

## Why is the PLF Process Proving So Prolonged and Painful?:

### An update, diagnosis and proposal

#### Summary:

In the light of the House of Bishops stating that there will be no further decisions on PLF in either the February or July General Synods this year and the new papers just released, this article explores what PLF promised two years ago and what has actually been delivered. It sketches the longer history (since 2011) to show how little has changed over such a long period and the over-promising that has been a hallmark of the PLF process. It then outlines ten elements which it proposes as the main reasons for this process proving so prolonged and painful:

1. There was an episcopal rush to publication of a proposal without recognition of its legal and theological weaknesses and the fragility of the apparent episcopal consensus.
2. The novel initial legal and theological basis for the proposal was a flawed sharp distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony
3. There was for too long a refusal to acknowledge and work on the complex doctrinal questions related to PLF and revision of the pastoral guidance.
4. The addition of pastoral provision/reassurance and the promise not to proceed with PLF or Pastoral Guidance without it.
5. The under-estimation of the breadth and depth of opposition to the proposals.
6. Repeated process failures, lack of transparency, and widespread lack of confidence that due processes are being followed.
7. The rejection of use of Canon B2.
8. A belief that past legal advice could somehow be ignored, by-passed or over-turned.
9. Initial confusion over the content of the church's doctrine of marriage.
10. The repeated insistence that doctrine remains unchanged and the proposals are compatible with that doctrine.

In the light of these, particularly the last two, it is claimed that what is needed now is a paradigm shift refocussing to address honestly the questions of doctrinal difference and the consequent necessary reconfiguration of episcopacy if we are not to remain stuck but find a way forward for as many as possible within the Church of England in the future.

#### What has happened?

Two years ago in February 2023 the House of Bishops brought forward its response to *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF) and a motion to General Synod ([GS 2289](#)). This proposal was developed over two residential meetings of the College in October/November ([Programme](#) and [Video](#)) and mid-December ([Video & Programme](#)) 2023, although it appears that, faced with multiple options as to how to proceed, it was only in the final stages that any consensus emerged.

[Its central features](#) were:

- Lament and repentance for “the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people and the harm that LGBTQI+ people have experienced and continue to experience in the life of the Church”
- Asking Synod to welcome the “decision of the House of Bishops to replace Issues in Human Sexuality with new pastoral guidance”

- Asking Synod to welcome the House’s response and commitment to “further refining, commending and issuing the Prayers of Love and Faith”.

After twenty-four months what has been achieved in terms of formal changes?

- The Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) have been commended for use by clergy under Canon B5 but only for use in regular services.
- This commendation occurred despite it being acknowledged 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” ([GS 2328](#), para 17). This meant that the commendation did not comply with the only amendment (the Cornes Amendment) to the Bishops’ proposals made by General Synod in February 2023: that 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”.
- The House of Bishops have not withdrawn their past repeated statements that “clergy of the Church of England should not provide services of blessing” for those registering a civil partnership or civil same-sex marriage ([2005](#), para 17; [2014](#), paras 20 and 21; [2020](#), para 20).
- In fact, the PLF Pastoral Guidance is now much more wide-ranging in what it says should not be done. It states that “The commended PLF Resource Section...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” ([Pastoral Guidance](#), 1.1.1).
- Although draft Pastoral Guidance was produced and circulated among various stakeholders back in September 2023, none has been issued and so *Issues in Human Sexuality* (1991) has not been withdrawn but remains in place.

Last Monday (20<sup>th</sup> January 2025), [the report](#) from the House of Bishops made clear that this situation is now not likely to change at either of the Synods planned for this year. This means that unless an extra Synod is convened in November 2025 (when it is possible a new Archbishop of Canterbury will have been nominated but not announced) this situation will continue until February 2026. July 2026 will be the last Synod before new elections:

After considered reflection on the complexity and depth of the proposed changes, it became clear that Bishops with views across the range of different perspectives agreed that it was unlikely all elements of the proposals would be sufficiently developed in time for Synod to make a decision in July. They agreed to extend the timetable to ensure that all elements of the proposals are sufficiently developed for a decision to be taken on them as a whole.

Intriguingly this appears to have had the support of bishops pressing for change (even been initiated by them – Helen King [reports](#) “an unexpected intervention from the ‘liberal’ bishops, proposing a delay”) although it has quite understandably [led to strong protest](#) from others frustrated at the lack of progress.

Even those of us who welcome this latest development have to ask why it has taken so long to achieve so little and to empathise with the frustration of those who are seeking for their strong convictions as to the form of a faithful, inclusive church to be recognised in some way by the

Church of England. It is not as if these questions were sprung upon the bishops and the wider church from nowhere. To understand why we are here it is necessary to review both the longer back-story over nearly 14 years and the key claims and steps taken during the PLF process over the last two years.

## The Journey to PLF (2011-2023)

The bishops' discernment process that led to the proposals summarised above followed over a year of church-wide discussions using the LLF materials (November 2020 to April 2022, see the [Listening with Love & Faith report](#)). [Those LLF materials](#) were themselves the fruit of over three years of work (September 2017-November 2020) to enable the church to have a more thoughtful, theologically resourced discussion. They arose because of the narrow defeat in the House of Clergy of the bishops' earlier proposals in February 2017 ([GS 2055](#)). These proposed upholding traditional teaching and a change in approach but declined to either authorise or commend new prayers or liturgies for use with same-sex couples.

Those earlier failed bishops' proposals eight years ago followed two years of [Shared Conversations](#) (2014-July 2016). These had been recommended by [the Pilling Report](#) (November 2013) which had been commissioned by the House of Bishops in July 2011 ([GS Misc 997](#)) to "offer proposals on how the continuing discussion within the Church of England about these matters might best be shaped in the light of the listening process". The conversations were reportedly the wish of Justin Welby who wanted to buy time at the beginning of his primacy (he took office in March 2013) before having to address these matters.

The 2013 Pilling Report (with [a dissenting statement from Bishop Keith Sinclair](#)) had also [recommended](#) that "there can be circumstances where a priest, with the agreement of the relevant PCC, should be free to mark the formation of a permanent same sex relationship in a public service but should be under no obligation to do so. Some of us do not believe that this can be extended to same-sex marriage". It proposed that "while the Church abides by its traditional teaching...the Church should not authorize a formal liturgy for use for this purpose" and instead "the House of Bishops should consider whether guidance should be issued". Twelve years on that proposal has still not been agreed and implemented.

## The PLF Journey (2023-)

The original PLF proposal was [announced](#) as "historic" in that it meant "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". It was also clear that the plan was for changes to follow soon in relation to the expectations on clergy. The Bishop of London who headed the process at the time [said at the press conference](#) on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2023 in relation to replacing *Issues*:

There will be pastoral guidance that will be put in place, and therefore, the use of that book for that reason will stop when that happens. 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.

The Archbishop of York [made similar commitments](#) two days later on the *Sunday* programme:

There will need to be some pastoral guidance because if we are saying that we want to welcome and acknowledge same-sex marriages in church, obviously we need to work

out exactly what that means for clergy. We're going to do that quickly. So I can't give you chapter and verse exactly on what that would be right now. But we're gonna very quickly get on with that. And it does mean that the previous guidance, very shortly, will be rescinded.

Both those commitments were made over two years ago. This massive over-promising and under-delivering has continued to be a mark of the whole process even after its “reset” a year later under new episcopal leadership in early 2024.

In July 2024, at the last General Synod, among the “core elements” of the emerging proposals was that there would be “further conversations on whether to remove current restrictions on clergy being in same-sex civil marriages”, leading to “decision by the House of Bishops in early January 2025” in order “to be presented at the February 2025 General Synod” ([GS 2358](#)). The Lead Bishop, Martyn Snow, [admitted](#) that “it is slightly ambiguous as to what will be brought back in February and what might have to then come to the July 2025 General Synod” but that “Our hope is that we can make significant progress by February 2025”. This timetable was reiterated as recently as November 2024 in [a leaflet](#) issued about the process, even as it was becoming clear to those following closely that it looked highly unrealistic.

Now, it seems, “significant progress” will not even be made by July 2025 and so may have to wait until February 2026. The practical implications of the apology offered in February 2023 therefore amount to some commended prayers, but combined with an even greater restriction on what clergy are able to provide in what are now being called “bespoke” services for same-sex couples, and the continued use of *Issues* in relation to clergy and prospective clergy. Why has this happened? What has led to the PLF process—on the basis of the terms on which it has been announced and repeatedly sold to the Church of England and despite all the hard work and good intentions of those involved—to take so long delivering so little of what it promised?

## What went wrong?

In seeking to understand why after so long the bishops have delivered so little there are at least the following ten major features of the last two years.

**First, there was an episcopal rush to publication of a proposal without recognition of its legal and theological weaknesses and the fragility of the apparent episcopal consensus.**

The original plan in December 2022 had been to bring a number of options to General Synod as to the best way forward. Instead, someone somewhere decided to rush out the hurriedly prepared PLF proposal and texts on the basis that it appeared to have widespread support across different perspectives among the bishops. As the bishop who chaired the LLF process quickly [came to recognise](#):

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.

Those “different understandings” only increased as attention turned to the Pastoral Guidance and the best way of introducing the prayers canonically. This led by late 2023 to public divisions with [a dissenting statement](#) from more conservative bishops and [calls to move rapidly to allow clergy to enter same-sex marriage](#). Having had only 4 bishops votes against PLF and 2 abstain in February 2023, by July 2024 there were 12 voting against and 5 abstaining with the numbers voting in favour falling from 36 to 22.

## Second, the novel initial legal and theological basis for the proposal was a flawed sharp distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony.

It was argued in January 2023 that

there is a good case for saying that the institution of Holy Matrimony and the institution of civil marriage are now distinct...The two definitions are mutually exclusive and this can be seen as having resulted in there now being two different institutions by the name of “marriage” ([GS Misc 1339](#), paras 5 and 6).

Although the changing legal advice has never been fully published, it is clear that this approach was abandoned over the summer of 2023 but no clear alternative account of civil same-sex marriage and its relation to holy matrimony developed. In the latest documents released, the Faith and Order Commission (FAOC) “expresses scepticism that a clear distinction between holy matrimony and civil marriage can withstand scrutiny” ([GS Misc 1406](#), p. 1).

## Third, there was for too long a refusal to acknowledge and work on the complex doctrinal questions related to PLF and revision of the pastoral guidance.

As a result of this refusal, it is only now in January 2025 that the wider church is being provided with serious theological reflection on the proposals from FAOC in the form of 3 papers over 118 pages ([GS Misc 1406](#)) and a [316 page compendium of sources in relation to the Church of England’s Doctrine of Marriage](#). This is because an earlier offer to begin work on the complex doctrinal questions at the beginning of the period of episcopal discernment in 2022 was rejected. It was instead repeatedly and falsely asserted that no such work was needed because the LLF resources provided sufficient theological material and justification in relation to the proposals. Another amendment in February 2023 [from Prolocutor Kate Wharton](#) sought recognition of what has in fact happened: to “request the House of Bishops to give further legal, theological, and practical consideration to the Prayers of Love and Faith, and to ensure that proper legal and theological consideration is given to the new pastoral guidance; and to provide the General Synod with the opportunity to assess the Prayers together with the new pastoral guidance at the earliest point reasonably possible”. After initial signs of episcopal support for

this prescient request it was resisted by the Bishop of London and defeated. There was a clear conviction that the end was in sight and limited further work was needed with the Bishop of London [stating](#) “Over the period of probably up to July in further development of the Prayers of Love and Faith, and also the Pastoral Guidance, having listened to Synod and responded to your comments, we will continue to take proper legal advice and undertake proper theological consideration”. As a result, FAOC’s work only began in the second half of 2023. Further work in relation to doctrine by the bishops on FAOC (known as the Episcopal Reference Group, ERG) was not begun until 2024 and although an initial part report has just been released (the 16-page [GS Misc 1407](#)) the full report from the ERG will not go to the House of Bishops until May 2025.

#### Fourth, the addition of pastoral provision/reassurance and the promise not to proceed with PLF or Pastoral Guidance without it.

When proposed in January 2023 the bishops had given no thought as to how to respond adequately to those who were conscientiously opposed to the prayers. However, during the Synod debate the Archbishop of York [said](#):

we care so much for the unity of God’s church; but for that unity to be maintained there has to be reassurance...So this seems to me to be the missing bit of our conversation...The pastoral guidance will be issued and will settle some of those questions; that will then replace Issues in Human Sexuality. That will happen, but I think we needed something in addition to that. I think we need to get together, some of us from Synod; that this is not just for the House of Bishops to do on its own; we need to get together and sit down and start talking about so, what kind of reassurance could there be...*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...*I'm going to ask Bishop Sarah: could you, on behalf of the House of Bishops give that reassurance to all of us that we will have those discussions about some kind of settlement.

The Archbishop broke that pledge in commending prayers in December 2023 with neither the guidance nor provision in place and Synod has rejected amendments relating to provision. Nevertheless, the need for what some have called the Church of England’s new “three-legged stool” of prayers-pastoral guidance-provision, has increasingly created a situation where it seems that (in another Brexit-parallel) nothing more can be agreed until everything is agreed. It is noteworthy that last week’s statement reaffirms this: [the House](#) “agreed to extend the timetable to ensure that all elements of the proposals are sufficiently developed for a decision to be taken on them as a whole”

#### Fifth, the under-estimation of the breadth and depth of opposition to the proposals.

The bishops, initially, overwhelmingly embraced the PLF as the way forward and seemingly failed to realise the Pastoral Guidance represented another major problem for them. They also seem to have expected much wider support in Synod. It was thought that there may be a hard-core of opposition from the usual conservative suspects but that over time it would diminish. This has proven a serious-misjudgement as shown by the voting figures in the three key substantive debates:

HOUSE	Feb 2023	Nov 2023	July 2024	Feb 23 Maj	Nov 23 Maj	Jul 24 Maj
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Bishops	36-4-2 (90:10)	23-10-4 (69.7:33.3)	22-12-5 (64.7:35.3)	32	13	10
Clergy	111-85-3 (56.6:43.4)	100-93-1 (51.8:48.2)	99-88-2 (52.9:47.1)	26	7	11
Laity	103-92-5 (52.8:47.2)	104-100-0 (51:49)	95-91-2 (51.1:48.9)	11	4	4

Of particular significance is that the July 24 vote was on a proposal that sought to implement a “reset” based on a greater consensus for the way forward developed out of the Leicester Process but the voting barely shifted.

Three other developments have also been significant here. Firstly, [the strong immediate response](#) of many Global South Primates:

As the Church of England has departed from the historic faith passed down from the Apostles by this innovation in the liturgies of the Church and her pastoral practice (contravening her own Canon A5), she has disqualified herself from leading the Communion as the historic “Mother” Church...The GSFA is no longer able to recognise the present Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rt Hon & Most Revd Justin Welby, as the “first among equals” Leader of the global Communion.

This has contributed to [the recent official Nairobi-Cairo proposals](#) that the Anglican Communion can no longer be defined in terms of churches being in communion with the see of Canterbury or sharing a common faith and order.

Secondly, within the CofE there has been the formation of [The Alliance](#) bringing together a range of existing networks including some (most notably more charismatic groupings such as HTB and New Wine) who have not in the past taken as clear a public stance. In [their latest letter](#) of October 2024 they state:

The Alliance continues to grow numerically with 2360 clergy whose churches currently represent 42% of the Church of England’s average Sunday attendance and 53% of all under eighteen-year-olds within the Church of England. The Alliance representatives in all 42 dioceses reflect the broad diversity of orthodox networks we are supporting, including traditional Catholics, New Wine, the HTB Network, CEEC, Living Out, Renew, the Church Society, 200 orthodox ordinands, the orthodox archdeacon group, the orthodox female clergy group and the orthodox global heritage majority group. We are working closely in partnership with a number of Alliance link bishops in the College and House who share our concerns and objectives, and have strong support from Primates from across the Anglican Communion. We represent the most diverse, youngest and fastest growing networks within the Church of England and yet are repeatedly told we are a small extreme minority grouping despite offering independent validation of our data.

Thirdly, although other factors are involved, the dramatic fall in the numbers offering for ordination is undoubtedly due in part to unhappiness relating to PLF. This has also led to a significant number of ordinands wrestling with whether or not they can be ordained by bishops supporting changes to church teaching and practice.

## Sixth, repeated process failures, lack of transparency, and widespread lack of confidence that due processes are being followed.

Here, in addition to the broken promises already identified, there are multiple examples that could be given such as:

- The sudden disbanding of three Implementation Groups in June 2023 despite having been instituted to continue work until the November 2023 General Synod. These had then effectively to be reconstituted and start from scratch with new membership nearly a year later.
- A meeting of the House of Bishops in October 2023 which led to a dissenting statement that included a signal that (as proved to be the case) in relation to adhering to the commitment in the February 2023 Cornes amendment, “legal and theological advice the House has received suggest clearly to us that the decisions of the House may fall short of this commitment”. It also warned that “we believe that bishops must have due regard to the obligations of good and proper governance”.
- The failure to announce until February 2024 key decisions taken by the House of Bishops in that October 2023 meeting (chaired by the Bishop of Newcastle) without supporting legal and theological materials and including a crucial amendment not tabled in advanced but introduced at the meeting itself.
- The failure in the period of September to December 2023 to share crucial legal advice concerning the use of Canon B2 and Canon B5A with either the House of Bishops or General Synod when these issues were at the heart of decision-making.
- The continued refusal to offer more than summaries of legal advice given to the House of Bishops with General Synod.
- The College and House of Bishops in June 2024 summarily rejecting a central feature of the proposals emerging from the Leicester groups that sought to recognise and work with “three spaces” in relation to attitudes to developments on sexuality (see [GS2358](#), para 10)

## Seventh, the rejection of use of Canon B2.

The normal, proper and legally secure process for introducing liturgical changes – particularly if they are controversial – is Canon B2 involving detailed Synodical scrutiny and a clear (two-thirds) consensus in support. Having initially bypassed this, in October 2023 the House agreed this should be the path for “standalone services”. They also agreed not to seek authorisation by the Archbishops for an experimental period under Canon B5A. This was after strong appeals from Archbishop Justin, including a warning that were the bishops to support authorisation using Canon B5A alongside B2 then his signing to approve experimental services may in the short-term due to the reaction of the Communion require a change of Archbishop, raising difficult issues for the next CNC.

Despite this, most bishops then supported an amendment in the November Synod from the Bishop of Oxford which was passed (by just one vote in the House of Laity). This did not reject use of Canon B2 but asked “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”, understood as a reference to Canon B5A.



As a result, although [the published Pastoral Guidance](#) continues to refer to the use of B2, nothing has been introduced under Canon B2 despite the stated plan of the bishops in October 2023 that

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 ([GS 2328](#), Annex A, para 30)

If the proposed timetable then had been followed ([Annex G](#)) it would have seen this February's Synod having a debate on the Revision Committee report and report on Diocesan Synod votes last year with possible final approval in a November Synod this year. Paradoxically, the concern that the B2 proposal without B5A would delay "some standalone services for same-sex couples" being "made available for use" that led to the Oxford amendment has not led to the use of B5A nor sped up the process. It may even prove to have lengthened the time taken for any standalone services to be made available.

It is also very significant that the Episcopal Reference Group has stated in a paper just released that:

In coming to a judgment on whether the PLF are contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England, the ERG is of the view that both text and context are relevant and belong together. The ERG recognises that the PLF in themselves (considered in the light of the Nine Theses), do not characterise the relationship of any given couple as marriage and do not, therefore, impinge directly upon the doctrine of marriage. Nonetheless, the contexts in which the PLF might be used could impinge upon this doctrine. This contextual risk is likely to be higher in a bespoke (i.e., standalone) service than in any use of the PLF within existing services. More time and reflection to consider different contexts and liturgical aesthetics would be needed, in consultation with the Liturgical Commission and the whole of the Faith and Order Commission (FAOC), before the ERG would feel confident to advise on *the congruence (or otherwise) of the PLF in bespoke services with the Church of England's doctrine of marriage* ([GS Misc 1407](#), para 6, italics added).

This recognition that there are complex questions concerning whether or not standalone/bespoke PLF services are compatible with doctrine (the wording here interestingly echoes the Cornes amendment without the canonical addition of "in any essential matter") not only means that further work is required. It also shows the danger of leaving this matter simply to the discretion of parish clergy given the risks of legal challenge (a regularly repeated but now seemingly ignored caution about proceeding with commendation for use under Canon B5). It raises again the question as to who the proper final judge on these matters should be and whether this can really be the ERG or the whole of FAOC or even the House of Bishops rather than the General Synod under the Canon B2 processes set up precisely to safeguard the Church's doctrine and its expression in its liturgy.

**Eighth, a belief that past legal advice could somehow be ignored, by-passed or over-turned.**

The decision of the bishops back in 2016-17 not to introduce any new liturgy was in large part due to the complexities of doing so without changing doctrine as set out in [a legal annex to GS 2055](#). In July 2024, in answer to a question in Synod, Bishop Martyn Snow [explained](#) that "I do not believe the advice has changed". The effect of that advice in relation to any possible service

was summed up in legal advice from 2018 in relation to the Hereford Motion asking for a service after a civil partnership or civil same-sex marriage. Noting that “in theory it might be possible to compose a form of service which met the requirement” set out in para 7 of the GS 2055 annex, it continued to state that “it seems unlikely that such a form of service 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 a result of the constraints of law and doctrine:

Such a form of service 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).

While it is possible that unpublished legal advice overturns that assessment there is nothing in the public domain which suggests that it is not still the case. Indeed the Bishop of Bath and Wells [revealed in July at General Synod](#) that the bishops have been told not only that PLF “must not resemble Holy Matrimony” but “they must also not resemble any other form of service connected with a marriage”.

Underlying all this is the question of the church’s doctrine and the need for any liturgy (whether introduced by a parish priest under Canon B5, commended by the bishops for use by a parish priest, or authorised) not to be contrary to that doctrine or indicative of a departure from it in any essential matter. Here we come to the last two and most significant failings which have contributed to this prolonged PLF process.

## Ninth, initial confusion over the content of the church’s doctrine of marriage.

It appears that when PLF were proposed in January 2023, the bishops’ focus was on the doctrine of marriage simply as a union of a man and a woman. The question as to whether the church’s teaching in relation to sexual ethics was also part of the doctrine of marriage was not considered but the assumption appears to have been that this could be changed without this representing a change in the church’s doctrine of marriage. Thus the Archbishop of York when asked “Is it still church teaching that gay sex is a sin?” [replied](#) in January 2023 on the *Sunday* programme:

Well, what we are saying is that physical and sexual intimacy belongs in committed, stable, faithful relationships and therefore where we see a committed, stable, faithful relationship between two people of the same sex, we are now in a position where those people can be welcomed fully into the life of the Church, on their terms... As I say, we believe that stable, faithful, committed, loving relationships are good. They are the place for physical intimacy...

It gradually became clear however, despite the attempts of some to deny it or to distinguish sharply between “doctrine” and “teaching”, that in fact the church’s doctrine of marriage included that marriage – not simply the sort of relationship described by the Archbishop – was the proper place for sexual intimacy. This is now clearly stated [at the start of the Pastoral Guidance issued for PLF](#): “It is within marriage that sexual intimacy finds its proper place”. It is also reaffirmed in the new statement from the ERG which includes among the “nine theses about

the doctrine of marriage” that set out “a stable core to the doctrine of marriage”: “Marriage is the proper context for sexual intimacy”. As the commentary on this sixth thesis states:

The Church of England has always believed and taught that sex is for marriage, and marriage is for sex. God’s gift of sex was given to a married couple – it follows ‘leaving’ one’s childhood home and ‘cleaving’ to one’s spouse. To consent to marry is “to have and to hold” one’s lover, to belong bodily one to another, to “worship” one’s spouse “with my body.” Marriage was ordained, the Prayer Book says, “for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication,” or as Common Worship expresses it, “the gift of marriage brings husband and wife together in the delight and tenderness of sexual union.” Sex belongs by God’s design and commandment within an exclusive, loving, faithful, permanent covenanted relationship, ‘forsaking all others.’ Sex instantiates, reflects, and strengthens the ‘one flesh’ union ([GS Misc 1407](#), p. 9)

Recognition of this reality is why, before proceeding to commend the prayers for use in regular services the bishops had to acknowledge in October 2023 that

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 ([GS 2328](#), Annex A, para 17).

This is important in relation to the tenth and final feature of the process that has played a decisive part in the problems faced:

### **Tenth, the repeated insistence that doctrine remains unchanged and the proposals are compatible with that doctrine.**

On their introduction two years ago, the bishops were clear that, in their final form, the PLF would “not contradict the Church’s doctrine of Holy Matrimony, as articulated in Canon B30” ([GS 2289](#), Summary, p. 2). In relation to “the Church’s doctrine of Holy Matrimony” they stated:

The Church of England continues to hold the received understanding of Holy Matrimony as between one man and one woman, as set forth in its canons and authorised liturgies. There is a range of positions held among the bishops and there is not sufficient consensus to propose a change to this. Bishops have also agreed that the conversations about these, and related matters, need to continue in a spirit of love and grace (Summary, p. 2).

The situation was therefore that “we have agreed at this time to maintain the doctrine of Holy Matrimony which the Church has received” ([GS 2289](#), p. 7). This has continued to be stated by the bishops despite the two crucial developments set out above.

Firstly, it can no longer be convincingly claimed as it was then that

It can be argued that a same-sex couple entering into a civil status which does not claim to be Holy Matrimony should not of itself be regarded as challenging or rejecting the Church's doctrine of marriage as expressed in Canon B30 (Of Holy Matrimony) and that those who do so should not, therefore, be regarded as acting in disobedience to that doctrine. On that basis it would be possible for same-sex couples who are in a civil marriage – like those who are in a civil partnership – to have a service of dedication, thanksgiving and/or blessing without contradicting the Church's doctrine of marriage ([GS 2289](#), p7).

Even as the legal and theological basis for this argument was disappearing, the House of Bishops agreed (20-15-2) in October 2023, in an amendment submitted by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich as a steer to FAOC on the day of the meeting and not on the Order Paper, 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.

Secondly, the Church's doctrine of marriage cannot simply be expressed in terms of it being between one man and woman. [Canon B30](#) in speaking of marriage as “for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections” is summarising the BCP as quoted above in support of the doctrine of marriage including that it is the proper context for sexual intimacy.

From the start the claim to be able to proceed beyond what was proposed back in GS 2055 eight years ago while keeping within its boundaries of unchanged doctrine and law looked highly implausible to any objective observer. It is now surely unsustainable in the light of the last two years. This may perhaps be implicitly acknowledged in the work now being undertaken by the ERG following the request of the House of Bishops (reported in July last year in [GS2358](#), paras 43-44) to offer theological advice ‘on the nature, role, and creation of doctrine’ as it relates to the Living in Love and Faith programme and how ‘doctrine can develop or change within the Church of England’.

The danger, however, is that an attempt will be made simply to add this work into the existing processes described here and thus perpetuate the problems. This would mean simply considering now not only “the doctrinal implications of a possible relaxation of restrictions on Clergy in Same Sex Marriages” ([GS Misc 1407](#), para 7) but as noted above “bespoke services” and perhaps also structural provision such as proposals for delegated episcopal ministry (raised by ERG in para 8).

## Is there a better way?

Given the problems set out above and growing recognition that these questions are ultimately doctrinal, would it not be more honest and more fruitful for there to be a paradigm shift in the approach being taken so as to put the fundamental doctrinal disagreement centre-stage rather than pretend we are keeping the doctrine but differing over what is permissible within it?

The truth is that it is those who are clearly committed to the church's doctrine of marriage who – almost without exception - have resisted the developments. Some, such as it would seem [Michael Beasley \(Bishop of Bath and Wells\)](#), have thought PLF as commended can be consistent with the doctrine as a pastoral response but are now cautious or opposed to any further developments.

In contrast, those supporting the changes and wishing to go further are, despite the official claims that doctrine is unchanged, almost all in reality in one or more of the following categories in relation to doctrine:

- Those who are honest that they reject the church’s doctrine of marriage (as male-female union and/or as the proper place for sexual intimacy) and believe it is in error (and, some would say, harmful).
- Those who believe in a particular understanding of the development of doctrine and are convinced that the doctrine of marriage can and should develop in response to same-sex marriage and the experience of gay and lesbian couples.
- Those who are willing to in some degree detach the church’s practice in terms of liturgical development and discipline from the constraints of its doctrine, perhaps by appeal to a particular understanding of “pastoral accommodation”.

Because of how the PLF process has developed there has not been honesty about this reality. There has also been no attempt by the bishops to offer a theological defence of any of these three positions (although FAOC’s new papers begin to highlight some key issues) as one which the Church of England should embrace or make space for within its common life and its faith and order. And yet, it would seem, to proceed with any of the further proposed changes being sought now requires for these doctrinal matters to be addressed head-on.

We need to face the fact that the current PLF process has not delivered because our fundamental differences are doctrinal and have practical doctrinal implications in relation to liturgy and orders of ministry. Buying more time but avoiding that fact will not solve anything.

In addition, bishops are “to teach and to uphold sound and wholesome doctrine” and act as “the principal minister” with the duty of “admitting persons into holy orders” ([Canon C18](#)). This means that—despite the reticence of so many bishops (particularly those pressing for change)—questions of episcopacy cannot be kept off the table but in fact need to be made much more front and centre.

If the original promises of the House of Bishops and hopes of many in the church in relation to PLF are to be realised and we are to get ourselves out of the malaise of the last two years and where we are now stuck then we must

- recognise our doctrinal differences and how serious they are for so many in the Church of England. Here the first of the latest FAOC papers, “[Ecclesiology, unity and differentiation](#)” includes much helpful material including that “it is a failure of Christian love for one side to declare what kind of disagreement is being experienced by the other. It must surely be the case that those who disagree with a given decision are themselves determinative of what kind of disagreement is in view, not the content majority” ([para 139](#))
- seek some form of agreement—perhaps returning to something like the “three spaces” model—on the consequent necessary restructuring of episcopal ministry to reflect our divergences over doctrine.