

14th December 2023

Pastoral Letter to all Clergy and Readers

Dear Friends,

I hope this letter finds you all well and pacing yourself as we journey through Advent to the great celebration of Christmas. I am hugely grateful for all of your ministries and consider it a huge privilege to serve you as your Bishop. I wanted to write following the majority decision of the House of Bishops on December 12th to commend the Prayers of Love and Faith for use in existing services of public worship from December 17th. I recognise that the run up to Christmas is not an ideal time for the Church to be issuing guidance. Please don't feel you need to digest all this until after a well-earned post-Christmas break.

The suite of resources is now available on the Church of England website [<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/prayers-of-love-and-faith.pdf>], alongside the pastoral guidance for using the prayers [<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/living-in-love-and-faith-pastoral-guidance.pdf>]. There will be further conversations in the House of Bishops in January about the next part of the guidance concerning what is permitted for ministers. The House also decided to explore ways of bringing forward the use of standalone services under Canon B5A. The House is bound by the Synod motion that any prayers or services should not be indicative of a change of doctrine (the Cornes amendment to the February Synod motion). The extent to which these prayers comply with that amendment is a source of significant division both within the House of Bishops and more widely.

On the basis of their theological convictions many will welcome this development, but with sadness that the provision doesn't go much further. Others, equally on the basis of theological conviction, will have profound misgivings and not feel able to use these resources. Still others will remain undecided, wanting to read through the resources and the associated guidance and come to a more settled view in consultation with others.

Guidance

Whatever my own convictions on these matters I will continue to support you personally and pastorally whatever decision you come to about the use of these resources. I did vote for the original motion to provide prayers in the February Synod in 2023. I did so because I have no doubt about the many goods that we all see in committed, exclusive same-sex relationships and consider it right that these are affirmed. However, in doing so I was clear that there needed to be proper protections both for those who use the prayers and those who feel unable to. I am uncomfortable that undertakings to bring the full suite of proposals, including the complete pastoral guidance and pastoral reassurance to bring clarity, have been delayed. This creates uncertainty and, with it, huge risks for our unity – for which Christ prayed.

Under these proposals the use of the prayers in a public (though not standalone) service lies with the minister at his or her discretion under Canon B5. I have neither the right nor the desire to interfere in this choice. Choices about the use of the prayers will be based on theological conviction and no lay leaders or clergy can be expected to use the Prayers if they feel unable to do so in good conscience. Even if a PCC are strongly in favour a minister cannot be compelled to use them.

Caring for one another

We have to accept we are deeply divided on these issues. I hope we will recognise that these divisions are on the basis of deeply held theological convictions. I recognise your pastoral heart and integrity whatever position you have come to. I would urge that we exercise care and sensitivity in how we express our views to one another, including how we speak *of* one another in conversations and online. We are members of the same Christian family and everyone deserves equal respect and sensitivity. Whatever our personal and theological convictions our churches must always be places of welcome. If you do experience any form of harassment for your choices or views on the prayers of love and faith please be in touch with me, the Archdeacons or the Comms team. We will seek to support you.

Decisions

Although the prayers are commended and therefore able to be used from December 17th you should not feel in a rush to come to a decision about their use. From your local knowledge you may deem it unwise to have the conversation with your PCC at this stage. If you do not feel it is right to introduce the prayers because of significant division or opposition you are free not to. I will support you in that decision. Benefices in vacancy who feel strongly about the matter should consider it with the Archdeacon as part of the vacancy process.

If you do want to use the prayers I strongly counsel you to discuss this with your PCC and come to an agreement. There are resources available to help that conversation. [<https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/pastoral-principles-course>] [<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/difference>]
While Canon B5 only references the discretion of the minister, the Parochial Church Council Measure of 1956 states that an incumbent and PCC should consult together on all matters of importance in the life of the parish, which would include public worship. If you need support in having those discussions, please contact your Archdeacon. Help and guidance for parishes and benefices will be available in the new year to facilitate your conversations should clergy and PCCs want help. When you do use the prayers please take care to keep within the guidelines for use.

Where you are operating as an assistant minister, curate or in a ministry team I ask you to respect the wishes of your incumbent, both within the benefice and in response to invitations to minister outside the parish. I expect ministry teams to have the conversation about where they stand and how they will respond to requests for use of the PLF at a reasonably early stage. If your incumbent finds the use of the prayers against their theological convictions I ask you to respect that and to be loyal in public. Conversely if your incumbent wishes to use the prayers you cannot be compelled to do likewise, if you feel unable in conscience to do so.

Where this issue has the potential for significant division within your team and/or your PCC please contact your Archdeacon for help and advice at an early stage.

In time we will be compiling a list of churches which will be using the prayers. I hope this will allow signposting by those who feel uncomfortable with their use to those who will be happy to do so. I am praying that we can navigate this significant change in the life of our church and maintain the highest possible degree of unity. I pray that loving our neighbour as ourselves, the Lord will guide us as we navigate these choppy waters together.

I am reminded of the words of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians:

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then ... I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.”

With every blessing and thanks for your ministry.



The Rt Revd Richard Jackson. Bishop of Hereford