

12th December 2023

Guidance on Prayers of Love and Faith

It is with great sorrow that I am writing to let you know that despite significant and deep-rooted disagreements about them, including my own which I have expressed privately and publicly, the House of Bishops has nonetheless commended the Resource section of Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF), with some basic guidance as to how they might be used, from Sunday 17th December.

This will allow set prayers including blessings for use with same-sex couples, at the discretion of the incumbent, in private or as part of an existing public worship service. In particular, it is noted that *"The PLF should not give the impression of simulating marriage."* (Guidance I.3.5). The standalone services have not yet been authorized for experimental use, although guidance on this is expected in the Spring, but this would be on the basis that such experiments should eventually be subjected to the proper scrutiny of the General Synod (a 'canon B2' process). Neither crucial Pastoral Guidance on the behaviour of clergy, nor properly formulated Pastoral Reassurance for those for whom this impairs fellowship, has been published - despite previous reassurances that this would be the case, which is an added failure of collective episcopal pastoral care which I deeply regret. It should be noted that the commendation of these prayers does not give any formal authorisation or legal status to these prayers, they simply add to resources available for use at an incumbent's discretion.

The stated intention of the House of Bishops is that PLF does not undermine the current doctrine and teaching of the Church, that *"...Holy Matrimony is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman, blessed by God in creation and pointing to the love between Christ and the Church; a way of life which Christ makes holy. It is within marriage that sexual intimacy finds its proper place."* (Guidance p.3), at least not *in an essential matter*. While it is good to restate the clear teaching of Scripture and the Church on this, I believe it is a serious error to allow in liturgy something that at best confuses people and more seriously risks misleading them about issues of sin and salvation, by redefining repentance.

Although legally the use of PLF is the choice of an incumbent, the lack of completed pastoral guidance particularly in relation to whether such prayers can be used for clergy, and the lack of completed pastoral reassurance to create provision with integrity for those who cannot use them, leaves clergy and parishes on all sides vulnerable to legal and other challenges. While the decision about the use of these prayers is one for clergy, ideally in consultation with their PCC, and no bishop can prevent them being used, nevertheless my strong recommendation is that you not only do not use the prayers, but also consider carefully how you will respond to those who choose to do so. The extent to which such public prayers contradict the 1998 Lambeth I.10 resolution reflects the seriousness of the issue, in that deliberate choices to deviate from that resolution led many Anglican Primates to declare 'impaired fellowship' with those who have supported such changes.

However as these issues have the potential to divide congregations and create pastoral tensions, I am happy to share some practical advice for Ebbsfleet parishes as a Bishop in spiritual oversight.

1. **Do not use the prayers.** Their use is divisive, their legal status is questionable, the implications of their use will confuse clear biblical teaching, and there is not the necessary completed guidance and provision for conscience that is needed. If you choose not to use the prayers, you **DO NOT NEED TO DO ANYTHING**. Neither the default teaching of the church nor its authorised liturgy has changed. The official ‘theological rationale’ for commending the prayers is provision for a ‘time of uncertainty’ which reflects the deep divisions in the church on this issue. My pastoral wisdom from 30 years of ministry is, if you face a situation with deep division and in uncertainty, “don’t change things!” – rather work for deeper understanding, prayer and unity first.

2. If you can, **pass a PCC resolution not to use the prayers.** A simple resolution such as: *“This PCC, recognising the considerable hurt and divisions that this issue has caused, is resolved not to use the Prayers of Love and Faith, and requests the bishop to make suitable provision for our conscientious position with respect to any impaired fellowship that may result from their use elsewhere.”*

At this stage it is not clear what “formal structural pastoral provision” will be offered to churches. I have made clear that an arrangement similar to my own, (which is not provided as a ‘legal’ right but is only discretionary for a diocesan bishop), is a not sufficient provision for what are in effect moral objections. I am happy to be consulted if parishes need further guidance.

There are some ministers whose PCCs would be divided by the request to pass a resolution, in which case you do not need to do so – because these prayers are only commended, an incumbent’s decision is final. If you do experience inappropriate pressure from within the parish, local community or from further afield, please raise that with me and be assured of my support.

3. **Consider what implications ‘impaired fellowship’ may have** on your ministry. An incumbent is responsible for the spiritual welfare of the church under their care, so it would be inappropriate to have someone to preach or preside who did not uphold biblical standards, and that may include even a bishop, as Article 26 allows. Our denomination has been structured since the reformation to ensure that a local incumbent may remain faithful to biblical norms, whatever pressure from outside. Spiritual safeguarding is as vital as any other safeguarding, so where you have concerns, act accordingly. I will be publishing further guidance in due course, as the details about provision for conscience becomes clearer.

4. **Do not leave the Church of England now.** I am aware how deeply distressing even the discussion of these issues is, particularly among those who are same-sex attracted yet committed to the biblical norms for marriage and sexual behaviour. These norms have not been changed, neither in God’s Word nor in the church’s teaching. It has only ever been the calling of Christians to stand up for biblical holiness in a rebellious world and even in a confused church.

I have found Jesus’ command to the church of Thyatira (Rev.2:18-29) a particular challenge: Jesus calls out the church’s leadership there for tolerating false teaching on sexual immorality from a prophetess Jezebel, with a warning of his judgement; but to those who are faithful to his biblical teaching (v.24) he says: *“Only hold on to what you have until I come.”* He doesn’t call for them to abandon the church despite its leadership’s errors, only to persevere in the truth.

That coheres with the action in mercy that Jude calls for, when calling the church to contend for

the faith – have mercy for doubters, mercy to those in danger of being led astray and even mercy to those corrupting the church (Jude 22-23). But the calling to ‘contend for the faith’ is a calling to stand up for what is right within the church, and not to abandon it to its leaders’ error. Even when visible differentiation is called for in the NT (eg Rom.16:17f, 2 John 10f), it is expressed by people not receiving the ministry of particular false teachers, not by the faithful leaving the church.


The foundations of the Church of England are still secure, Christ and His Word – but as Paul reminds us 1 Cor.3:10-15, not everything that people build on those foundations will last the scrutiny of Jesus, yet it is our calling to keep building where we can with what really lasts.

I am aware that for some, conscience issues on PLF have already created burdens that seem too great to bear, and a different denominational connections may feel the only option for the future. Sometimes family breakups can seem the lesser of evils, and in the end the spiritual welfare of those we are called to serve must have priority. If it is right that if we can no longer serve the Church with a clear conscientious faith it would be sinful for us to remain (Romans 14:22-23); so if that is you, though it grieves me, I will support you. However I am not persuaded that what has been proposed has prevented our gospel proclamation or impaired godly living for faithful people, nor prevented people discipling others in that way. Though fellowship will be impaired by this harmful innovation, it is only within a church than we can contend for truth and rebuke error– which is reason to remain.

5. **Support the CEEC and others in seeking suitable provision.** While as the Bishop of Ebbsfleet I am able now to provide more than just ‘informal spiritual oversight’ that CEEC have suggested (for resolution parishes), I would still encourage churches to add their names to the CEEC list. CEEC have said that they will then expect to refer such churches back to my oversight, where I have Honorary Assistant Bishop status. Registering is still worth doing to help clarify the extent to which wider provision is going to be needed. But I have publicly said many times that a provision that depends only on the ‘discretion’ of a diocesan bishop is not sufficient for providing for this moral issue. What is required is a ‘legal’ provision, similar to the level of delegation that already exists for Area Bishops and was proposed (but not accepted) as “Transferred Episcopal Arrangement” when the women bishops’ legislation was being debated. That simply means delegating episcopal authority by a legal instrument, not by a diocesan bishop’s ‘discretion’, as it is my experience that different diocesan bishops interpret my role in resolution churches in very different ways.

In conclusion, let me remind you that we are still in Advent – a season to remember that a day of Jesus’ judgement is coming, and closer now than ever. That is a reassurance that whatever our struggles for holiness and truth, one day our Lord will resolve them all. In the meantime, in this in-between time, we have good news to proclaim – the Saviour and Lord has come. Our hope has never been in our Church, but in the Lord of our Church; and it is our commission to share his glorious life-transforming good news. That is the priority in these next weeks of Christmas, as many from our local communities will choose to join in our Christmas celebrations. There is no greater joy than seeing the gospel changing lives, and ultimately that is the fruit that will last.

Have a fruitful Christmas, and a peaceful New Year,
Yours in Christ,

 + Rob Munro