



November 2023

Dear sisters and brothers,

I'm writing with an update on the General Synod's recent debates concerning the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF), which include prayers asking for God's blessing on same-sex relationships - and offer some reflections on these debates.

General Synod (the national parliament of the Church of England) **voted to allow the PLF to be used in regular services** (eg Sunday services) – this is expected to start within a couple of months. Synod also asked for the Bishops to prepare the PLF for 'stand-alone services' (eg a Saturday afternoon blessing of N & M) on a temporary, trial basis. It is not yet clear when that would happen – probably sometime in 2024. In the meantime, work will also continue on seeking to get legal authorisation for such stand-alone services to happen on a permanent basis – although as things stand, the chances of that getting voted through any time soon are very slim (as it would require a 2/3 majority).

The Synod debates and votes highlighted a number of issues, which all agree on:

- ☐ **The church nationally is split almost down the middle on these issues.** Many of the votes in Synod were very close – about 52% in favour to 48% against in the final vote in the 'House of Laity', and a key amendment was passed by just 1 vote.
- ☐ The 'House of Bishops' are increasingly divided as well – they voted in favour of an amendment to their own proposals, which they had released just a few weeks previously.
- ☐ The depth of feeling on both 'sides' of the debate is incredibly strong

**Some in our church will be delighted** that Church of England churches will be able to begin asking God's blessing on gay relationships very soon, but are dismayed that stand-alone services may not be fully authorised for years to come, and are frustrated that I've said the PLF won't be used at St James' by the Park whilst I'm vicar (as expressed in my pastoral letter in February 2023). It's important to emphasise that these people aren't simply choosing to ignore the Bible's teaching on sex and marriage, but are trying to grapple hard with how we apply that teaching in our contemporary culture.

**Others in our church are distraught** that a clear majority of the Bishops voted in favour of such services, and are considering whether they can, in good conscience, stay part of a denomination which uses such prayers. It's important to emphasise that these people are not 'anti-gay' (indeed, some have gay family members whom they love dearly); their concern is that the bishops and PLF are going against what they see as the clear teaching of Scripture on sex and marriage.

**Still others in our church wonder what all the fuss is about** and wonder why everyone else can't just muddle along as we've always done. The difficult reality is that the two viewpoints are diametrically opposed and fundamentally incompatible:

- The historical Christian understanding has been that sex outside of male-female marriage is against God's will and therefore ultimately damaging to human beings as well as unholy. From this point of view, to say that God *would* bless such relationships is to encourage people to sin – which is to encourage something that would be harmful to them.
- The revisionist understanding says that loving, faithful same-sex partnerships can reflect God's love just as clearly as a loving, faithful male-female marriage. From this point of view, to say that God *won't* bless such relationships brings deep psychological, pastoral and spiritual pain – it is harmful to them.

No illustration is perfect, but the situation isn't too dissimilar to one we faced in the pandemic about whether or not vaccines were good:

- Some people saw the vaccines as life-lines that would radically reduce the risk of serious covid infection. To be vaccinated was the sensible thing to do; not to be vaccinated was being irresponsible to the wider society and could bring harm especially to clinically vulnerable people.
- Other people saw the vaccines as dangerous and rushed. To be vaccinated was irresponsible and could bring you harm and could bring all sorts of unforetold consequences over time to the wider population.

In both the PLF debates and the vaccines example, one side sees the viewpoint of the other side not just as wrong, but as deeply harmful to countless individuals. These aren't just differing opinions. They are diametrically opposed convictions about what is best for human flourishing. That is why so many people are so worked up on these debates!

How are people feeling about all this? Lots of people on both 'sides' of the debate have similar feelings:

- **Deep sadness** – for people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or same-sex attracted – who are once again caught in the cross-fire of these debates. These are precious brothers and sisters with names and deeply painful stories; they are people to be loved, not some letter in an LGBTQIA+ acronym, still less a problem to be solved.
- **Deep grief** – that the depth of division in our church and the CofE nationally is so great. We know that Jesus bought the church with his own blood and prays for its unity; our divisions must grieve him so much more than they grieve us.
- **Grave concern** for the future of the CofE nationally – there are already stories of churches beginning to advertise services of blessing for same-sex couples – and of people leaving those churches as a consequence. It seems to me unavoidable that over time, people (from both sides of the debate) will feel compelled to leave their local church. Such ruptures – even if handled as well as possible – will leave deep scars for all involved.
- **Confused** by a lack of clarity and direction from the Bishops. Over recent months, they've changed their minds or gone back on their promises several times. I think that's largely because they've been tasked with an impossible job – trying to introduce PLF without seeming to change the church's doctrine on marriage. Now they've been asked to trial services for a limited time which they know are highly unlikely to receive permanent legal authorisation. It's hard to know how many more twists and turns are yet to come.

- Much **angst** – knowing how work for the unity of the church locally and nationally, whilst remaining true to our personal convictions, is difficult! And if we're finding it difficult, how much harder must it be for our Bishops!
- Huge **frustration** – that at a time of year when we have so many wonderful opportunities to share the good news of God-become-man, we are being distracted by these decisions and their implications.

These might feel very 'negative' emotions. But on both sides of the debate, there is also a **deep commitment to praying** for God's will to be done. And there is a **great confidence that Jesus is, somehow, at work through all of this**. He said, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16.18). If not even the gates of Hades can overcome Jesus' work in his church, we can be sure that these current difficulties won't derail God's good and loving plans and kingdom-building purposes! So please join me in praying for the Church of England – confident that Jesus is continuing to build his church.

### **What next for us?**

I want to re-iterate that, whether or not you agree with my historical Christian view of marriage and sexual ethics, **I am here for you as your pastor**. My role isn't to inflict my views on you; my style isn't to judge people. My role is to prayerfully, lovingly and graciously point you to the fulness of life that is in Christ, by the power of his Spirit. If you have personal or pastoral or theological struggles around the rights or wrongs of same-sex relationships or about the current situation in the CofE, I hope you will feel able to chat with me. It will be my privilege to listen to your story and pray with you. I also want to re-iterate that **gay people are welcome in our church** (indeed, we had a preacher just a few weeks ago who describes himself as same-sex attracted).

Some people will want to do a bit more studying on this issue, to understand the differing points of view and come to their own personal conclusions. I'm wondering about setting up a **book group in the new year** which would meet every fortnight to look at a few chapters from an excellent new book written by someone who engages very graciously and carefully with lots of the (good and bad!) arguments that are used by both sides of the debate. If you'd be interested in joining such a book group, please let me know.

Finally, **the way we handle our disagreements** as brothers and sisters is just as important as the differing arguments we put forward. We must keep praying for each other and for God's will to be done; we must keep letting God speak prophetically through Scripture into our situation (even if that means changing our opinions!); we must keep being really careful about the way we speak about those who disagree with us and those who are different from us. If our disagreements are characterised by unkind or inaccurate words, we give the devil a foothold. But if, despite our disagreements, we continue to love and serve one another and keep making every effort to live in unity, Jesus's Lordship and victory will be evident.

In the name of our precious Saviour Jesus, and with my love and prayers,



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