

Prayer and Dedication After a Civil Marriage: A Short Historical Sketch

The service of *Prayer and Dedication After A Civil Marriage*, having initially been considered for authorisation by the Archbishops under B4, was the first service to be commended by the bishops for use under B5 (even though that process was originally developed for *Lent, Holy Week, Easter*). It was published on 31 October 1985 ([NoL, Oct 1985](#)) with the Archbishop of Canterbury's foreword setting out its status:

These services have been commended by the House of Bishops of the General Synod and are published with the agreement of the House. Under Canon B4 it is open to each Bishop to authorize, if he sees fit, the form of service to be used within his diocese. He may specify that the services shall be those commended by the House, or that a diocesan form shall be used. If the Bishop gives no directions in this matter the priest remains free, subject to the terms of Canon B5, to make use of the services as commended by the House.

This commendation was with the support of General Synod which on July 2nd 1985 had voted to remove the 1957 ban on offering any public service for those who had entered a civil marriage after divorce while maintaining the 1957 call not to use the marriage service. Synod in February 1981 had already commended *private* services of prayer and dedication after remarriage.

In relation to the process for PLF, the wider history relating to divorce and remarriage that lies behind this commendation (which I explored [here](#) in relation to pastoral accommodation, some of which is reproduced below) is important. Introducing a service of prayer and dedication was a direct reversal of the unanimous decision of the 1978 Lichfield Report exploring the response to remarriage after divorce. This had stated “we are therefore of one mind in rejecting the suggestion of a public service of prayer and dedication. *We recommend that the present use of such services be brought to an end*” (para 232, italics original). Their discussion of this proposal is illuminating given the current proposal for a form of service, distinct from the marriage service, for same-sex couples.

The Lichfield Report noted that many clergy who adhered to the Convocation regulations forbidding remarriage recognized some such couples “wish for an opportunity to pray together and to dedicate themselves at the beginning of the new marriage”. It recognized that “Private services of prayer and dedication frequently take place, either in the couple's home or in church, and the existence of such services is explicitly envisaged, if not formally sanctioned, by the Convocation regulations” (para 225). It acknowledged that a case had been put “that the provision of an officially-approved form of service of prayer and dedication would go far to meet the needs of some of those marrying after divorce while preserving the Church's distinctive witness to the permanence of marriage” (para 226). It then set out the case for this (para 227) in words worth quoting at length as, by replacing their scenario with that of a same-sex couple, they are very similar to the case some make for providing some form of service for those entering a same-sex marriage:

There are Christians who believe that it is right and godly for them to enter into a second marriage after the first has been legally dissolved and while the previous partner is still alive. Their decision to remarry is their own, made after due reflection and prayer, and made in good conscience. They believe that God is calling them to this second marriage. They are willing to acknowledge that divorce and remarriage falls short of what God intends, and that in an age when many are rejecting the norm of life-long, exclusive monogamy it is prudent and right that the Church should witness to this norm by refusing to remarry anyone who has been divorced and whose partner is still living. Nevertheless, they seek for more than the priest's private prayer said with them either in church or at home. They seek

(1) A means of grace to encourage them along the path which they have chosen;

Prayer and Dedication After a Civil Marriage, Andrew Goddard, June 2023.

- (2) An opportunity for sharing their discovered vocation with their friends and neighbours in humility, wonder and joy;
- (3) An acknowledgement of the mercies of God within the family of Christ and of the continuing fellowship and acceptance of one another in the Church.

The report noted that this “would not be a marriage and would contain no marriage vows” and “the service would express penitence for the past, thanksgiving and joy in the present and dedication for the future”. While “in all such expression the Church would, as the Body of Christ, be associated” and any priest using it would be “acting in the name of the Church”, the Church “would not be expressing its approval *or* its disapproval of the marriage” and providing this rather than a marriage service would mean the Church “retaining its witness against divorce and remarriage in general and in the abstract” (para 228). Arguments in its favour included that “it would meet a pastoral need which is difficult legally to meet at present” (para 229).

Nevertheless, the report’s authors saw “fundamental objections to the suggestion” which again are worth quoting in full:

We believe that there would be a continuing risk of confusion between the service proposed and the marriage service. It has already been noted that some clergy offer a form of service which closely resembles the marriage service (para 225). Even if the minister had carefully explained the difference between a service of dedication and a marriage service to the couple, it is likely that some of those taking part in the service would be unaware of the distinction. This risk would be increased if, as seems likely, elements of the traditional ceremonial associated with a wedding appeared in the service. The appearance of the bride in white, the ringing of bells, the wedding march – all these would convey a powerful though misleading message which the words of the service would be unable to correct (para 230).

In addition, while no minister could be compelled to take such a service, “in practice the clergy would come under considerable pressure to make the service available to all who asked for it, since a couple who were denied the use of an official service of the Church would regard this as a mark of disapproval or rejection. If however the service became widely used, there would be a risk of confusion between this service and the marriage service, and it would be difficult for the Church to dispel the impression that it had begun to remarry all comers” (para 231).

Three years after this report, in July 1981, Synod overwhelmingly voted (296-114, (27-7, 134-58, 135-49) for a motion proposed by Bishop John V. Taylor (Winchester) stating that “there are circumstances in which a divorced person may be married in church during the lifetime of a former spouse”. This was “a dramatic turnaround” (Ann Sumner Holmes, *The Church of England and Divorce in the Twentieth Century: Legalism and Grace*, p. 163) of its previous votes on this matter, including as recently as July 1978 on the Lichfield Report’s majority recommendation, leading [NoL](#) to comment:

The result is fairly amazing – all previous votes on the issue, both in General Synod and in the dioceses, have tended to come up with a fifty-fifty split. So, although there is not yet any actual change in the regulations (regulations which not all clergy view as binding anyway), yet there has been a clear turning-point established in the life of the Church of England (p. 10).

Between that 1981 vote and the commendation of the new liturgy in 1985 the church sought, unsuccessfully, to find an agreed process to implement their clear decision to allow marriage in church after divorce. As they did so they wrestled with questions that are highly relevant today in

Prayer and Dedication After a Civil Marriage, Andrew Goddard, June 2023.

relation to PLF. Various options were considered, dioceses were again formally consulted (as they had been after Lichfield when they split 18-17 on its recommendation) and the House of Bishops was openly divided with continuing opposition even after Synod strongly supported (295-130) a proposal from the House which was then not implemented. A *Times* editorial in early 1984 (“The Marriage Bond”) offered an assessment of remarriage in church which is echoed by many in relation to PLF:

Important changes in doctrine and practice of this kind are inadvisable unless there is a clear and coherent theological basis for them, and unless there is general consent to this basis. That cannot be said. (*Times*, 25th Feb 1984, quoted in Sumner Holmes)

In June 1984 the Archbishop of York, John Habgood, issued a warning, in a report to the House of Bishops (“Canon B30 and the Proposed Marriage Regulation: Some Deeper Issues in the Marriage Debate”), that some would argue needs to be heard today:

If the whole matter is purely disciplinary, no problem arises. But if the House decides that it is doctrinal or has doctrinal dimensions, we shall need to move very carefully....The method by which the Church decides such issues may have considerable repercussions for the future and will say a lot about our claim to be a theologically responsible body. (quoted in Sumner Holmes, p. 168).

By February 1985, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who wanted remarriage in church in some circumstances as agreed in principle back in 1981 rather than just a service of prayer and dedication, had to admit:

There comes a time when I must agree that there is no real consensus in my favour, and that the peace of the Church demands that we cease this endless wrangling over a question on which we are so divided. (General Synod, 13th February 1985, pp. 214-5, quoted in Sumner Holmes, p. 169).

This failure to agree on how to permit *remarriage* in church after divorce is therefore what lay behind the move to introduce the service of prayer and dedication after a civil marriage despite it being rejected in the Lichfield Report. Although criticisms of it have continued, [it remains a commended service](#).

Comparisons are often drawn between our current disagreements and those in the past over divorce and remarriage. Parallels have also been drawn between PLF and the service of prayer and dedication after a civil marriage. Given this history surrounding the commendation of the service of prayer and dedication, what might an analogous situation in our debates look like?

An analogous situation in our debates would involve the bishops commending prayers after a civil same-sex marriage some years after the Synod had voted (by over 2-1, and in marked contrast to much tighter votes in previous debates) that there are circumstances in which a same-sex couple could marry in church. They might find this alternative to a marriage service necessary, as in the 1980s, because a way could not easily be found to implement the more radical step (though approved by Synod by two-thirds in each House) formally and securely, and because of unresolved questions about the doctrine of marriage. Even so, care would be taken to avoid reference to blessing – Hebblethwaite notes, “Because of strongly-expressed reservations in General Synod the word 'blessing' was scrupulously avoided, hence the title *Prayer and Dedication*” (p. 30). This provision would also follow Synod commending a private service of prayer and dedication after a civil same-sex marriage and voting to lift previous prohibitions on such services (such as those found in current Pastoral Statements). It would also be able to be developed from “the various forms of

Prayer and Dedication After a Civil Marriage, Andrew Goddard, June 2023.

prayer used in separate dioceses” already (p. 30). That is clearly very far from our current scenario in terms of both sustained Synodical support for a significant development in relation to the church’s practice and considerable time being taken to move from initial in principle decisions to specific liturgical change.