

# A pastoral letter from the Bishops of the Church of England

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Thank you**

During the past six years many of you have contributed to *Living in Love and Faith* by engaging with questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, together with others across the Church. You have borne this period of learning, listening and discerning with great patience and courage. We are sincerely grateful – thank you.

Your engagement with the *Living in Love and Faith* process has helped us to listen more attentively to the diverse beliefs, experiences and hopes that are found among those who call the Church of England their spiritual home. We have taken to heart your responses gathered in *Listening with Love and Faith*, including conversations within our dioceses, and have been moved and supported by your words, prayers and creative contributions.

## **Apology**

We want to apologise for the ways in which the Church of England has treated LGBTQI+ people – both those who worship in our churches and those who do not. For the times we have rejected or excluded you, and those you love, we are deeply sorry. The occasions on which you have received a hostile and homophobic response in our churches are shameful and for this we repent. As we have listened, we have been told time and time again how we have failed LGBTQI+ people. We have not loved you as God loves you, and that is profoundly wrong.

We affirm, publicly and unequivocally, that LGBTQI+ people are welcome and valued: we are all children of God.

## **Difference and discernment**

We are deeply conscious of our call to serve both church and nation. We have studied the Scriptures, paid attention to the Church's tradition and listened to wider society, as well as to the voices of our sister churches in the Anglican Communion and ecumenical partners. Above all, we have sought the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in prayer and worship.

The differences among you are also present among us, the College of Bishops. We are partnered, single, celibate, married, divorced, widowed, bereaved; heterosexual, gay, bisexual and same-sex attracted. We have diverse convictions about sexuality and marriage.

Engaging with the *Living in Love and Faith* process has enabled us to become more open and honest with each other – an important part of what it means to be members together of the Body of Christ. Being honest has not erased our disagreements, but it has deepened our relationships and our desire to continue to walk together, seeking the deeper unity for which Christ prayed.

The Pastoral Principles are one way in which we are learning how to avoid the evils that so easily seep into our relationships with one another, into the lives of our church communities and into wider society. Whenever we encounter diversity, difference and disagreement, we, as bishops, must remind ourselves of the need to address ignorance, to cast out fear, to acknowledge prejudice, to speak appropriately into oppressive silence, to admit hypocrisy and to pay attention to power. We continue to commend these Pastoral Principles to the whole church so that together we can grow more clearly into the likeness of Christ and make his love known to this generation.

## **Future work**

*Living in Love and Faith* was an invitation to the Church to attend to a whole range of matters about being human and in relationship with God and one another. We have therefore identified a number of areas to which we believe the Church should now give further attention, both nationally and locally. These are described in more detail elsewhere and relate to being embodied people; to singleness, celibacy, friendship and the church's community life; to human identity and to everyday faithful relationships. Yet within all this there is one specific question to which a response is eagerly awaited: that of same-sex relationships and marriage. It is to this we now turn.

## **Same-sex relationships**

We are united in our desire for a church where everyone is welcome, accepted and affirmed in Christ. With joy we cherish and value the LGBTQI+ members of our churches and celebrate the gifts that each brings as a fellow Christian. We are united in our condemnation of homophobia. We commit ourselves – and urge the churches in our care – to welcome same-sex couples unreservedly and joyfully.

We continue to seek to be a church that embodies 'the radical new Christian inclusion' to which the *Living in Love and Faith* project was called by the Archbishops in 2017: an inclusion that is 'founded in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it – based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships, and in a proper 21st century understanding of being human and of being sexual.'

## **New Prayers of Love and Faith**

We value and want to celebrate faithfulness in relationships. That is why we have drafted and asked the House of Bishops to further refine and commend a new resource to be used in churches, called *Prayers of Love and Faith*. This resource will offer clergy a variety of flexible ways to affirm and celebrate same-sex couples in church, and will include prayers of dedication, thanksgiving and for God's blessing. It could be used for a couple who have marked a significant stage in the development of their relationship, sealed a covenanted friendship, registered a civil partnership, or entered a civil marriage. This resource will represent a significant move that is intended as a loving and celebratory response to same-sex couples who are cherished and deeply valued by the Church. We are not all agreed on the extent of these prayers, but nevertheless have agreed to offer them to the Church. The use of these prayers will be entirely discretionary: clergy may choose to use some combination of these prayers or not to use them at all.

These *Prayers of Love and Faith* will not be the same as conducting a marriage in church. They will not alter the Church of England's celebration of Holy Matrimony, which remains the lifelong union of one man and one woman, as set forth in its canons and authorised liturgies. While there is a range of convictions held by the bishops about this important matter, we have not found sufficient consensus to propose a change in doctrine at the present time.

We realise this will be disappointing for those who long for 'equal marriage' for same-sex couples. We also realise that for others among us, there will be deep concern that the *Prayers of Love and Faith* will go too far: your consciences and theological convictions will not allow you to use them.

We respect and share these differences, maintaining that within the theological diversity we represent, everyone has a secure and respected place within the Church of England. It is *from* this diversity that we, your bishops, reaffirm our commitment to serve and care for the flock of Christ. We offer these draft *Prayers of Love and Faith* with joy and in the belief that they will strengthen the mission of the Church and uphold its unity.

For these changes to be embedded in the life of the Church, we will work to produce new 'Pastoral Guidance' that will explain the practical implications of this way forward, including for the discernment of vocations within the Church of England. This new guidance will replace *Issues in Human Sexuality*.

## **Journeying together**

There are some among us who will be perturbed because they believe that these developments do not reflect the way of Christ as they understand it. Some will see these developments as steps along a continuing journey. Some will feel we have gone too far. Some will feel we have not gone far enough.

For all of us, the Bible is central to our understanding and living out of the Christian faith: as Anglicans, we believe that Scripture witnesses to God's saving work brought to fulfilment in Jesus Christ and contains within it all that is necessary for salvation. Despite being united in this belief, we interpret the Bible differently and have come to different conclusions about numerous matters, including what it has to say about gender, relationships and marriage.

Amid our differences as bishops, we know of many committed same-sex relationships between followers of Christ. We see their faithfulness to one another and the fruit of their discipleship and service. We want to find ways of affirming same-sex couples – inside and outside the church – while committing ourselves to respecting the disagreement, in conscience, of those who believe this compromises the Church's inherited tradition and teaching.

*Living in Love and Faith* has been about learning and listening together: to God, one another and the world around us. In these final stages of our discernment, we want to pay special tribute to the 'Reference Group': the twelve deeply faithful Christians who accompanied us in our deliberations in the last few months of 2022. Representing a diversity of lived experiences and convictions, they kindly held us to account, reminding us of the need for clarity, care and compassion.

We live in a society in which we are often pressured towards adversarial behaviour. As God's church, we are called to a different way – a theme we discerned in many of your responses to *Living in Love and Faith*. We agree with you and want to continue walking together, bearing with one another in love. By being honest about our own disagreements and through a gracious interpretation of doctrine, we will honour the reality of our differences within the Church of England, across the Anglican Communion, and among ecumenical partners. We hope to model this by providing prayers that bear a nuanced variety of understandings.

This is not about enforcing unity but pursuing it, by the grace of God. What we must do is create a generous space for the Holy Spirit to fill as we stay faithful to Jesus Christ, rooted and grounded in the love of God.

Our conversations, learning and prayer continue. We have reached one milestone, but there is further to go as we seek God's coming kingdom together.

May God bless you with peace and love with faith from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.