

Playing Fast and Loose with Prayers of Love and Faith?

Introduction

After [initial publicity](#) surrounding a use of Prayers of Love and Faith on the first Sunday following their commendation, it has been unclear how often, and in what ways, churches are using them. Many seem to think their use has been minimal, perhaps because of couples waiting for standalone services to be introduced. However, on the Friday following the recent meeting of the General Synod (12th July), they were used at the regular lunchtime Communion service in York Minster and this has caused some controversy. They were used for two men who had entered a civil marriage the previous day and their use there raises questions as to whether people are playing fast and loose (PFL) with Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF).

Attention was drawn to the service on Facebook by Canon Tim Goode who that evening wrote that it was

An utter privilege to preside at the Eucharist Thanksgiving for the marriage of [A and B] at York Minster, incorporating the Prayers of Love and Faith. A truly joyous celebration of their wonderful and graceful love. Thank you Sally Hitchiner for such a fabulous sermon.

This post [now instead opens with](#)

An utter privilege to preside at the Eucharist with prayers of blessing following the civil marriage of [A and B] at York Minster, using the newly commended Prayers of Love and Faith.

Sally Hitchiner posted on Facebook, claiming this was “the first in any cathedral in England”:

Wonderful to preach at the first Eucharist Thanksgiving with prayers of love and faith today @YorkMinster following the gay wedding of couple...

A [similar post on Twitter](#) was clarified three days later with [the message](#)

Just to be clear with the exact wording of the service on Friday it was “the Eucharist with prayers of blessing following the marriage of”....

That exact wording is what appeared on the service booklet for the service according to an image of it that has been circulated.

It is clear from these posts and the comments on them that this was a very special service for the couple and their friends and an encouragement to many in the wider church. It therefore makes me uncomfortable about writing what follows. However, it is also clear that the service has upset many. Some of the complaints raised are based on an objection to *any* use of the commended PLF on the grounds that PLF as introduced are wholly unacceptable. A more interesting and important set of questions relates to what this service shows about how the PLF are being used and described. This raises questions as to whether those using them are fully aware of, and working within, the constraints of the church’s doctrine and law and the Pastoral Guidance. The two corrections to the description of the service by the clergy presiding and preaching show that there are issues of concern here and that some people are on a rather steep learning curve.

Without sight of the full order of service it is difficult to make any definitive judgment about the extent to which, either deliberately or in ignorance, the Minister was playing fast and loose with PLF but there are at least the following four areas where there are serious questions:

- Canon B5
- Pastoral Guidance & Standalone services
- Legal advice
- Doctrine: Language of Blessing and Marriage

These are important questions whatever one's views on PLF if there is to be respect for the church's doctrine and law and if clergy officiating at such services are not to put themselves at risk of serious legal challenge or rebuke from their bishop for failure to use PLF as commended.

Canon B5

[Canon B1.2](#) states that

Every minister shall use only the forms of service authorized by this Canon, except so far as he may exercise the discretion permitted by Canon B 5. It is the minister's responsibility to have a good understanding of the forms of service used and he shall endeavour to ensure that the worship offered glorifies God and edifies the people.

There is no dispute that the inclusion of PLF in any service falls under [Canon B5](#) which concerns "the discretion of ministers in conduct of public prayer". There is less clarity and understanding whether the PLF (both as currently commended for regular services and as now being proposed to be commended for standalone services) are, in any particular instance, being used under Canon B5.1 or B5.2. This is, however, an important matter to clarify.

It would appear that currently (this may change with standalone services) the PLF are commended for use under B5.1 which reads:

The minister who is to conduct the service may in his discretion make and use variations which are not of substantial importance in any form of service authorized by Canon B 1 according to particular circumstances.

This is in contrast to B5.2 which relates not to changes to authorised services but to a form of service for *an occasion* for which there is no authorised form:

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.

It would appear that the Minister is claiming that this was an authorised regular service of Holy Communion which simply incorporated PLF in line with the Pastoral Guidance under Canon B5.1. However, there are at least three important questions raised by the service booklet (and even more by the language used by the clergy presiding and preaching in publicising the service):

1. In describing the service not simply as "THE EUCHARIST" but adding "with prayers of blessing following the marriage of..." is this not in fact rather a service for an occasion "for which no provision is made" and so an exercise of discretion under B5.2? As

explored below this relates to the question as to whether it is, in fact, a form of standalone service.

2. If it is under B5.1, can a “variation” in the authorised eucharistic liturgy which is drawn attention to in the name of the service on the service booklet be considered a variation “not of substantial importance”?
3. If it is under B5.1, can a “variation” described as “prayers of blessing following the marriage of” two people of the same sex be considered a variation that is “not of substantial importance” given the church’s doctrine of marriage?

Pastoral Guidance & Standalone Services

The Minster was seeking to act within [the published Pastoral Guidance](#) so this was not intended to be a “standalone service” but rather the use of PLF materials “in prayers in regularly scheduled Sunday or weekday services” (PG 1.1.1, p. 3), in this case a regular Friday lunchtime Eucharist.

Part of the problem here is that there is considerable ambiguity about this distinction and what is necessary to constitute something as a “standalone service”.

The opening part of the guidance (1.1.1) mentions **two** seemingly essential but distinct criteria and [reads](#)

The commended PLF Resource Section is designed for use in these regular services, but should not be used to offer standalone or special services (hereafter, ‘standalone services’). These are services *that do not fall within the normal, usual pattern of worship for a parish, and are designed primarily around the PLF* (italics added).

In relation to PLF use in a cathedral, the Guidance rewords the *second* criterion but makes it a separate prohibited sufficient in itself to render the service outside the guidance rather than one of the two necessary defining criteria of a “standalone service” [\(1.1.3\)](#):

The decision to use any form of commended prayers would be at the discretion of the Dean, subject to the same restrictions about not using them for a standalone service, *or a service whose main or entire focus is the PLF....* Given part of the role of cathedrals as the seat of the bishop, chapters should seek the views of their diocesan bishop before making a decision, rather than simply notify the bishop. This conversation is primarily about ensuring good ongoing relationships, recognising that the final decision lies with the dean and chapter (italics added).

A **third** feature is one which relates to the formality of the service: the proper incorporation of PLF is described as “more informal use of the PLF as part of regular worship” which is again contrasted with “a standalone service of public worship” (1.1.1).

The recommended use of PLF in public worship is later [described](#) (1.2.1) as follows presumably illustrating what is meant by “more informal” and again contrasting this with the second criterion:

Prayers from the Resource Section of the PLF may be included in the intercessions or prayers of a regular service. Like all prayers in public worship, the intercessions at such a service must not be ‘contrary to, or indicative of a departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter’. They may not be used to construct an entire service whose focus is the PLF.

What is prohibited in that final sentence appears to be another way of describing a “standalone service” which, drawing on the above features but using more technical language, is given [this three-fold definition in 1.1.1](#)

The PLF here would offer *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* (italics added).

A **fourth** and final guide for identifying a standalone service is the currently legitimate use of PLF is contrasted with where “prayers from the Resource Section may form part of a standalone or special service which follows the service structure provided in the PLF” ([1.2.1](#))

A further challenge arises in relation to the context of the Minster service which is clearly one of prayers “after a couple has contracted a civil marriage” ([1.2.5](#)). Here the Guidance is particularly confusing. It states that such prayers can be offered but “Ministers should consult the Notes to the service for advice and guidance in shaping the service”.

Although there were proposed Notes for standalone services in earlier drafts of PLF shared with Synod, in [the published PLF](#) there are currently no Notes as such for use of PLF resources but only notes for prayers for covenanted friendships and for the blessing of a home. This is important given the distinct and significant legal questions around offering prayers for those who have entered a civil same-sex marriage which are discussed below.

So how did we get to this confused situation? The language drawing a distinction between regular and standalone services was suddenly introduced at some point following the July Synod and before September for reasons that have never been fully explained. It imposed these terms on what previously had been distinguished as “resources” and “service structure” including two outline orders and notes (as in [original Jan/Feb proposal](#)). This new terminology was closely connected to the decision at that time that some of PLF (the outline services) had to be taken through the synodical process of Canon B 2.

As these selections from the Guidance show, the exact distinction is far from clear. It may simply be a matter of whether or not the service is one within the regular pattern of services (in which case the Minster service as a regular weekday Eucharist is not a standalone service). However, the use of PLF in a regular service is also described in terms of these not being “special services” or “designed primarily around the PLF” and as simply including PLF in “the intercessions or prayers of a regular service” as a “more informal use of the PLF”. The formal description of the Minster service as one “with prayers of blessing following the marriage of” two people therefore looks like it may well go beyond the Pastoral Guidance. Without more details it is difficult to be sure but it would appear that the Minster service, although taking place at the time of a regular Eucharist, was also one which “follows the service structure provided in the PLF” for a Eucharist *standalone* service using PLF as set out [in draft to the November General Synod](#) as “an outline order for a service within a Celebration of Holy Communion”.

Legal Advice

One of the serious problems with the PLF process has been that legal advice has been given to the bishops on numerous occasions but they have refused to publish it. Instead, they have simply commended the prayers for use by clergy under Canon B5 and so placed all the legal risk on clergy using PLF. They are now planning to extend this to “standalone services” from sometime after February 2025. Clergy therefore have to rely on their own understanding of the

key canons, the Pastoral Guidance which is in part shaped by the legal advice (both of which as shown above raise questions in relation to a service such as that held in the Minster), and the selective summaries of the legal advice presented to General Synod.

The description of the service as “Eucharist Thanksgiving for the marriage” and “Eucharist Thanksgiving with prayers of love and faith today @YorkMinster following the gay wedding of couple” in the first publicity for it by the clergy presiding and preaching raise serious questions. This was implicitly recognised by their changes or clarifications of their original reports. However, the approved description of “the Eucharist with prayers of blessing following the marriage of...” also raises serious questions.

A glimpse of unpublished legal advice

Perhaps the most significant contribution on LLF at the July Synod was [the question](#) and then [the speech](#) by the Bishop of Bath and Wells. In the latter he gave the first glimpse of some of the legal advice the bishops have received. He stated that

Legal advice given to the House of Bishops last December in paper 2328 stated that the formal notes which form part of the Prayers of Love and Faith will need to make it clear not only that the Prayers of Love and Faith must not resemble Holy Matrimony but that they must also not resemble any other form of service connected with marriage.

This is important on a number of counts. *Firstly*, although Bishop Michael might have been thought to be referring to GS 2328 which was presented to the November Synod and he had just quoted, these words are not found in that document. *Secondly*, he specifically says he is quoting “legal advice given to the House of Bishops” and so he would appear to be making public a small part of what has until now been kept hidden. This means his reference to 2328 most likely refers to HB(23)28 given how House papers are numbered. *Thirdly*, what he cites would seem to mean that the use of the PLF must not resemble a Thanksgiving for Marriage (hence the need to rewrite the original descriptions of the service on social media) or a Service of Prayer after Civil Marriage. This is not clearly set out and explained in the Pastoral Guidance. This simply says that use of prayers “should not attempt to resemble Holy Matrimony” (1.3.6). In fact, this statement appears immediately after stating that it needs to be made clear that “this is not a wedding, in the same way that Prayers of Dedication after a Civil Marriage, or the Blessing of a Marriage, are not services of Holy Matrimony” (1.3.6)). This perhaps implies, contrary to the legal advice quoted at Synod by the bishops, that similarity to those other services is acceptable as they “are not services of Holy Matrimony”.

What Synod has been told about legal advice

This quotation from unpublished legal advice is similar to what is found in para 9 in [GS 2328](#) in November 2023:

we are equally clear that the PLF Resource Section does not treat the relationship of the couple as being Holy Matrimony. They are not being commended for use in a way that does that or gives that impression. The material contained in the PLF Resource Section intentionally does not differentiate between couples who have and who have not entered into a civil same-sex marriage. That is because the PLF Resource Section is being offered for the purposes explained in the previous paragraph; they are not being offered to be used as a thanksgiving for marriage or a service of prayer and dedication after civil marriage and do not refer to, or take account of, a couple’s civil marital status.

It is clear that the Minster's service does not conform to this as the couple's civil marital status is highlighted on the service booklet. The fact that both the preacher and the priest presiding referred to it publicly as a Eucharist Thanksgiving either "for the marriage of" or "following the gay wedding of" the couple raises even more concerns.

In GS 2328 in November the bishops explored the specific question of whether "the use of prayers and other resources for same-sex couples who have entered into a same-sex marriage" would be "contrary to, or indicative of a departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in an essential matter" (para 10). They refer to the fact that "legal advice we received set out both sides of the argument" and highlight as significant that

The PLF Resource Section does not treat those couples who have entered a same-sex civil marriage any differently from the way they treat a same-sex couple who are in a civil partnership or who have not acquired any formal civil status for their relationship. The use of the PLF Resource Section for a couple who have entered into a civil same-sex marriage does not therefore imply that their civil status is something that the Church considers distinguishes the couple from other same-sex couples who wish to dedicate their life together to God. The materials contained in the PLF Resource Section are not a celebration of a couple's civil same-sex marriage. They are praying with and for two people who love one another and who wish to give thanks for and mark that love in faith before God ([GS 2328, para 11](#)).

On this basis it would appear at least prudent and perhaps legally necessary for there to be no reference at all to the civil status of the couple during the service and for the prayers simply to be for a same-sex couple. This is clearly not the case at York Minster where the service booklet does "imply that their civil status is something that the Church considers distinguishes the couple" and that the service is "a celebration of" their marriage. It would appear that Canterbury Cathedral are also disregarding the significance of this rationale for the prayer's legality set out in para 11 because [their announcement on 18th June](#) restricted the use of PLF to "Same-sex couples already in civil partnerships or civil marriages, or who have sealed a covenanted friendship".

Unpacking the legal logic and its implications

Tracing back the legal advice behind these statements reveals important elements in the legal reasoning behind these statements.

In November 2016 in the legal advice annexed to [GS 2055](#), it was stated that

The effect of Canon B 5.3, in the light of the doctrine described in Canon B 30, is that it would not be lawful for a minister to use a form of service which either explicitly or implicitly treated or recognised the civil marriage of two persons of the same sex as equivalent to holy matrimony (para 7)

This, along with para 9 of GS 2328 quoted above, was referenced by the Bishop of Leicester in his answer to Stephen Hofmeyr's question at the recent July Synod ([Q55](#))

Legal advice given in January 2018 reaffirmed this position. It also helpfully drew out the practical implications of this when it further stated that any service of prayer and dedication after the registration of a civil partnership or a same-sex marriage

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)

Some of this was quoted by Stephen Hofmeyr in his supplementary question in July which asked if the advice had changed and if so in which document. The Bishop of Leicester [replied](#), "I don't believe the advice has changed".

Although it is unclear what was said during the service at York Minster, the service booklet description of it as including "prayers of blessing following the marriage of" two men breaches these constraints and at least implicitly treats a civil same-sex marriage as marriage.

All this which is in the public domain would appear to demonstrate the Minster service was not within the law. The difficulty is that the more detailed reasoning for that conclusion is not as clearly articulated for clergy and others to follow. It was, however, set out in some detail and with great clarity in the 23 page "LLF Analysis of Legal Issues" produced in March 2023. This was shared with all of us who were working on the Implementation Groups between the February and July Synods. Despite requests, however, neither it nor other legal advice, has been shared with those now advising the bishops. I have wrestled with whether or not to quote from this document here. I have decided not to do so and that it would be much better if it, and other written advice setting out the legal arguments, was all published together (with perhaps an accompanying narrative and explanation) rather than being selectively quoted or summarised or paraphrased.

The basic legal question does, however, seem to be clear when it comes to using the service for a couple following a civil same-sex marriage and certainly if attention is drawn to this situation in any way during the service (especially if this is without also making quite clear that it is not to be viewed as holy matrimony). That question is how the Church of England interprets entering into a same-sex civil marriage and what evaluation it makes of such a decision given its doctrine of holy matrimony. Is it, to take the words in the canons, a decision which is either "contrary to" or "indicative of a departure from" the Church's teaching? Or is it something which is understood to be compatible with its doctrine of marriage?

It is clear that the answer to this question is of great importance when it comes to the question of whether clergy can enter a same-sex civil marriage. It is, however, not as widely recognised that it is also important in relation to whether (and if so, under what conditions) any service using PLF might be offered to a married same-sex couple or refer to their civil marriage.

The bishops have answered this question in the past by holding that entering a civil same-sex marriage is not compatible with the doctrine of the church and so cannot be approved. [The 2014 Pastoral Statement](#) states, "Getting married to someone of the same sex would, however, clearly be at variance with the teaching of the Church of England" (para 26). The consequences drawn from this in relation to clergy were then upheld in [the Court of Appeal in the Pemberton case](#) which noted with reference to the 2014 statement that "A clear statement on marriage and same sex marriage is contained at paragraphs 9, 11, 12, 26, 27 and 28 of that document, including the need to obey the Church on these issues. Paragraph 26 states expressly that

marrying someone of the same sex would be at variance with the teachings of the Church of England” (para 64). Clearly the bishops could revisit this question. Until then, however, the presumption must be that the decision to enter a same-sex civil marriage is not something the Church can approve. This would appear to have significant, but currently not publicly articulated, legal implications concerning use of PLF following a same-sex marriage.

However, in October 2023, by means of a hurriedly introduced amendment to the original motion, and without making this decision public until February 2023, the House of Bishops did agree that “same sex marriage is distinct from Holy Matrimony such that same sex marriage is not seen as impinging on Holy Matrimony in such a way that contradicts the Church’s doctrine” ([Answer to Q56](#)). This judgement has though never been made part of the rationale for PLF which, as noted above, has stressed the PLF are simply for same-sex couples without reference to marital status. In February the Archbishop of York also said in answer to two questions about the amendment ([Questions 62 and 63](#)) that

In preparation for the meeting on 9 October 2023, the House of Bishops was provided with a joint paper from the Chief Legal Adviser and the Theological Adviser entitled Living in Love and Faith: Civil Marriage and Holy Matrimony. Although it was not prepared with the amendment in view, it contained advice on various aspects of the relationship between civil marriage and Holy Matrimony. As the position has yet to be considered in detail by the House of Bishops in the light of further advice from FAOC, the substance of the advice has not so far been published.

This, and the fact that decisions about permitting clergy to enter civil same-sex marriage are still on hold and no rationale has been offered for any other position, suggest that it is still the case that the church cannot approve the decision to enter a civil same-sex marriage because it “is not compatible with the teaching of the Church of England”. If this is the case then it would appear that any service should not draw attention to a couple being in such a marriage.

Given the York Minster service it therefore becomes pressing that at least the March 2023 legal advice and the October joint paper from the Chief Legal Adviser and the Theological Adviser entitled Living in Love and Faith: Civil Marriage and Holy Matrimony are made public and that the status of the 9th October decision of the House clarified in relation to the clear contrary statement in the 2014 Pastoral Statement.

Doctrine – Language of Blessing and Marriage

As the above analysis has shown, whatever was contained in the order of service or said during it, the framing of it as “with prayers of blessing following the marriage” is where there are serious questions relating to law and the Pastoral Guidance. This is the case even if only PLF commended prayers were used, they were simply part of the intercessions, and (apart from the dress of the couple and perhaps, given photos, prayers over rings) there was no resemblance to any service related to marriage.

The most obvious problem is the use of the language of “marriage”. This is not even qualified as “civil marriage” (as it was [in a recent tweet from Andrew Dotchin](#) describing his more recent use of PLF in ways which are also hard to square with the guidance and legal basis for PLF). Use of “civil marriage” might then appeal to the case for a clear distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony to argue that the service was not contrary to the doctrine of the church in an essential matter and was a form of service which glorifies God and edifies the people. The PLF were though, only judged to be legal it appears because they did not use that language of

“marriage” anywhere. They were commended for use simply with a same-sex couple and without reference to any legal status they might have. It is clear that the Minster service did not comply with these constraints.

The language of “blessing” in the service booklet is also problematic as the blessing is related to the marriage (though “following” is better than “on”) not to the people. A case could perhaps have been made for the service if it was “with prayers of blessing on” two named individuals rather than “prayers of blessing following the marriage of” two named individuals. This distinction between blessing individuals (but not relationships and certainly not a legal status) was developed at the end of the discernment process in December 2022/January 2023. It was (along with the sharp distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony that has since been abandoned) another crucial element in securing legal approval for the prayers. Its rationale was sketched in the original paper to Synod ([GS 2289](#), p.9) and explored more fully in [a paper then posted on the LLF website](#) and summarised in the theological rationale offered in November ([GS 2328, Annex H](#)). Even if the arguments are accepted (and they have been strongly critiqued by, among others, [Martin Davie](#)), the LLF paper’s discussion of “the blessing of a same-sex civil marriage” notes that

this position runs the risk of being perceived as confusing (and perhaps disingenuous) in simultaneously affirming and rejecting same-sex marriage. As such, while this option could be seen as a ‘compromise’ or as indicating a direction of travel towards same-sex marriage, the pastoral and theological coherence of the option seems difficult to maintain (p. 8).

Conclusion

The fundamental underlying problems here include the following:

1. That, as someone put it to me recently, “they are not PLF, they are PNW, Prayers Nobody Wants” as was argued [here](#) back in January ie what is sought is equal marriage and, once the constraints imposed by current doctrine and law are recognised and properly applied, the PLF are barely even crumbs from the table.
2. That those who are using the PLF are likely to be those who do not accept the church’s doctrine and so will not be the best judges as to its liturgical implications and may not to be too concerned about the details of the legal constraints that doctrine creates.
3. That those who do accept the church’s doctrine are concerned (a) that PLF as commended and/or as used in practice are contrary to the canons and will undermine marriage doctrine and (b) that the law and the doctrine need to be respected.
4. That the bishops have failed to release the legal advice they have received but have put all the legal risk on parish clergy
5. Statements were originally made that have given false impressions and raised false hopes eg the [initial press release](#) stating “same-sex couples...could have a service in which there would be prayers of dedication, thanksgiving or for God’s blessing on the couple in church following a civil marriage or partnership” or [the Archbishop of York’s statement](#) that “it takes us to a place where LGBTIQ+ people, people entering into same-sex marriages, people in civil partnerships are able to come to the Church of England and those relationships and marriages can be acknowledged and celebrated”.
6. That the theological rationales and legal bases for the PLF have shifted in various ways since they were introduced leaving many unclear about where we now stand as a church and what is and is not permissible.

7. That the Pastoral Guidance, in particular the distinction between regular and standalone services, is often far from clear and fails to do justice to the differences between Canon B5.1 and B5.2 and it would appear to elements found in the unpublished legal advice.

Services similar to those at York Minster have, of course, been taking place for decades in various places within the Church of England (I explored how Southwark Cathedral were offering them back in 2017 [here](#) and, as a PDF, [here](#) with shorter PDF summary [here](#)). There is also now, I believe, a widespread acceptance among those who believe they are contrary to doctrine and should not happen that those within the Church of England who wish to welcome and include same-sex couples liturgically and in some sense mark their marriages should be provided with a way to do so that has legal security and integrity. The problem is the bishops are attempting to square the circle by (1) offering PLF but also (2) saying they are maintaining doctrine (at least in relation to what they consider “in any essential matter”) and legal constraints. The reality is that it appears almost half the church does not want the former and almost half the church does not want the latter and in using PLF are likely to offer illegal services.

There is clearly an urgent need for the bishops to clarify what a same-sex couple are considered by the Church to be doing when they contract a civil marriage and whether this is something that the Church can approve. Their refusal to share crucial legal and theological advice on this matter with the wider church and their decision to bring all these questions to the fore by commending prayers and then leaving individual clergy to follow unclear pastoral guidance as to what is and is not lawful is not defensible. Those committed to the church’s doctrine and concerned about these developments will inevitably scrutinise publicised uses of the PLF such as that at York Minster. They cannot but some of what is happening as indeed examples of playing fast and loose with PLF in practice on the ground but now with the tacit acceptance of this by the bishops who commended PLF.

The description of the service offered at York Minster is, it has been argued, one that it is very difficult to justify as within the law and pastoral guidance. It is, however, likely to be replicated in other cathedrals and parishes over coming months. The situation will then get even more complex and contested once standalone services are commended (as the Bishop of Bath and Wells highlighted at Synod).

This will in turn only lead to those unhappy with PLF becoming even more disillusioned with the approach of the bishops and/or those wishing to fully include and welcome same-sex couples feeling betrayed if it is made clear by an individual bishop or the bishops collectively that the services they want to provide are in fact not within the law and guidance.

Given this situation, at the very least it appears there needs to be an urgent review and revision of the existing pastoral guidance to bring greater clarity, particularly in relation to services following a same-sex civil marriage. This needs to go beyond simply revisiting the guidance to enable “standalone services” as currently proposed. This proposal is itself unclear - is it simply extending *when* what is currently allowed to non-regular services or is it altering *what* is allowed, allowing a service much more focussed on the couple with the potential to look more like a wedding? Even the latter, however, faces exactly the problems highlighted here with any service like that in York.

It is also now even more pressing that the legal advice which the bishops have received and which has helped shape the pastoral guidance is made fully available so that clergy are not left unclear as to what the constraints of the law are when it comes to using PLF.

Perhaps, though, rather than continued conflict and potential legal action concerning specific services we need a more fundamental “reset” in relation to PLF. PLF from the start has been set up in a flawed manner on the basis that liturgical innovations can be introduced without changes to law or doctrine or ecclesial structures. This is despite all the previous legal and theological advice and is likely only to result in widespread PFL with PLF as, under current constraints, PLF really are an example of PNW (Prayers Nobody Wants). Rather than now simply commending whatever is meant by “standalone services”, do we not need instead to consider afresh questions such as:

- What doctrinal, legal and ecclesial developments needs to be put in place to enable those who wish to do so to offer “prayers of blessing after marriage” or even “Eucharist Thanksgiving” for same-sex couples and to do so with legal security and theological and ecclesial integrity within the CofE?
- Might it not even be possible with such developments for those churches who wish to do so to register with the state so as to provide some form of service which would also constitute the entering into a civil same-sex marriage in church?
- How, given these developments clearly lack the necessary two-thirds support (perhaps now in every House of General Synod), can space be given for this alongside a space with continued legal security and theological and ecclesial integrity acceptable to those within the CofE who reject such developments as clearly contrary to current canons and doctrine and ultimately contrary to Scripture?