriction. No one was coerced into engaging or not engaging with the material.
- *Exeter, Oxford, Chester, Southwark and London between them provided 30% of the responses.*
These are some of the largest dioceses and would be expected to provide a good percentage of responses.
- *The positionality of the researchers is not disclosed.*
CARU (Church Army’s Research Unit) have answered this point well,

“the Analysis complains that ‘the positionality of the researchers is not stated’ and proceeds to make presumptions about the researchers and their views, [...] We are very aware that we all come from particular positions, and within the research team we have different viewpoints. Regardless of this we are able to approach the task in a professional manner.”

Brendan Research would stand with CARU and “strongly resist the notion that people with non-heterosexual backgrounds should be excluded from engaging in research in this issue.” That one of the researchers is a member of the Church of Scotland, whose General Assembly agreed to allow ministers who wished to, to perform same-sex marriages three weeks after the questionnaire closed, is no indication of the researcher’s views, and to suggest that this reduces the credibility of the report (p1) is an unwarranted attack on their professionalism.

Number of responses

Throughout the *Analysis*, comments are made about the response rate, e.g. p5 “how many of the 6,400 actually completed the questionnaire?” In this type of study it is important to allow respondents the agency to decide how many, or how few, questions they choose to answer. Some may only wish to answer textual questions when they can say what they want to, others prefer the quantitative elements. The only questions that were compulsory were the confirmation of understanding of the privacy statement at the start, necessary for GDPR, and whether the respondent had led the course, necessary to navigate the questionnaire. Sections of the questionnaire were only available to some respondents, such as the

questions for course leaders. To give a figure of those who had answered every single question would not be helpful or representative of the respondents. Numbers of responses to each of the quantitative questions are given throughout in line with good practice.

At p5 it is suggested that “percentages are impossible to ascertain with any level of certainty” This is clearly false as the subsequent paragraph notes, “The percentage figures given in the report assume the number of people giving the responses, rather than the number of responses given” which is clearly what is necessary in this case.

The *Analysis* p5 is correct in noticing that the wrong column of ONS data had been used, and we apologise for this error. Thank you for bringing it to our attention. We concur with the ONS and Adjusted figures given in Table 2, p6. However, the ONS categories reported are mutually exclusive – the percentages sum to 100%. As the *Analysis* notes, participants in this questionnaire were able to choose more than one category. Treating the percentages as mutually exclusive in the “LLF” column is arithmetically incorrect; the percentages here sum to 105.8%, rendering the “Ratio” column meaningless.

Conclusion

The *Analysis* appears to disregard the clearly stated remit and aims of this part of the *LLF* process, to “reflect back - as faithfully, impartially and accurately as possible – what those who have engaged with Living in Love and Faith have said by means of the questionnaire, the focus groups and creative submissions.” (LwLF p6).

It is neither

- a vote on “whether the church should adopt same-sex Marriage” (p2, p7, p8),
- claimed to be representative of the population of England (p2, p4, p5, p8),
- the use of SurveyMonkey to form doctrine (p1, p9),
- an attempt to lead instead of the episcopate (p9),
- nor claiming to represent ecumenical or Church tradition (p9).

Indeed, the *Analysis* states:

It is the episcopate who should give the lead in all this, rather than a survey. The wise shepherd does indeed pay attention to the flock, but the flock should not determine the direction of travel. That is for those who, by virtue of their consecration, are to be “guardians of the faith of the apostles”. (p9)

This is exactly the second aim of the report,

“to ensure that the voices, perspectives and insights expressed through this churchwide engagement are listened to and heard by the bishops of the Church of England as they embark on the final stage of the journey in discerning a ways forward for the Church of England during the autumn of 2022. (p6 LwLF).

Brendan Research is always happy to address comments on our research, and we are confident that we have worked to high standards in conjunction with the Living in Love and Faith Next Steps Group. We are particularly grateful to the Bishop of Sherbourne, the Rt Revd Karen Gorham, the Bishop of Grantham, the Rt Revd Dr Nicholas Chamberlain, and the Bishop of Maidstone, the Rt Revd Rod Thomas for their helpful comments in our meetings.

Brendan Research - October 2022

PART 2: Response relating to the LLF Focus Groups by Church Army's Research Unit

Church Army's Research Unit (CARU) undertook the focus group element of report, and these notes relate to that part only.

CARU worked closely to the remit it was given in terms of the scope and nature of the focus groups. At every stage of the process we were advised by the Next First Steps Group, which specifically reviewed the questions that formed the basis for the discussion in the groups. Primarily, the groups were designed to provide another approach to gathering views on this important issue, to complement those gathered through the survey. There are clear links to the kind of questions asked in the survey. The groups enabled rich and deep discussions to take place in a safe environment which added significantly to the LLF process. We cannot see how this could be '*a serious weakness*' as stated on page 1 of the Church Society Analysis.

The focus groups were self-selecting, in that no one was forced to take part. The statistics we produced reveal the range of people involved according to different characteristics. The participants were not all white as stated on page 14, and the groups did actually include people who work and those who have childcare responsibilities. Therefore, it cannot be said such people were excluded, as stated on page 11.

Providing groups at different times of the day and in various regions of the country was an opportunity for many people to be involved. We recognised there was no onsite group that took place in London or in an urban deprived area and we made attempts to adjust for this. This is not an issue about methodology as incorrectly stated on page 13, but the practical scope of the research exercise. However, we know that people from London and deprived areas did attend groups, either online or in person, so these voices were heard. Some people travelled considerable distances to be part of a group, as they saw this as a valuable opportunity to express their views. To state that '*poorer and non-white voices were not heard*' (page 11) is false.

We went to some lengths to record the characteristics of those involved, precisely because we know how this can affect the research if not monitored. There was a higher percentage of non-heterosexual people in the groups, but they still represented a minority of less than 20%, and thus hardly able to dominate the discussion, as implied on page 12. The Analysis makes a contradictory point on the same page about the percentage of women in the groups, implying that at 40% their voices were suppressed. The way the groups were led by professional researchers ensured that people from all standpoints could express themselves, as indeed they did. To say that the celibate gay voice was absent is not true, another conclusion drawn from a careless reading of the findings.

The Analysis states on page 1 that '*The data analysis is questionable given that quotes are unattributed and there seems to be little consideration given to balance*'. To insist that contributions should be attributed and identifiable shows a poor understanding of the research methodology involved. In line with established research practice, we sought to ensure that participants could share their views in confidence and in a place of safe expression. This is all the more necessary with sensitive subjects such as sexuality and faith. Furthermore, our outline and detail of the discussions was balanced, in as much as we reported on all the main points that were made. A careful reading of our report shows the breadth and the balance of different views that were expressed.

Contrary to what is suggested on page 11, we think that the use of the creative element in the focus groups provided an important non-literate element. To say that this gave advantage to people whose first language is English is inaccurate and bizarre. It was an innovative part of the research method that was readily welcomed by participants and provided a good quantity of interesting and revealing visual data, which, if examined, will show many different views and opinions. It is interesting that the *Analysis* ignores this visual element of the research almost entirely.

It is important to note two other important elements that were not raised in the Analysis. Firstly, the views expressed through the groups came from across a very wide spectrum and therefore it is misleading to suggest that the responses were curated to augment one particular standpoint. There was no *'amplification'* of the LGBTQ+ views, nor were contributions nurtured through a *'script'*, nor drawn out as *'a result of leading questions'*, as suggested on page 13. Secondly, all the participants provided anonymous feedback which we consider to be an important part of the research process. Although people expressed views from across the spectrum there was no indication in the feedback of being directed or influenced. Indeed, most people explicitly thanked us for encouraging them to freely share their view, whatever that might have been.

On page 1 the Analysis complains that *'the positionality of the researchers is not stated'* and proceeds to make presumptions about the researchers and their views, based in one case on where a person supposedly attends worship, which is actually factually wrong. We are very aware that we all come from particular positions, and within the research team we have different viewpoints. Regardless of this we are able to approach the task in a professional manner, guided by our research ethics made explicit in the technical report. The suggestion is that we ignored our own declared ethical standards. Furthermore, we would strongly resist the notion that people with non-heterosexual backgrounds should be excluded from engaging in research in this issue.

We clearly state, despite what is claimed on page 14, that the report on our findings was not an overview of what the Church of England thinks, but rather a snapshot of views expressed as an outcome of the LLF process. However, this does not make it *'an assembly of random unattributed quotes'*. Even though it is not a representative sample of the church, it does happen to present most kinds of views found within it. This is its strength, not as a partisan statement or summary of quotes from like-minded people, but an encompassing reflection that recognises the diversity of strongly held views, powerfully expressed in discussion and in visual material.

It appears to us that those who commented on the focus group research in the Analysis may well not have attended any of the groups or consulted with those who did. If they had, one would expect that they might have concurred with the feedback of those who actually took part which clearly indicated that it was a process of open and honest discussion where all voices were heard, and many different views recorded. We are always happy to address comments on our research and have confidence that what we have presented is robust and innovative, and a significant and positive contribution to the ongoing LLF listening process in the Church of England.

Church Army Research Unit – October 2022