

## PLF: Persistent Leadership Failure and Prayers of Love and Faith

### Introduction

It is now over 16 months since the House of Bishops [first announced](#) the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) claiming that “For the first time, under historic plans outlined today, same-sex couples will be able to come to church to give thanks for their civil marriage or civil partnership and receive God’s blessing”. Alongside this was “a commitment to produce new pastoral guidance in relation to the discernment of vocation, replacing the 1991 statement [Issues in Human Sexuality](#)”. These were held to be possible alongside a clear statement that “the formal teaching of the Church of England as set out in the canons and authorised liturgies – that Holy Matrimony is between one man and one woman for life – would not change”.

The Archbishop of Canterbury described the proposal as one that “reflects the diversity of views in the Church of England on questions of sexuality, relationships and marriage”. The Bishop of London, when she proposed them to the February General Synod, said, “In proposing our way forward as bishops, what we have done is to chart a path that navigates the realities of the disagreements among us in a way that enables us to walk together” ([Proceedings](#), 62).

The press release with these details had to be rushed out after, within hours, the decision of the House of Bishops to proceed with the proposal [was leaked to the BBC](#). After the most recent House of Bishops (15-17 May) there was yet again an almost immediate leak from the bishops ([this time to the Church Times](#)). This was of the “emerging proposal” following the “reset” of the PLF process and the Synod vote in February to move to next business rather than vote on the proposal in a paper presented not by the House as a whole but by the Bishop of Leicester. This leak revealed that, for all the talk of greater transparency from meetings of the House, [the earlier press release](#) about the meeting was minimalist in its details:

The House discussed recent work on Living in Love and Faith (LLF) and how the Church might move forward together towards a unifying position around the further use of the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF), accompanied by Pastoral Guidance, and proportionate Pastoral Reassurance measures, while recognising the challenges. Bishop Martyn Snow expressed his thanks for the constructive, gracious, and generous atmosphere of the recent residential weekend undertaken by the LLF working groups who came together in Leicester. The Bishops encouraged the Programme Team and LLF working groups to continue their work before outlining a more detailed proposal to the College and House of Bishops in June.

In fact, according to the Church Times, the bishops had discussed “a briefing document marked confidential” that “summarises the conclusions that emerged from a recent residential meeting of the three LLF working groups” although members of the three groups were only made aware that these were their conclusions after the document leaked.

What follows offers comments on the new emerging proposal in relation to PLF where, despite the claims in January 2023, there is still so much unfinished business. Currently it seems that PLF [satisfies practically nobody](#) with just over half the church unhappy because although the bishops [commended PLF back in December](#) the accompanying Pastoral Guidance for their use prohibited standalone services and made clear the prayers for a same-sex couple are no longer to be offered “to give thanks for their civil marriage or civil partnership”. This has, for those seeking change and “radical Christian inclusion”, made the situation worse in practice than it had been previously when various clergy did offer such standalone services. Just under half the church is, however, unhappy because the bishops have commended prayers they themselves acknowledge are indicative of a departure from the church’s doctrine and thus contrary to the hard-won “Cornes amendment” agreed by the February 2023 General Synod.

The discussion below of the new PLF proposal is first set within a brief overview of how we got to where we are now. This shows that the fundamental PLF problem we are facing is not Prayers of Love and Faith but Persistent Leadership Failure, a problem increasingly felt across the divisions on sexuality and not just in relation to this subject but in other areas most notably the handling of safeguarding.

## What was the planning and preparation for introducing PLF?: PLF’s birth and early life

As the press release announcing PLF made clear, the proposals followed “a six-year period of listening, learning and discernment known as [Living in Love and Faith](#)”. The seeds of the consequent difficulties perhaps lie in the fact that this LLF process offered no specific proposals or even alternative options, the survey of participants using the LLF resources ([despite claims to the contrary](#)), sought no evidence of their favoured options, and the House of Bishops only gave themselves from September 2022 to January 2023 for a concentrated process of discernment and decision making.

The originally planned three residentials for this were reduced to two due to the death of the Queen. This meant the first meeting together was not until [late October 2022](#) and by [the start of the second meeting on 12-14 December](#) there were still seven possible ways forward being considered and no specific proposals of prayers even on the table. To help consider the options, there was a very short summary of the distinction between authorised and commended prayers and a slightly longer summary of legal issues (which reflected previous legal advice such as that found in [the annex to GS 2055](#) from November 2016). This noted that a form of service to recognise same-sex relationships could happen “only in a very limited way” and that among the conditions were that it “does not treat the marriage as equivalent to Holy Matrimony” and “does not sanction/ condone a sexual relationship” because “services which did not meet these conditions are contrary to the Canons”. This meant that “for a blessing of existing same-sex civil partnerships or marriages to be done in the Church of England” was something that “would require changes to the canons of the Church of England to recognise that marriage is not only between one man and one woman. (So that the ‘blessing’ or ‘Order of prayer and dedication’ is no longer contrary to doctrine)”.

The fourth of the seven possible ways forward (the last before those directly introducing same-sex marriage in some form) was to

offer same-sex couples in civil marriages or partnerships a new service of blessing which is not a solemnisation of marriage. That means that the doctrine of ‘marriage’ remains unchanged. The blessing of a same-sex civil marriage is a different kind of (faithful, monogamous, lifelong) relationship, the goods of which can be blessed. It would require a change in the doctrine of the Church with regard to sexual intimacy outside the context of Holy Matrimony.

The theological and pastoral considerations and practical implications of this which were highlighted included that:

- This would remove the assumption that marriage is the only context within which sexual activity is appropriate.
- Legal and canonical change would be required alongside new liturgical texts.
- This would require theological grounds for ‘development of’ or ‘departure from’ current doctrine.
- Work would need to be done on whether these prayers were offered after a civil marriage, and whether the civil marriage was blessed, and what the relationship of this would be to Holy Matrimony.
- Requires explicit (not implicit) crafting of the blessing liturgy phrasing about the sexual nature of the relationship to avoid accusations of hypocrisy

The initial proposal approaching the December meeting was

These possible ways forward are presented to enable bishops at the December College to decide on a small number of options to include in the document for Synod and the wider Church. They will be used to test the mind of Synod in February 2023. This will hopefully avoid a ‘binary vote’ and an impasse. Instead, they will offer Synod an opportunity to engage meaningfully with decision-making and ensure that a direction of travel is reached by means of a transparent process involving both bishops and Synod.

Somehow, as a result of that pre-Christmas December meeting and in the five weeks following it, the House reached the position announced on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023 of commending specific draft prayers for same-sex couples to “give thanks for their civil marriage or civil partnership and receive God’s blessing” without a change to canons or doctrine. Through that short period, [the Liturgical Commission](#), whose constitutional functions include “To prepare forms of service at the request of the House of Bishops for submission to that House in the first instance” and “To advise on the experimental use of forms of service and the development of liturgy” played no formal role in the process. They have continued to play little or no formal role as a Commission in the ongoing processes surrounding PLF. Similarly, throughout this whole discernment process [the Faith and Order Commission \(FAOC\)](#) was kept out of doing relevant work until some point in the summer of 2023.

Just a month after the announcement, and after the February General Synod debate, Bishop Christopher Cocksworth, who chaired the Living in Love and Faith process and previously served on the Liturgical Commission, recognised there had been a failure in leadership in proceeding in this way. [His whole article](#) bears re-reading and includes the acknowledgment that among the reasons that “the proposed provision has united a broad alliance of evangelical networks, and some significant catholic voices, in suspicion, bewilderment, consternation and, among most the evangelical spectrum, rejection” was “something to do with ecclesial processes”:

Great care had been taken in producing the resources, encouraging engagement with them, bringing the bishops through a process of discernment to a point of decision. Some form of diversified consensus on key intentions of the provision seemed to have emerged. Then, however, we — and I say we because I am a member of the College and House of Bishops, and I accept my share of responsibility — allowed ourselves to hurry the last and vital stage. We did not give the time and attention to hone the response and scrutinize the prayers with the great care that was needed for documents put into the synodical process and, in so doing, to check whether there was a sufficiently common mind among us to find secure expression in common texts.

Furthermore, we promised pastoral guidelines on the practical outworking of the provision, with all their complex legal and theological questions, at a later point, rather than offering them alongside the liturgical provision. The result was that the response and prayers raised more questions than they answered, questions that could not be answered by the entirely reasonable probing of the synod. As well as other consequences, it soon became clear that different bishops had, after all, different understandings of what was being provided.

These “different understandings” of what was being done and the consequences of the failure to “give the time and attention” and “great care” to PLF before announcing them have since played out in relation to at least four central areas that would normally have been carefully considered before announcing “historic plans”:

- who the prayers are for,
- their legal and theological basis,
- their relationship to the church’s doctrine, and
- the canonical means by which they should be introduced into the church’s life.

## Who are the prayers for?: From committed relationships to only people in same-sex relationships

Although the focus in the press release was on PLF being for same-sex couples, their original use was much wider. The opening summary of the paper presented to the February 2023 General Synod ([GS 2289](#)) reads:

Bishops recognise the diversity of committed relationships that exist both in the Church and in wider society today. Bishops joyfully affirm, and want to acknowledge in church, stable, committed relationships between two people – including same-sex relationships. To enable this to happen bishops plan to commend a resource under the heading Prayers of Love and Faith (p. 1).

This still appeared to be the case in the July General Synod although during the work of the Implementation Groups questions had been raised as to whether the requirement that the relationships be “stable, committed relationships” was best met not by clergy determination but by the couple being in a legally recognised committed relationship i.e. civil partnership or civil marriage. The update simply noted there may be conditions imposed on the use of the PLF “such as that they may only be used with those whose relationship is demonstrably faithful, exclusive and permanent” ([GS 2303](#), para 12).

By November 2023, however, and in [the final commended prayers](#) and [Pastoral Guidance](#), it was clear that the PLF were only being commended for use with same-sex couples and that there could be no requirement that the couple were in a civil partnership or same-sex marriage. This change was related to the changing basis for the prayers and the changing understanding of the constraints of the church’s doctrine.

## What is the theological and legal basis for the prayers?: From distinguishing civil marriage and holy matrimony to “pastoral provision”

As noted above, the longstanding legal advice had given very little room to introduce something like PLF. The initial reason PLF was able to evade these previous constraints and receive legal approval was that a sharp and novel distinction was drawn between civil marriage (CM) and holy matrimony (HM). The rationale for this was only very briefly stated in the initial documentation for PLF but was more fully articulated in [GS Misc 1339](#). This is presumably a summary of “Discerning in Love and Faith: Some Legal and Pastoral Issues, prepared by the Secretary General and the Legal Office” which was produced in January 2023 and provided to the College of Bishops in January 2023. That summary did, however, conclude by noting that

The bishops have indicated that “Issues in Human Sexuality” is to be replaced. But nothing in the draft Prayers pre-empts what the replacement might say on the subject of sexual relationships. In reaching a final view on the legal position the Legal Office will need to see both the final draft of the Prayers and the replacement pastoral guidance

In the July paper ([GS 2303](#)), presumably because of this important caveat, the previous legal note ([GS 2289](#), p. 44 of PDF) - which included “The prayers and forms of service commended here are ‘neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter’ (including, but not limited to, the

definition of Holy Matrimony in Canon B 30)” - was replaced with “A Legal Note appropriate to the form of final approval, consonant with any relevant provisions in the Pastoral Guidance, will be supplied” (GS 2303, p. 28 of PDF). In the [final published commended prayers of December 2023](#) there is no legal note at all.

The lack of transparency surrounding legal advice makes it difficult to be clear about what occurred but more information has been provided ([GS Feb 2024 questions](#), Qs 52-54, p. 23) as to when legal advice was produced. It would appear that the CM/HM distinction, although coming under heavy legal and theological critique from the start, was still being maintained in “Living in Love and Faith – Analysis of Legal Issues: prepared by the Legal Office in March 2023 – provided to the College of Bishops in March 2023”.

Between July and the crucial October 2023 meeting of the House of Bishops it would appear that this ceased to be the basis for the prayers. The reasons for this are perhaps to be found in “Living and Love and Faith: the Current Legal Position: prepared by the Legal Office October 2023 – provided to the House in October 2023” and in the paper “Living in Love and Faith: Civil Marriage and Holy Matrimony” which was also prepared for the 9<sup>th</sup> October meeting. Despite its title, having the weight of being “a joint paper from the Chief Legal Adviser and the Theological Adviser” and containing “advice on various aspects of the relationship between civil marriage and holy matrimony” the Archbishop of York and those preparing Synod answers on his behalf for some reason forgot of its existence in their initial answer to Questions 62 and 63. This asked about advice relating to the amendment discussed below on this very question of Holy Matrimony’s relationship to same-sex marriage. This joint paper may be one of the reasons why the bishops who dissented from the decisions on 9<sup>th</sup> October complained that Synod would be unable to “determine whether the bishops have fulfilled their intention (supported in February) that the final form of the prayers should not be “indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England”” and stated that “legal and theological advice the House has received suggest clearly to us that the decisions of the House may fall short of this commitment”. The original Synod answer claimed instead that “No specific advice on the particular question was provided on that occasion [although the Bishop of Leicester’s answer to Questions 52-54, as noted above, also refers to a document entitled “Living and Love and Faith: the Current Legal Position: prepared by the Legal Office October 2023 – provided to the House in October 2023”] but some advice which covered the question had been given to bishops at an earlier stage in the LLF process. That advice, in the form in which it was given, has not been published but it was in substance that set out in GS Misc 1339”. The corrected answer issued during General Synod stated that “the substance of the advice has not so far been published” because “the position has yet to be considered in detail by the House of Bishops in light of further advice from FAOC”.

This lack of detailed consideration by the House and the fact that FAOC [The Faith and Order Commission] was only at the initial stages of its theological work on the question did not, however, stop the House of Bishops supporting an amendment on 9<sup>th</sup> October which was sprung on the meeting on the day and without any supporting papers from the Bishop of Edmundsbury and Ipswich who moved it. The House of Bishops voted (20 for, 15 against, 2 abstentions) that “this House agree that same-sex marriage is distinct from Holy Matrimony such that same-sex marriage is not seen as impinging on Holy Matrimony in a way that

contradicts the Church's doctrine". This decision, seemingly seeking to reinstate the previous CM/HM distinction as the basis for PLF, was, however, not announced to the November Synod and was only released in February 2024. It is unclear what status it has in the current process. Rather than speaking as previously, and in that amended motion, of a distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony, yet another novel argument – "pastoral provision in a time of uncertainty" (see my account and critique [here](#)) – was instead offered to the November 2023 Synod as the theological and legal basis for the prayers.

It is now being recognised that among the options for enabling the replacement of *Issues* to allow clergy to enter a civil same-sex marriage is that of a "change in teaching" and many believe this would be the most honest approach to such a development. In the words of Annex B of [GS 2346](#) prepared for the February 2024 General Synod, if the bishops "take the view that such a civil marriage is something which, whilst being separate from Holy Matrimony, can properly be the subject of a form of service which at least implicitly approves the decision of the couple to enter into it" then

The bishops could issue a new teaching document, which makes clear that restrictions are being removed on ministers being in civil same-sex marriages. There is a significant risk that this would be seen by some as a change in doctrine, which the bishops (and the General Synod) have been clear they do not wish to do... (p. 16)

There is, therefore, the possibility that – because of the work on the Pastoral Guidance - there may be yet a further rationale possible for the PLF, one which would entail a change in teaching and many would say doctrine that could significantly alter the current legal constraints on any such service.

All this shows the importance of the third question:

## How do the prayers relate to the church's doctrine?: The shift to being "indicative of a departure from the Church's doctrine"

As the above quotation makes clear, a change in doctrine has been consistently rejected by the bishops and General Synod. The important Cornes amendment which was passed in the February 2023 General Synod with the support of both Archbishops and the Bishop of London and the Bishop of Leicester (the Lead LLF Bishops then and now) [stated](#) that the Synod

endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England

By November, however, it became clear that this decision of Synod was being ignored. Whereas there had been hopes that the doctrine of marriage could be said not to include

any reference to the proper place for sexual intimacy, the theological paper for that Synod ([GS 2328](#)) spoke of “the teaching of marriage as the proper place for sexual intimacy between one man and woman” (Annex H, p. 90 of PDF) and showed from earlier statements that “the doctrine of marriage in relation to marriage as the fullest and given place for sexual expression is clear (p. 94). [The Pastoral Guidance](#) published in December 2023 to guide the use of PLF therefore states at the start:

The Church of England teaches 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 (p. 1, p.5 of PDF)

This clarification seemingly altered the clearer legal advice given to the bishops about the legal basis of PLF although we cannot be sure as it has never been published. However, it probably lies behind the following statements in the papers for the November Synod justifying the decision to commend PLF for use in regular (but not standalone) services:

*We have also been advised that it would be difficult to say that making the PLF available for same-sex couples without there being an assumption as to their sexual relationships was not indicative of any departure from the Church’s doctrine. Existing pastoral statements of the House of Bishops (issued in 2005, 2014 and 2019) state that because some same-sex couples will be “living consistently with the teaching of the Church, others not”, it would “not be right to produce an authorised public liturgy in connection with the registering of [civil partnerships/same-sex marriages] and “that clergy of the Church of England should not provide services of blessing for those who [register a civil partnership/enter a same sex marriage]”. If the PLF are to be available for same-sex couples without there being an assumption as to their sexual relationships, there would have been a change in the Church’s formal position on what its doctrine of marriage, and the place of sex within it, did and did not preclude in terms of public worship. Such a change might indicate a departure from the previous understanding that the Church’s teaching precluded public worship being offered for a same sex couple who were or might be in a sexually active relationship ([Annex A](#), para 17, p. 8 of PDF, italics added).*

This means that the PLF are not of the form requested by Synod in February 2023 and cannot be signed off by the Legal Office as easily as they were then. This therefore increases the risk that they may be in breach of the canons. The past legal advice was quite clear on this stating that if the teaching of the church about marriage being the proper place for sexual intimacy was maintained (as it has been) then:

a service which sanctioned or condoned such a sexual relationship would not meet the requirement that a service must “edify the people” and would probably also be contrary to, or indicative of a departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in an essential matter ([GS 2055 Annex](#), para 9)

The bishops, however, concluded the PLF were not in breach of the law because the canons only prohibit the use of liturgies that are not indicative of any departure from the Church’s



doctrine *in any essential matter*. The bishops remained insistent that PLF were “not intended to change the Church of England’s doctrine of marriage” and that such doctrine included the following:

- that the Church’s teaching on sexual activity is regarded as part of that doctrine;
- that the PLF are intended to recognise and respect that doctrine;
- that the PLF affirm the goods in same-sex relationships, including stability, faithfulness, exclusive, lifelong commitment etc.;
- that the PLF say nothing about sex but many same-sex couples will be in active sexual relationships (Annex A para 22, p. 9 of PDF).

They claimed that “what is envisaged by way of pastoral provision – which involves acknowledging and celebrating what is good in same-sex relationships even if the Church is unable to commend every aspect of some relationships – is a new insight into doctrine that can be reflected in forms of worship and that doing so represents a proper degree of flexibility” (para 23) and that this “new insight” is “compatible with the general Anglican approach” (para 24) and “the essential doctrines of the Church of England are safeguarded” (para 25). As a result,

We have therefore come to the view that, in so far as making the PLF available for couples in an active sexual relationship does involve any departure from doctrine, it nevertheless does not involve a departure from doctrine “in any essential matter”, and that doing so is compatible with the relevant canonical requirements (para 26).

**By what canonical route should the prayers be introduced?: From “B5 for all” to “maybe B4.2” to “B5 for some and B2 (with B5A, then without B5A, then perhaps with B5A) for others”, back now to “B5 for all”.**

Between January 2023 and the currently “emerging proposal” for PLF there have been the following nine different key stages covering multiple different proposals concerning which of [the relevant liturgical canons](#) (Canons B2 to B5A) to use (for more details see my discussions of these canons [in summary here](#), [in full here](#) and [on Canon B5A here](#)):

*First*, the original proposal was that a suite of prayers and service structures with accompanying notes to the service would *both be commended by the House of Bishops for clergy to use under Canon B5*. The February 2023 motion included that Synod “welcome the response from the College of Bishops and look forward to the House of Bishops further refining, commending and issuing the Prayers of Love and Faith described in [GS 2289](#) and its Annexes”.

*Secondly*, there were many concerns raised about this route, especially that it meant that all the legal risk rested on the parish priest using the prayers. An Implementation Group focussed on this question prior to the July Synod and it was reported there that

The group has been reviewing the routes by which the prayers may be authorised (or commended), in concert with the Pastoral Guidance and Pastoral Reassurance groups. They are also considering, with the other working groups, in which situations the PLF will be recommended for use and what conditions may be imposed on them, such as that they may only be used with those whose relationship is demonstrably faithful, exclusive, and permanent.

The House and College have considered the range of routes presented by the Group including Canon B5 commendation of the Prayers, B4 approval by the Convocations, Archbishops or Ordinary and B2 approval by General Synod. *They are particularly weighing up the option of approval by the Archbishops (under Canon B4.2), as an approach that may provide more legal protection for those ministers who choose to use the Prayers.* No final decision has been made by the House as to the route by which the prayers will be made available for use ([GS 2303](#), paras 12 and 13, italics added).

*Thirdly*, the appeal of Canon B4.2 quickly diminished (it has previously only been used for the Remembrance Day service and Coronation liturgy). At some point during the summer of 2023 *a decision was made to separate the components of PLF and introduce the suite of prayers as commended prayers for use under Canon B5 as originally intended but to introduce the service structures (now being described as “standalone services”) by Canon B2*, the usual process for introducing liturgy, particularly controversial matters. This has never been fully explained or justified.

*Fourthly*, consideration also began to be given at some point in late summer as to whether use might also be made of Canon B5A – authorisation by the Archbishops for an experimental period. According to yet another leak from the bishops to the Church Times (and it appears to Ben Bradshaw MP), *the use of Canon B5A was strongly supported by the College of Bishops on 20-21 September 2023 by a reported vote of 75 to 22.* This was the plan of what would be put to the House of Bishops that was announced to those across the spectrum of views attending various stakeholder meetings the following week.

It is important at this stage to note that in response to Synod questions ([Qs 52-54](#), p. 23) in February 2024, it became known that a paper specifically on this subject and entitled “Prayers of Love and Faith: Authorisation for Experimental Use and Approval by the General Synod” was “prepared by the Legal Office September 2023. Shared with members of the staff team and lead bishop September 2023”. It was, however, only “circulated to the House of Bishops in December 2023” by which time a lot of turbulent water had passed under, and over, this particular bridge.

*Fifthly*, at the meeting of the House on 9<sup>th</sup> October, by a vote of 19 for, 16 against, and 1 abstention, *the bishops decided instead to “agree that the PLF [part 2] should be subject to approval by the General Synod under Canon B2, without any prior experimental period of authorisation under Canon B5A”.* This contrasted with the College rejecting this option by a reported vote of 68 to 28 and followed a strong case for B2 authorisation of the standalone services being put to the House by the Archbishop of Canterbury. His personal conversion to the need to use Canon B2 and to use it without also using Canon B5A was apparently

crucial. It was therefore this decision of the House that led the bishops strongly to recommend B2 to the November Synod in GS 2328:

The third section of the Prayers contains the forms of service to be used for separate, standalone services (those outside of existing regular worship). *These forms of service will not be commended*, but will follow the process for liturgical authorisation under Canon B2. *Following the Canon B2 process for these services will provide the firmest footing for those using them within the shortest possible timeframe. It will provide reassurance concerning legal challenges*, both for those who wish to use the prayers and for those who do not. It will also regulate the form in which this material can be used, and enable an opt-in approach to provide clarity and transparency about which churches have decided to offer them (Introduction, para 10, p. 2, italics added).

We have agreed that the PLF outline forms of service – which are intended to provide forms of standalone service for same-sex couples – should be introduced in the General Synod for approval under Canon B 2 (Annex A, para 27, p. 10)

We look forward to the Synod’s consideration of the proposed outline forms of service and *hope that this process will begin with the First Consideration Stage at the February 2024 group of sessions* (Annex A, para 30, p. 10, italics added)

Annex D is clear that “These forms of service are to be **submitted to the General Synod for approval under Canon B 2**. It is the outline orders of service that are to be formally authorised” (p. 29, bold original).

*Sixthly*, by the time of the November General Synod there was widespread unhappiness about the decision to use Canon B2 and especially not to use Canon B5A thus meaning “standalone services” would either not be authorised for another two years or even not at all (given the voting record of this Synod and the need to secure 2/3 majority in all 3 Houses). By the narrowest possible margin in the House of Laity (99-98-2), but now with a clear majority (25-16-0) in the House of Bishops and the support of both Archbishops and the Bishop of London despite their contrary vote in October (see analysis [here](#)), an amendment from the Bishop of Oxford was passed. This was to “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”. Widely seen as an appeal to reinstate Canon B5A it needs to be noted that (a) The amendment passed was simply to “ask the House to consider whether” the services be made available not for them to be made available, (b) the amendment passed by only one vote in the House of Laity (and one its supporters then voted against the final motion perhaps signalling their regret for their original vote), (c) the Synod was not made aware of the very serious disadvantages in using B5A (including “Medium to high risk of successful legal challenge”) which were seemingly set out in the undistributed September Legal Advice but only shared with the House subsequently in December and then with Synod in February 2024 in [GS 2346](#) Annex A (esp pp. 12-13).

*Seventhly*, when the suite of PLF prayers were commended by the House of Bishops in December for use under Canon B5.1, [the accompanying Pastoral Guidance](#) made clear that “it is currently envisaged that the PLF forms of standalone service will be subject to a full synodical process for authorization under Canon B2” (Cover Note, iii) and “The text relating to standalone services [which appeared in italics] is liable to change in the course of the synodical process for authorization. If that process concluded that the PLF services could not be authorized, then these passages from the Pastoral Guidance would then be removed entirely” (iv).

*Eighthly*, rather than beginning the B2 process in the February 2024 General Synod as originally proposed, the paper presented by the Bishop of Leicester ([GS 2346](#)) set out the serious challenges facing any use of Canon B5A, the details of the proposed B2 process, and the advantages and disadvantages of the various canonical routes (in a helpful table on pp. 12-13). The proposed draft commitments (not voted on by General Synod) included instead, “*we are committed to the experimental use of standalone services of PLF, with legal protection and support for those who opt-in to using them as well as those who don’t*”.

*Ninthly*, the Church Times now reports (and conversations since then have confirmed) that the current emerging proposal is to abandon any attempt at using Canon B5A, leave open the question as to whether or not to ever use Canon B2 at some point in the future but certainly not for another three years or more, and instead *return to commending “standalone services” for use under Canon B5*.

## What are we to make of the current proposal to return to commending standalone services for use under Canon B5?

The current proposal apparently comes from the new Working Group on Prayers of Love and Faith and the wider discussions involving all three groups in Leicester. This has [ten members](#) including its episcopal Chair, Ruth Worsley, Acting Bishop of Coventry, two of whom are on the Liturgical Commission of whom one (Bishop Michael Igrave) is the Commission’s Chair who is also on FAOC. He is the only one of the 11 members of [the previous 2023 Implementation Group on PLF](#) also on this group although there will likely be continuity of staff with expertise in liturgy (Matthew Salisbury) and law.

It is important to clarify what is meant by “standalone services” and the nearest we have to a formal definition is that given in the Pastoral Guidance:

a discrete structure for a particular and distinctive liturgical act – *a rite* for marking a significant stage in a committed and faithful same-sex relationship ([Pastoral Guidance](#), p.4 of PDF, italics added).

What follows argues that although commending “standalone services” for use under Canon B5 appears in one sense logical given the commendation of the PLF resources and the canons, it also faces multiple challenges.

In one sense this recognition of the possibilities under Canon B5 is not surprising. When the bishops suddenly introduced the sharp distinction between the suite of prayers (to be commended) and the outline services (to be authorised) and argued that the former could only be used in “regular services” and that “standalone services” had to await full authorisation by Canon B2 the problems with this were quickly pointed out. [Canon B5.2](#) is clear that

The minister having the cure of souls may on occasions for which no provision is made in The Book of Common Prayer or by the General Synod under Canon B 2 or by the Convocations, archbishops, or Ordinary under Canon B 4 use forms of service considered suitable by him for those occasions and may permit another minister to use the said forms of service.

[I wrote back in October](#) of six problems with the proposal of banning standalone services until they were authorised once the prayers themselves were commended. This included the following observations and questions:

What, once the PLF are commended by the bishops for use under B5, prevents a priest using these commended prayers to create a liturgy for such an occasion [as described in B5.2 above] as a “standalone” service with PLF content being front and centre...?

Distinguishing between using PLF in “regular services” from using PLF in “standalone services” is making a false distinction with no legal or theological basis whatsoever.

It is the resources which provide the filling that require proper and careful scrutiny and raise doctrinal questions, not the outline structures. So why is it the resources which the bishops are refusing to consider under B2, if they accept B2 should be used in relation to PLF?

B5.2 already grants quite considerable freedom to form services where commended PLF prayers and the same-sex couple are much more central in the order of service.

Clergy using the prayers under B5 will be able to hold services much like any that may eventually be passed by B2. Particularly given the freedom granted under B5.2, nobody seriously expects the vague “standalone” distinction is going to be stopped until such services are authorised.

The new proposal seems to be a recognition of this fact. It amounts to acknowledging that the restrictions on “standalone services” imposed by the bishops and written into the Pastoral Guidance were an abuse of their power once one accepts the bishops’ argument that PLF are “reverent and seemly and shall be neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter” (as required for any use of Canon B5 in Canon B5.3). It was seeking to take a right away from the parish clergy granted to them under the canons.

That does not, however, make commendation for use under B5 the obvious solution as there are multiple problems with taking this path.

*First*, following this pathway in turn means that “standalone services” for same-sex couples (whether married, civil partnered or without legal status and whether sexual or celibate) using a prayer of blessing have always been legal within the Church of England since the 1974 Worship and Doctrine Measure despite all the past reports (from Gloucester Report onwards) and Pastoral Statements to the contrary. This is because, under commendation, “[nothing has changed](#)” legally. As was made clear in the paper to the February General Synod

The original approach suggested in GS 2289 was for the full suite of Prayers of Love and Faith to be made available for individual ministers to use at their own discretion under Canon B 5.2. In this situation, it is the local minister having the cure of souls who elects to use the particular form of service. The House of Bishops might give a view that such forms of service are capable of being used at the discretion of the minister by commending them, but this has no legal effect. It does not amount to authorisation ([GS 2346](#), p. 11).

It would seem therefore that, if this route is used, the bishops and Synod, having said they “lament and repent of the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people” should specifically apologise for this decades-long failure, reinforced in recent months by the ban on standalone services, to be as generous as the church’s law and doctrine apparently have always permitted.

*Secondly*, however, if these arguments are accepted and the bishops commend standalone services then they are placing all the legal risk on any “minister having cure of souls” who uses the prayers. This is perhaps the primary reason why the bishops have been reticent about proceeding down this pathway. The latest discussion given to Synod in February 2024 made the seriousness of this clear:

There are several risks with this route: firstly, commendation does not definitively determine the question of whether a form of service is lawful. This would leave ministers offering these services open to the possibility of a complaint being brought against them individually under the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1963 or the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003. The pastoral impact of such an occurrence, the distress caused to the couple, the minister and parish, as well as the wider reputational risk must be considered....

**The bishops have listened and take very seriously the concerns around ministers bearing the legal risk of using the PLF. This is why they have been considering alternative routes for authorising the standalone services that enable the greatest legal protection for those clergy who wish to use them. ([GS 2346](#), p. 11, bold original).**

*Thirdly*, as set out above, it is now clear that the legal risks are even greater than when the bishops first rethought using commendation due to the risks. This is because there is now

acceptance that “it would be difficult to say that making the PLF available for same-sex couples without there being an assumption as to their sexual relationships was not indicative of any departure from the Church’s doctrine”. The key question then become whether or not this is in “an essential matter”. Once this is combined with the disadvantage of using Canon B5 noted in GS 2346’s table (p. 13) – “High likelihood of legal challenge being brought against individual ministers” – it would seem irresponsible of bishops to encourage clergy to use their right under Canon B5 rather than secure an authorised service by means of Canon B2 (or one of the options in B4 or B5A).

*Fourthly*, one of the key distinctions between “regular services” and “standalone services” was that in the former the prayers “may not be used to construct an entire service whose focus is the PLF” ([Pastoral Guidance](#), 1.2.1, p.20 of PDF). As noted earlier, a standalone service is described as “a discrete structure for a particular and distinctive liturgical act – a rite for marking a significant stage in a committed and faithful same-sex relationship” ([Pastoral Guidance](#), p.4 of PDF, italics added). This means that for the bishops to encourage “standalone services” under B5 would be to encourage clergy to create a rite where the focus is recognised to be indicative of a departure from the church’s doctrine.

*Fifthly*, the argument appears here to be that the “forms of service” are already authorised forms (Service of the Word or Holy Communion) so there is no need for an authorisation process such as Canon B2. However, this does not fit with the description of standalone services above from the Pastoral Guidance. In addition, if that is the case then it is being argued that any commendation would be for use under Canon B5.1 (adapting an authorised service) not Canon B5.2. This was the basis for commending the suite of prayers in regular services but it only permits the person taking a service to “make and use variations which are not of substantial importance”. That was already contentious if a prayer of blessing was to be used in a regular service (as discussed [here](#)) but will be very hard to defend if the couple and the PLF are “the focus” in “a rite for marking a significant stage in a committed and faithful same-sex relationship” especially if the service is closely tied to a civil marriage ceremony. It will be particularly controversial if such a service focussed on the couple presents itself (as it would presumably need to do) simply as an additional service of Holy Communion (hence an authorised service) added to a church’s normal pattern of worship. The proposals relating to using renewal of baptismal vows instead of developing a liturgy to mark transition were objected to by some for connecting something contentious to a service related to a sacrament. A standalone service presented simply as one of Holy Communion that was in effect taking place to enable the celebration of a recently married same-sex couple would raise even more concerns.

*Sixthly*, to stay within the law any parish priest would need to ensure that the service was doing what the bishops claim the PLF are doing given the church’s doctrine of marriage remains unchanged. This is significantly different from what most clergy and couples wanting such a service believe and would like to express liturgically. The Pastoral Guidance when issued gave some sense of the constraints that this would place on the service, in particular in response to the question as to whether PLF could be used in standalone services, it was stated that this was possible “Only if these are authorized via the B 2 process. At this point, they could be used, provided the service does not look like and cannot be mistaken for Holy Matrimony” ([Pastoral Guidance](#), 1.2.2, p.20 of PDF). There are,

however, no details as to what would constitute “looking like” or “being mistaken” for Holy Matrimony. Although not stated in the Pastoral Guidance, it would presumably also be important that any service did not look like the Service for Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage as that service is predicated on the couple being in Holy Matrimony.

*Seventhly*, as the quotation above makes clear, although the Pastoral Guidance issued in December gave guidance for standalone services it did so on the basis that these were *authorised* services, specifically authorised services under Canon B2. There can be no doubt as to the legality of any service properly authorised by that process and no threat of legal challenge to the minister officiating at it. Were the new emerging proposal to forego authorisation and revert to *commendation* there would therefore need to be a serious review and risk assessment of the guidance to take this into consideration. There is the real possibility that any revised Pastoral Guidance would result in a service such as that the legal office described in 2018 advice as one that “it seems unlikely...would be considered usable by those clergy who would wish to officiate at a service of prayer and dedication after the registration of a civil partnership or a same sex marriage” as it

would have to omit any reference to the parties’ marriage or their being married; or, if it did contain such a reference, would have to contain explanations and disclaimers as to the nature of the civil marriage and its not amounting to marriage so far as the Church’s teaching was concerned. Either way, such a service might well be considered pastorally unusable in respect of the occasion for which it was intended. It is not clear what such a service would or could actually do. Nor is it clear in what way it would glorify God and edify the people (see Canon B 1.2 for this requirement).

*Eighthly*, not only is the previous commitment to move quickly to introducing services under Canon B2 being removed, by not using Canon B5A (which can only be used “Where a form of service has been prepared with a view to its submission to the General Synod for approval by the Synod under Canon B 2”) using commendation for use under B5 removes any need for any authorisation by Canon B2 or any other means. The Church Times reports that “The document shown to bishops on Thursday, however, proposes a model that “allows for the option of a B2 vote at the end of the discernment process but does not require it””. This is another major *volte-face* and disregards the widespread conviction – expressed last year in several letters from The Alliance and a group of bishops – that constitutionally Canon B2 has to be used to introduce such services.

*Ninthly*, the Church Times reports that the proposal is that, in relation to PLF, “restrictions on their use in stand-alone services should be removed for a “period of discernment of three years””. The Pastoral Guidance set out processes by which PCCs would be involved in the introduction of such services and it is apparently the plan that this would also be the case if the route of commendation for use under B5 was followed but the assessment of Canon B5 offered only in February to General Synod clearly stated, “There would be no obligation for ministers to discuss the use of the standalone services with their PCC” (GS 2346, p. 11). This major problem arises because Canon B5 authorises either “the minister who is to conduct the service” (B5.1) or “the minister having the cure of souls” and it is not clear how the bishops could place further legally binding conditions on those ministers before introducing PLF in standalone services if they are held to be legal under Canon B5.



There is an even more fundamental issue here. The liturgical canons set out what leading canon lawyer Norman Doe describes as “a principle of subsidiarity (distributing rights of liturgical innovation to all levels of the church)” alongside “the ways in which the General Synod enjoys an overriding power of liturgical authorization” (*Legal Framework of the Church of England*, p. 281). To seek to avoid authorisation and put the responsibility solely on the parish priest in order to introduce an experimental period for contentious liturgy while also insisting on laying down constraints on the priest which are not present in the canons would appear to be an unjustifiable exercise of episcopal power without responsibility. It represents an extension of the liturgical role of the House of Bishops beyond the extra-canonical innovation of commendation to clergy in relation to B5, a new development which would be significant given that the House on its own (unlike General Synod led by the House, the Archbishops, Convocations, a diocesan bishop, and a parish priest) is granted no formal canonical role in relation to liturgy. What is being proposed here is, in effect, the bishops making Canon B5 do the work intended by Canon B5A while bypassing the need for authorisation or Synodical involvement as there is no commitment by the bishops ever to use Canon B2.

*Tenthly, and finally*, the Pastoral Guidance for the standalone services was clear that “The Notes to the standalone services will provide more detail if and when these are authorized” (p. 4 of PDF). In relation as to whether or not prayers can be offered after a couple have entered a civil marriage or civil partnership the answer was “Yes, they can. Ministers should consult the Notes to the service for advice and guidance in shaping the service” (1.2.5, p. 21 of PDF). Draft Notes have appeared in the past (and include, for example, guidance on the contentious matter of rings) and would likely have been of particular interest to Synod members during the B2 process. If the bishops reverted to commending for use under Canon B5, they would be renegeing on their commitment to the November Synod expressed in the published Pastoral Guidance. In addition, as the service would not be an authorised one, it is far from clear that the notes would have any legal force – the evaluation of using Canon B5 presented to Synod in February 2023 was clear that “There would be...save for that already provided for in the Canons, no restrictions on ministers adapting the forms of service, or creating their own material in preference to using the commended PLF Resource Section or outline orders of service”.

In summary, because of the chaotic pathway the bishops have led the church on, this latest emerging proposal faces major challenges and, even if successful, will yield, if securely within the canons, a form of “standalone service” which will fall far short not only of “same-sex marriage in church” but even a form of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage or the originally promised “same-sex couples will be able to come to church to give thanks for their civil marriage or civil partnership and receive God’s blessing”.

## What about the Pastoral Guidance and Pastoral Reassurance/Provision?

As the focus here is on Prayers of Love and Faith, and the details of the “emerging proposal” in these other two areas remains less clear, this will be brief and simply highlight that once again we have experienced PLF in the form of Persistent Leadership Failure.

The introduction of PLF in January 2023 without any clarity as to what would replace *Issues in Human Sexuality* was unwise. At the launch [the Bishop of London acknowledged it was less than ideal but saw it as a short-term problem](#):

And I think one of one of my regrets is that I couldn't be sitting here today and saying these are the pastoral guidance. But that's not where we are, we would hope that certainly by the time the Synod met in July, there would be clear pastoral guidance in place.

We are now approaching the July 2024 General Synod with no sign of “clear pastoral guidance” even in outline let alone “in place”. This is despite a group (of which I was part) working on this between February and July 2023 in order to take matters forward and the House of Bishops voting in October that “further work be done on part 3 (Ministry) of the Guidance for issuing as soon as possible”. The major stumbling block is – quite predictably – whether or not clergy will be permitted to enter same-sex marriage. The House in October passed (by only 18 votes to 15 with 2 abstaining) an amendment that added to the words quote above “with the intention that it remove all restrictions on clergy entering same-sex marriages, and on bishops ordaining, licencing and granting permissions to officiate to such clergy”. This was agreed after minimal debate, no consideration by General Synod which has still never discussed this, and again without either theological or legal papers providing support.

As is now clear from Annex B of [GS 2346](#) such theological and legal advice would have shown that there is no easy way to achieve what the bishops (by a narrow majority) have said they intend to do. The three unappetising options are:

- “The bishops could issue a new teaching document, which makes clear that restrictions are being removed on ministers being in civil same-sex marriages. There is a significant risk that this would be seen by some as a change in doctrine, which the bishops (and the General Synod) have been clear they do not wish to do to occur” (p. 16).
- “whether the theological rationale of enabling “pastoral provision in a time of uncertainty” could be extended to remove restrictions on clergy entering same-sex civil marriages as a pastoral response... this may be seen by some as a significant change in the doctrine of marriage, or a disregarding of the teaching of the Church...It is also highly likely that, were the bishops to conclude that these changes do not constitute a change in doctrine in an essential matter, decisions that emanate from this could be challenged in the courts and leave individual clergy open to further legal risks” (pp. 16-17).

- “an agreement to limit the exercise of discipline to those ministers who enter into same-sex civil marriages, without this requiring any formal change to doctrine or the teaching of the Church... this approach could lead to a pattern of different practices in different parts of the country... Even if a general consensus was found amongst bishops, it would still be possible for others to bring a complaint under the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003 against clergy who have entered into a same sex civil marriage” (p. 17).

It also appears that, for all the repeated episcopal emphasis on unity and “walking together”, a number of bishops have threatened they may simply follow the third path and disapply discipline on their own initiative in order to, from their perspective, break the logjam and move matters forward. This, and any wider “disapplication of discipline”, would inevitably raise questions as to the right of the bishops to decide effectively to abandon the upholding of the law in this highly contentious matter. Were they then to enforce discipline on those dissenting it would bring into play not only the pastoral principle of “paying attention to power” but the need to “admit hypocrisy”.

In relation to Pastoral Reassurance or Provision, [the answer to Q55 at the February 2024 General Synod](#) (pp. 23-25) finally reveals the previously unannounced decisions of the bishops and traces the changing stance of the House. This moves from in May 2023 narrowly voting (21-20) to remove the words “for provision” from a motion which spoke of “recognising the need for provision to ensure that those who use, and do not use, the prayers are properly protected as part of the legitimate theological traditions of the Church of England” to in October 2023 unanimously adding “as soon as possible” to a motion calling for “further work on additional formal structural pastoral provision set out in paragraph 32-40 of paper HB(23)37 for decision by the House of Bishops at a future date”. [The most recent meeting](#) in May 2024 considered “proportionate Pastoral Reassurance measures”. The Church Times [reports](#) that in fact these included proposals that “the level of reassurance required for the use of standalone services of PLF was for ministers or parishes to request care from a bishop who shares their doctrinal views” and that in the case of clergy entering same-sex marriages

“There may be a case to make at this point for transferred episcopal pastoral care and sacramental ministry,” the document said, with the prospect of creating “three spaces in the Church: one for those who want to maintain the doctrine of marriage, one for those who want to explore developing it, and one for those who do not want to make a clear decision at this time.”

For many, what is now finally beginning to be recognised by at least some bishops as likely to be necessary (given the implicit or explicit change of doctrine that is underway and the depth and breadth of opposition to the bishops’ proposals and the way they have been implemented) is something that should have been apparent since PLF were announced or before.

These two areas of agreement on Pastoral Guidance and Pastoral Reassurance, although only dealt with briefly here, are important in relation to Prayers of Love and Faith because it would appear that the current process is committed to finding a comprehensive settlement

and it is unlikely that the Archbishop of York who chairs the Programme Board could retain any credibility or integrity if he once again breaks [his commitment to the February 2023 Synod](#) that

I want to give you this pledge that I won't be able to vote, I won't be able to support commending these prayers when I hope we vote this through today. But I won't be able to support commending these prayers until we have the pastoral guidance and pastoral provision

This means that any further developments in relation to PLF will need to be set within probably significant developments in these two areas which may, in turn, reconfigure the possible options for PLF.

## Conclusion

Focussing almost exclusively on Prayers of Love and Faith this account has sought to show the extent to which we have seen a Persistent Leadership Failure in the handling of PLF by the House of Bishops headed by the Archbishops.

One underlying problem has been the attempt to address specific questions of liturgy (and the connected replacement of *Issues*) without addressing our theological and doctrinal disagreements but instead simply claiming that doctrine remains unchanged. There also appears to have been either changes in legal advice due to decisions by the House and/or disregard for legal advice by the House.

Now, however, these doctrinal and legal challenges are combined with a widespread lack of confidence in the leadership of the church due to its repeated failures which have eroded trust and respect across the divergent perspectives on sexuality. It may even be the case that across the board a new consensus is emerging that the bishops and their failings are a, perhaps *the*, fundamental problem. The agreement to “move to next business” in the last Synod in February may have been the first clear sign of this reality. This has arisen because we have seen a lack of proper preparation and foresight concerning the challenges, broken promises as to what is to be delivered, apparent forgetfulness about past statements, a confusing and incoherent way of making constantly changing and incompatible decisions, and an apparent lack of adequate regard for due process and legal and theological expertise.

It remains unclear what exactly will be brought to Synod and whether there will be any vote on a proposal. Whatever comes to it, Synod – across its divisions on sexuality - needs to find some way of calling the bishops to account and constructively addressing the reality that (as in other areas, most notably and tragically the handling of safeguarding), the fundamental PLF problem we are facing as a church is not Prayers of Love and Faith but Persistent Leadership Failure.