

Reducing Wedding Fees – Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn, 69

This is a friendly amendment, drafted in collaboration with the mover of the motion.

When this deanery synod motion to reduce wedding fees came to Blackburn Diocesan Synod 4 years ago, I voted against it.

But I was wrong.

I voted against it because I'm an archdeacon (I might have forgotten to pack my dog collar, but I'm still an archdeacon), and I was worried whether the Church could afford it, for the reasons that William Nye sets out very well in his briefing paper.

However I was wrong, because I believe what we say in the wedding service is true, 'Marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means of his grace.'

Marriage is a very precious gift of God, not just for Christians but for humanity as a whole. Faithful committed relationships bring stability to homes and families and are the bedrock of society. Stable faithful sexual relationships can be found inside and outside marriage, but intimate relationships which are sealed by the public commitment of marriage last longer than those which aren't, and this stability is a massive benefit to children and families.

If marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means of his grace then we shouldn't be charging for it.

- The medieval church had a word for trying to charge people for access to the means of grace and that word was simony. I am delighted to learn from our ecumenical representative that the RC Church still does not charge for weddings because of their sacramental nature, and neither should we.

I've heard it said that £480 is a drop in the ocean compared to the total cost of a wedding. That may well be true in some parts of the country, but it is not true in Blackburn or Blackpool, which have some of the most deprived wards in the country.

I don't believe abolishing wedding fees will cost the Church £15bn as suggested in the briefing paper. Of course there is a risk, faith is spelt RISK, but my amendment is cautiously worded, as you would expect from an archdeacon with a cautious approach to risk. It simply asks for a time-limited trial, so that we can test whether people will be more generous under grace than under law.

Churches will be free to invite couples to make a donation to the cost of a wedding, and to give as much as they can afford. God is no one's debtor, and I believe we will find that many couples who could easily afford to give more than £480 will do so generously, knowing that they will be enabling another couple to marry for free.

But even if income to the Church did drop we would still have taken the most wonderful opportunity to tell the people of this land that the Church of England is here for you. We believe in marriage and we want to offer you a priceless gift, because we want every couple to have the best chance to build a secure and stable home, sealing your relationship in a public ceremony of commitment in front of family and friends, and to do so in the presence of the God who loves you and wants the best for you.

If you want some extras and bells we can do that too for a fee, but we won't charge you for the marriage ceremony itself, because marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means of his grace.

I urge you, members of Synod, to support this amendment which I move in my name.