

13 December 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this letter I'm writing to you further to the vote taken in the [House of Bishops yesterday](#) that the Resource Section of the [Prayers of Love and Faith](#) (prayers to be included in liturgies such as Sunday services) should be commended for use in churches with effect from 17 December.

For some, the commendation of the prayers will be a cause for celebration, for others the source of dismay and for yet others a matter of little interest at all. I am writing to you about three things:

1. To offer a perspective on how we have reached our current position.
2. To suggest the approach we should take about the choice to use, or not use, the Resource Section prayers within our Diocese of Bath and Wells.
3. To let you know about practical support that I hope will help us all through the next stage of this journey.

Much of what I have to say here comes from the Presidential Address that I gave at Diocesan Synod on 25 November. If you've already listened to or read those words, please forgive me for any repetition.

1. How did we get here?

The LLF process has been running for six years. It has painfully revealed that we are together in a church where, using the Anglican resources of scripture, tradition and reason, different church members and parts of our church have come to very different conclusions about how we should best respond to people living in same sex relationships and particularly about the recognition and celebration of such relationships within the life of the Church.

Some would like to see the Church offer same sex marriage just as now happens in the civil system. Others view the offering of prayers of blessing for people in same sex relationships as completely incompatible with the teachings of the Church. Most people, I would suggest, sit somewhere on a continuum between these two polarities. What we have learnt is that any amount of argument does not seem to alter people's particular views. Sadly, we have come to realise that we are not going to reach a simple unified position.

Into this situation the House of Bishops offered proposed prayers of love and faith, which were debated at February's synod and again last month. The prayers seek to find a middle way between our polarities, preserving the Church's teaching that Holy Matrimony is an estate that can only be

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entered into by a man and a woman, whilst at the same time offering recognition and celebration of those in same sex relationships and asking for God's blessing upon the people involved. As with many compromises in life, the prayers run the extreme risk of pleasing nobody – a truth richly demonstrated by the debate that took place at General Synod.

So where have we reached and what will happen next? The actual wording of November's General Synod motion doesn't take things much further than the motion that was passed in February. The motion said this:

That this Synod, conscious that the Church is not of one mind on the issues raised by Living in Love and Faith, that we are in a period of uncertainty, and that many in the Church on all sides are being deeply hurt at this time, recognise the progress made by the House of Bishops towards implementing the motion on Living in Love and Faith passed by this Synod in February 2023, as reported in GS 2328, encourage the House to continue its work of implementation, and ask the House to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.

Further to that motion and to the voting at the House of Bishops, what will now happen in practice is as follows:

- The prayers for covenanted friendships (which have not been regarded as contentious) are commended for use by the House of Bishops from 17 December.
- Prayers for same sex couples that can be included within liturgies such as a Sunday service of Holy Communion (the Resource Section) are also commended for use by the House of Bishops from 17 December.
- Consideration of the introduction of so-called standalone services – where a couple would come to church for a specific liturgy offered just for them – is ongoing among the House of Bishops.

At General Synod this last point about standalone services was the subject of an amendment by the Bishop of Oxford that was narrowly approved by all three houses of General Synod. It's contentious for two reasons. The first is that the probable route for the introduction of such services would be authorisation by the Archbishops for an experimental period to be followed by a vote of Synod that would need a 2/3 majority to pass – unlikely given the current make-up of the Synod. The second is that for some, the stand-alone services could be thought to look very much like a wedding service. This leads some to ask whether such services would contravene the church's teaching that holy matrimony is between a man and a woman. As further work from the House of Bishops becomes available, and the way ahead clearer, I will of course be communicating this to you.

2. The way forward for our diocese

So, what do I suggest would be the best way forward for us here in Bath and Wells?

I have concerns that the [Pastoral Guidance](#) issued by the House of Bishops about the usage of the Resource Section does not offer the full clarity needed concerning discernment about the use of the prayers. I think we can offer greater clarity here in Bath and Wells and propose below how I think this should happen.

Firstly, I have long and consistently been of the opinion that the use of the prayers of love and faith should be 'opt in' rather than 'opt out' – used by those who choose to use them but with no expectation that they will, or should, be used by those who don't.

Secondly, given the differences that exist among us, I'm also passionate that the decision to use or not use the prayers must be subject first and foremost to the consciences of individual ministers (be they clergy or lay ministers) and should also only be used in any church with the agreement of the PCC.

Hence 'opt-in' means that unless ministers with the agreement of their PCCs choose otherwise, churches will not offer the prayers of love and faith for those in same sex relationships unless they have actively and intentionally chosen to do so.

Now the challenge I have is this. As bishop, I could seek to insist that the use of the prayers be subject to the kind of 'opt in' process I have outlined. However, I would much prefer that all of us committed together to make this the practice we hold in common, even amidst our different decisions. For the strongest pastoral reasons, and in pursuit of the unity to which Jesus commanded us, as the people of God in this diocese, I invite us all to commit to make 'opt in' the way we do things round here.

Under 'opt in', the prayers would only be used by those ministers who wished to do so, and with the explicit backing of their church's PCC. If approached by enquirers they could then say "welcome, come in, we'd love to celebrate these prayers with you". By the same token, any minister and PCC not willing to offer the prayers could, when asked, simply say "we've not opted into their use". They would of course have the option to refer enquiries on to other ministers and churches that have.

It's important to say at the outset that no parish or benefice needs to make a decision concerning the use of the prayers immediately or indeed at any time. Good discernment is needed by everyone as to whether and when it is the right time to have a discussion about the prayers and again if it is the right time to come to a decision about their use. Also, no one should feel under any obligation at any point of the need to say anything about their parish's use or not of the prayers on their website or in other public material. Please see a short appendix at the end of this letter giving some guidance about how the 'opt in' process would work in practice.

I'm also conscious that there is much fear and uncertainty about what the future will look like, and that's not been helped by the pastoral guidance not yet being issued in full. One of the best ways to counteract fear is agency. So, my second proposal is that we should work together here in Bath and Wells to develop our own guidance in a number of areas. We've begun to do this, for example, for our work in schools. And in the New Year we will be looking at what guidance might be helpful in other areas.

3. Practical support

For many there is considerable anxiety and concern about what the future holds. At such a time, I believe it to be imperative that we draw on the strength of God and each other to navigate this time. To help such a process please may I draw your attention to the following:

A. Lay conversations about Living in Love and Faith

Many of our churches are highly heterogenous with respect to the perspectives on the use of the prayers of love and faith held by Readers, churchwardens, PCC members and congregations. Earlier in the year, we held sessions for clergy at which they could discuss the implications for the prayers of love and faith, In the new year, on 8 and 17 January, we are offering sessions to our lay leaders. Please see further information about these meetings in Appendix B at the end of this message.

B. Accessing good and appropriate pastoral care for clergy and for churches

I'm very conscious that the introduction of the prayers of love and faith is causing much challenge to our unity as a church family. As for all families, it can be extremely helpful in the face of such difficulty to draw on a variety of sources of support to see us through difficult times. The first port of call for support is your archdeacon. An immense strength we also have here in our Diocese of Bath and Wells is our team of nine active honorary assistant bishops (Please see list in Appendix C at the end of this message). Our assistant bishops come from a wide range of church traditions. They are available to offer pastoral support and care for clergy and churches that need them. If you'd appreciate being put in touch with one of our team, please do contact your Archdeacon who'd be glad to put you in contact with an assistant bishop able to help you.

C. Ongoing conversation

I would like to hold a further meeting for the clergy of the diocese to meet and think together more on the introduction of the prayers of love and faith and to consider how best we can respond. This meeting will take place from 9am – 11am on the morning of **Tuesday, 16 January at Flourish House in Wells.**

In conclusion

We have much to consider. We could very easily turn inwards as we think about the challenges that face us. But I'd like to finish with these words of Jesus:

'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' (Jn 17: 21b-23).

I hope so much that whatever we may face, that together we can find the unity that is Jesus's prayer for us all.

This comes with my prayers and best wishes to you all for a blessed Advent and a joyful Christmas.

+Michael

Appendix A – Discernment about the ‘opt in’ use of the Prayers of Love and Faith

Local knowledge, understanding and sensitivity are going to be essential in working out what good discernment will look like. The advice offered here is a template which will need to be thought through carefully according to local circumstances. Please do call on your archdeacon if you would value a conversation about how this might work in your particular setting.

Some parishes will receive the opportunity to use the prayers with joy and anticipation. Others will be clear that they will never use them. While others may not feel that the time is yet right to consider their use. Good pastoral discernment is needed by everyone as to whether and when it is the right time to have a discussion about the prayers and again if it is the right time to come to a decision about their use. No one should feel under any obligation to be rushed into making decisions or of the need to say anything about their parish’s use or not of the prayers on their website or in other public material.

Should a parish consider it timely to make a decision about the use of the prayers then the first stage of decision-making rests with the incumbent of the benefice. According to their conscience, the incumbent may discern that she/he does not wish the prayers to be used in the churches of her/his benefice. While this decision will need to be communicated carefully and sensitively to churches in an incumbent’s care, the incumbent’s decision does mean that the prayers will not be used in the benefice and this decision should be respected as final. Where a parish is in vacancy they should consult with their archdeacon.

It may be that the incumbent wishes to ‘opt in’ to the use the prayers *or* that while she/he is unwilling personally to use the prayers, she/he is willing for other ministers (associate clergy, curates, readers or clergy from other parishes) to offer the prayers in the churches of the benefice. Should an incumbent express a willingness to explore using the prayers, then the next stage would be for the incumbent to discern together with the PCC whether this would be the right move for a parish at this time. This demands good spiritual discernment. PCCs may, for example, wish to draw on guidance such as ‘Seeking God’s Way Together’ (further information on which will shortly be coming from our Deanery and Parish Support team and which will be discussed at the January lay meetings). Using such an approach, PCCs may discern that they are minded that they wish their church to ‘opt in’ to the use of the prayers in their church, or that the prayers should not be used in their church or that the prayers will not be used until such time as a decision is made actively to ‘opt in’ to their use.

Because the considerations outlined above are all the product of discernment, it is of course possible that incumbents and PCCs may change their minds about any of the decisions over time. Within such an ‘opt in’ system, all of us need to agree that it cannot be acceptable, in any part of the decision-making process, that either the incumbent or the PCC should be pressurised to go against the dictates of their conscience.

Should ‘opt in’ be discerned through the discernment process outlined above we recommend that a short and simple statement letting people know that a church is offering the prayers should be added to its website and ‘A church near you’ page.

Appendix B – Lay Conversations invitation

To: Readers, lay deans, churchwardens, PCC secretaries, lay worship assistants, lay chaplains, lay pastoral assistants on Wednesday, 6 December

Earlier this year clergy came together to talk about the developments in Living in Love and Faith (LLF) in a safe space. We are now in a position to offer that opportunity to our lay leaders on Monday, 8 January 2024 from 14:00 to 16:00 at Flourish House or over Zoom on Wednesday, 17 January from 19:00 to 21:00.

Our churches contain a huge variety of perspectives on LLF. Some would like to see the Church offer same sex marriage just as now happens in the civil system. Others view the offering of prayers of blessing for people in same sex relationships as completely incompatible with the teachings of the Church. Most people, I would suggest, sit somewhere on a continuum between these two polarities. The key aim of these sessions is to consider how we can move forward together in unity, respecting any differences we may have, as well as to share hopes and fears about the latest proposals. What attitudes and practices will lead us to have discussions marked by the fruits of the Spirit? – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal 5: 22-23).

While we will be able to provide an update on the latest position on LLF, this is not a session where we can give solutions or detailed guidance. We will, of course, keep you updated on any developments and details of any support that can be offered to you as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Should you be interested in attending, please [book your place using our online form](#).

Bishop Michael

Caroline Mason, Lay Chair of Diocesan Synod

Appendix C – Active Honorary Assistant Bishops of the Diocese of Bath and Wells

The Rt Revd Paul Bayes

The Rt Revd Brian Castle

The Rt Revd Christopher Foster

The Rt Revd Mike Hill

The Rt Revd Michael Langrish

The Rt Revd Rob Martin

The Rt Revd Alastair Redfern

The Rt Revd Nigel Stock

The Rt Revd Trevor Willmott

