

Living in Love and Faith

A theological and pastoral introduction to the PLF and accompanying pastoral guidance

1 THE POSSIBILITY OF PASTORAL PROVISION

After six years of exploration of matters of sexuality through the Living in Love and Faith project, in February 2023, the General Synod of the Church of England voted in all three Houses in favour of the following motion:

That this Synod, recognising the commitment to learning and deep listening to God and to each other of the Living in Love and Faith process, and desiring with God's help to journey together while acknowledging the different deeply held convictions within the Church:

- a) lament and repent of 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;
- b) recommit to our shared witness to God's love for and acceptance of every person by continuing to embed the Pastoral Principles in our life together locally and nationally;
- c) commend the continued learning together enabled by the Living in Love and Faith process and resources in relation to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage;
- d) welcome the decision of the House of Bishops to replace Issues in Human Sexuality with new pastoral guidance;
- e) 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;
- f) invite the House of Bishops to monitor the Church's use of and response to the Prayers of Love and Faith, once they have been commended and published, and to report back to Synod in five years' time;
- g) 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 motion as amended (clause g) reveals where the Church of England is: there is a small majority in favour of some change, but there is only fragile agreement for the possibility of change and about what this change needs to be. There would not be the two-thirds majority in the Synod required for unequivocal, resounding change. The Living in Love and Faith project was always billed as 'discernment': it was an exploration of where we are, an exploration of the lives and beliefs of the people of God, of Scripture and tradition, and of the insights that reason can give through science, social sciences, listening to changing culture, and the scrutiny of lived experience. Consultation was wide-ranging, and many voices were heard.

That exploration was not in vain: the whole people of God in the Church of England were invited to draw together in a new way, to explore theology in depth, to share in discernment throughout the whole church, and to meet one another in honesty about subjects many found difficult to discuss openly. This was a change in that the whole church was invited to take part in discernment, at the level of the parish through the LLF course, while the LLF material was the result of a new type of wide-ranging interdisciplinary collaboration across theology, history, science and social sciences, between lay and ordained, academics, clergy, bishops and representatives with lived experience. Many churches took this opportunity to engage and feedback, though not all did. Nevertheless, whatever else LLF may yield, it has changed us as a Church, and has made us more aware of one another, and of the challenges that many among us face on a daily basis as they seek to live faithfully under God.

Yet we have to be honest, and acknowledge that this long period of discernment has not taken us to a consensus. There are those among us who continue to hold to the teaching of the Church on marriage, sexual intimacy and sexuality that we share with many other churches ecumenically and across the world, and would not want to see change; there are those who long for change, because they have prayerfully come to the conclusion, following study of Scripture and tradition, that it would be right to change our teaching on marriage and sexuality to include same-sex couples; and there are many who are not entirely sure, and would locate themselves on different parts of the spectrum. For some, it is a disagreement that seriously impairs communion; for others, it is a secondary matter, because it does not touch essential beliefs as reflected in the creeds. As individuals, and as sub-groups within the Church, we disagree.

But as a *whole* Church, as a body, we simply have not come to a conclusion as a result of our disagreement. We are not certain of what the right way to go may be; there is tentative agreement that some form of change is needed, but that we are not yet certain enough of what the right way forward may be.

The question that faces the church therefore is, what do we do in a time of uncertainty about the way we should take? How do we enable everyone of us, the whole people of God, to live as faithfully as they can, given their diversity and the different challenges they face? How do we demonstrate God's grace and gentleness towards one another, because these are areas of deep significance, where the weight of judgement and expectation can easily crush and maim? Or, to put it differently, what is the shape of the space we can inhabit at this time, in faithfulness to our inherited teaching, and with honesty, creativity and grace in response to the challenges of life in the 21st century?

There are many different possible responses to living in a time of collective uncertainty. We could do nothing, because that keeps us in the place we have inhabited for many years, and a place that some

identify as a place of certainty. Not to change is not a neutral option, because it would be deeply hurtful for those who have hoped, and prayed, and shared their story over many years, while they seek to live faithfully. It would also risk being seen as ignoring the commitment we have made as a church to repent from homophobia and the way LGBTQI+ Christians have been treated in the past, and to seek better ways of relating to one another, regardless of which theological and ecclesial tradition we belong to. We could, equally, try to force change through, but that would not respect the strong misgivings of large parts of the Body, or the reality of our collective uncertainty as to the way ahead. This place of an absence of consensus is deeply painful for all in the Church, though not in the same way, or to the same depth. This space is one that inevitably generates fear, anxiety, grief, and other strong emotions.

Yet the space within which the Synod has agreed to move is that of a motion for change, but without changing doctrine. The question before us therefore is, what is the most generous, compassionate and gracious space we can create at this point, within which as many people in the church can find ways of growing in love, in faith and in relationships with one another? This place would be one of continuing discernment and conversation, of continuing to seek the mind of Christ together, rather than a place of frozen conflict and disagreement.

This kind of space would have to be marked by provisionality and humility, recognising that we are in a time of corporate not-knowing, where mystery remains as to our humanity and how we are to live our lives in a world that we do not always understand, and where God often acts in surprising ways. It would also be a space within which the goodness of our traditional teaching on the importance of intimate relationships and respect for our own and others' bodies, and the call to live lives of holiness, is acknowledged and drawn upon. It would need to be a space that is honest about the reality of our humanity, the struggles we face, the harm that we have caused, and the depth of our disagreement.

If we are not changing the doctrine of the Church regarding marriage, then the space we are exploring is the space for a genuine, careful pastoral response: the kind of response that genuinely rejoices at the goods that we can see in same-sex relationships – faithfulness, stability, fruitfulness, love, faith, grace – and keeps looking for where God is at work, and how we may respond faithfully to God's call to holiness in the fashioning of our lives, rather than focus primarily on identifying the absence of virtue, or good, in others. Such a response would express itself differently in different parts of the Church, and would be a possibility, not a requirement; it would leave space for discernment and the exercise of conscience for individuals and communities. This space would also rest on the recognition that the entire Body is trying to find ways of living faithfully to the Gospel, and where disagreement does not lead to disrespect or accusations of not being fellow Christians.

It is not a new challenge for the Church to have to find ways to respond to profound and painful questions in the face of change. In its pilgrimage through history, the Church is always caught up in wider changes and its doctrine and teaching have always needed to be thought through and articulated in fresh ways in new times and places. At times, new circumstances have forced new questions; some of these have led to a restatement of traditional views, others to developments in doctrine or teaching (as with questions around procreation and contraception¹), and yet others to new pastoral practices without changing fundamental doctrine (such as remarriage after divorce², or, for very different example, responses to polygamy in the Anglican Communion which retain the fundamental doctrine of marriage yet make space for practical arrangements that do not visit harm

¹ For more details, see *LLF Book* p.148-149.

² For further exploration, see the *LLF Book* pp.137-140.

on vulnerable women, in particular³). Many of the things LLF discusses have been brought to the surface as burning issues because of wider socio-political changes in an advanced, technological society, where long-held configurations of households and gender roles have shifted, and new possibilities have emerged thanks to modern medicine. They are not necessarily brand new questions, but are sharper because of the pace of change, and because advances in science have helped us understand more about ourselves, our bodies and minds. Yet science often opens up more mystery and questions, and can only tell us what is and what could be, but not what *should* be. Doing theology, defining teaching, restating doctrine in new times, is always an iterative and communal process, and part of the ongoing corporate discernment of the people of God as they seek to live faithfully. As such, the response of the Church at this time is neither the first, nor the final word.

A pastoral response to one another in our present situation is something that is deeply rooted in tradition and Scripture, as will be explored further below. The people of God have always had to live in the world as it is, rather than the world as it should be, holding in balance working towards a vision of perfection that may need to be expressed through lives distinct from prevailing cultural mores, and the need to find ways to enable realistic, staged growth and discipleship in a less-than-perfect world. The Church is called to walk together in the way of Christ by the light of Scripture, tradition and wisdom while bearing one another's burdens. We do this in contexts and institutions graced by the good gifts of God and deeply distorted by sin, which impact our shared life and witness, and often impose unequal burdens on different members of the Body. We do this guided by the Scriptures' witness to God's good creation and wonderful redemption from the realities of sin and brokenness, while we seek deeper understanding of the mystery of redemption, life, faith and grace, whose fullness we only see dimly, 'through a glass darkly'. By the light of Scripture, tradition and wisdom, we seek God's grace for the fuller embodiment of the perfection that lies ahead. As we do so, we need to find ways to support realistic growth and discipleship on that pilgrimage with God.

Pastoral provision recognises that we all fall short of the ideal, of perfect holiness, but that there are things we can do together, in our prayer, in our worship, in our life together to nurture the kind of virtues and goods that reflect more closely the ways of God. This is what the PLF are seeking to do: not to displace or deny the 'ideal', the doctrine of marriage, or the teaching of marriage as the proper place for sexual intimacy between one man and woman. Rather they seek to acknowledge that on our earthly journey, we can develop good practices, virtues, qualities, that can be recognised and ask for God's help and blessing as we seek to grow in love and righteousness and receive the blessings of the kingdom.. The PLF are a sign of hope, and a recognition of where God is at work among us, even if we do not fully understand how that is, or why we are the way we are, and even when we might be concerned about other aspects of a relationship. They are an example of the discipline of discerning God's good gifts, thanking God for them, and seeking to grow them further. They build on what is good and trust that God can enable good to grow further.

The rest of this introduction will seek to explore these matters further, looking at how a theology of practical grace can shape a fuller and richer pastoral response from what has been our practice until now, without changing our fundamental doctrine of marriage. It will also explore the complex relationship between pastoral practice, doctrine and public prayer in a church where much of our doctrine and teaching is shaped by our liturgical texts. Furthermore, grace is needed from all areas of the church, because the reality of disagreement remains, such that 'pastoral provision' is something that the whole church needs: pastoral provision is being made for those who wish to

³ For more details, see the *LLF Book*, pp.346-347.

place same-sex relationships before God in prayer, and pastoral provision is being made for those who struggle so much with this that they need reassurance and a different way of relating within the Body of Christ. This equally important aspect of pastoral provision will be explored separately, as part of proposals for pastoral reassurance for those who cannot accept these proposals, in light of their understanding of Scripture and tradition.

2 THE DOCTRINE OF MARRIAGE, CHANGE AND MAKING A PASTORALLY GENEROUS SPACE

Like all doctrine, the doctrine of marriage is practical, at once declaring testimony to God's ways and providing shape and guidance for life. It enables God's people to offer support for a form of intimate society by which God blesses its participants and wider society and helps shape a way of holy living within the Body of Christ. By living and teaching in accordance with its guidance, the people of God seek to bear witness to the triune God's gracious goodness as our creator, God's transforming grace as our Redeemer and the hope of God's kingdom. The *Book of Common Prayer* attests to Holy Matrimony within the context of this divine economy as a lifelong covenant of a man and a woman, instituted by God in creation, adorned by Jesus Christ and signifying his mystical union with the Church. In particular, it was instituted for the procreation and godly education of children, as a remedy against sin and for the loving mutual society, help and comfort of the couple. It thus teaches that this way of life is the proper context for sexual intercourse, within the bonds of that faithfulness, mutuality and generativity. The Church is called by God to proclaim the Christian faith 'afresh in each generation'. History changes the contexts in which the Church proclaims and lives the Good News. Changed contexts shift the webs of meaning within which the Church's doctrines are put to use, so that faithfulness requires renewed interpretation and attentive pastoral application of the faith as the Church has received it. Such renewal is reflected in the Church's liturgy and teaching in this area as in others.

As part of a rapidly changing society, with new challenges and discoveries, the Church has been renewing its reception of the doctrine of marriage and its teaching about sexuality, both in its liturgy and teaching documents. It is still on that journey today. The introduction of PLF does not change the shape of marriage in the Church's doctrine nor its understanding of the place of sexual intimacy within marriage. However, the PLF are also being introduced as pastoral provision within a period of continued discernment whose scope includes the Church's sexual ethics, and whose matter includes the question of how far its doctrine of marriage may guide recognition of gifts and goods in sexual relationships outside Holy Matrimony. In that context, those with responsibility for teaching the faith should continue to articulate the Church's doctrine while engaging in continued faithful, sensitive and nuanced ways with different understandings of these questions, and coming alongside people whose lives are shaped and affected by their teaching, with grace and compassion. To proclaim afresh wisely, at this time, may serve to frame and guide such conversations without curtailing or controlling them.

2.1 THE DOCTRINE OF MARRIAGE IN THE LAST SIXTY YEARS

A key question facing the Church is how we can make reasonable and generous pastoral provision without implicitly changing the doctrine of marriage in any essential matter. The question risks implying that the doctrine of marriage has not changed, or has only ever changed intentionally or officially. This not entirely accurate if one looks long into history⁴. Nor it is not entirely accurate if we look at history on the smaller canvas of the post-war years: we find that under pressure from wider society, the Church has shifted in its language and expression of marriage, relationships and sexuality, not because the doctrine has changed in an essential matter, but because different circumstances have highlighted different questions, pressures, and the need to reformulate a long-held belief for new contexts.

Divorce and remarriage, as well as contraception, have already been mentioned. These matters are well covered in the LLF book (contraception on pp.148-149 and divorce and remarriage on pp. 137-140), so there is no need to cover this extensively here, but simply note that both represent significant shifts, the first with respect to a fundamental aspect of the doctrine (procreation), the other with respect to possible pastoral provision (marriage was no longer indissoluble, so that divorce was possible as a pastoral accommodation, but marriage was still understood to be 'lifelong', therefore it was deemed that the doctrine was not actually changed). Remarriage after divorce is an example of how a doctrine may remain essentially unchanged, while our pastoral response changes.

Other changes are more subtle, yet significant, and reveal a pattern of gradual evolution that is rooted in successive statements and reports. In particular, teaching on marriage has changed, in ways that do not always or necessarily affect the canons or liturgical texts, but nevertheless significantly affect the outworking of the doctrine in pastoral practice. This points to the complexity of speaking of 'change' in the abstract, and back to the way in which the PLF were clearly designed to effect no change to either the canons or liturgical texts, or, to use the legal phrase, 'in any essential matter'.

The clearest change is the move away from the primacy of procreation and increasingly making room for the expression of sexuality as a good within the relationship which strengthens it and enables mutual pleasure. This is reflected in liturgical change, with the move from the BCP's rather terse perspective on sex, to Common Worship's talk of 'the delight and tenderness of sexual union'. It is matched by changing advice on contraception.

Some Issues in Human Sexuality, 2003, recognises the shift:

the Church of England has moved away from an emphasis on the avoidance of sin and the production of children as reasons for marriage, in favour of an emphasis on marriage being a context for an intimate, pleasurable and mutually supportive relationship. (1.2.23).

The 1999 *Marriage: A Teaching Document*, had said 'We marry not only because we love, but to be helped to love'. The idea of a 'remedy for sin' (BCP) is dropped altogether in *Common Worship*, and children are mentioned only after emphasising the material and relational aspects of marriage. The change has been welcomed by many; and it says something positive and liberating about sexuality. It may also, however, be seen at least partially as a reflection of the wider Western cultural tendency to emphasise personal fulfilment and happiness over social duty, cohesion and stability, or at least

⁴ The LLF resource hub has further material which details a longer historical view than can be explored here, LLF hub>Further Resources>Library>Theology and Ethics>Marriage and Singleness, and LLF Hub>Further Resources>Library>History, Philosophy and Law

the changing balance between these different concepts. Teaching on marriage does not just reflect theology and Scripture, but the interaction of theology and liturgy with wider cultural mores, whether consciously, or not.

This interaction is reflected positively in the increasing acknowledgement that marriage is rarely 'ideal' in practice, even if it is the theologically considered the proper, or fullest, configuration of intimate relationships (see the *Osborne Report*, 1987: 'Those who enter marriages are as much subject to moral responsibility as those who do not. It would be a travesty to give the impression that marriage takes people out of the possibilities of the corrupt abuse of their sexuality', p.166). And so other significant changes that have affected doctrine and teaching over a longer period of time include notions of consent, both *to* the marriage and *within* marriage. Marital rape is now recognised and condemned, in law and in the church, which again marks a significant change in how sexuality, marriage, and gender relationships are conceived of. This is quite striking in its inclusion in Lambeth 1.10d, alongside homophobia and trivialisation and commercialisation of sex. Given the state of gender justice worldwide, this acknowledgement in church contexts is crucial – and likely needs much more attention.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference Report expanded on this:

Clearly some expressions of sexuality are inherently contrary to the Christian way and are sinful. Such unacceptable expression of sexuality include promiscuity, prostitution, incest, pornography, paedophilia, predatory sexual behaviour, and sadomasochism (all of which may be heterosexual and homosexual), adultery, violence against wives, and female circumcision. From a Christian perspective these forms of sexual expression remain sinful in any context. We are particularly concerned about the pressures on young people to engage in sexual activity at an early age, and we urge our Churches to teach the virtue of abstinence.

Finally, the increasing recognition of the goods of same-sex relationships is paralleled by an increasing recognition of the goods of faithful non-married sexual relationships. We see this in two major teaching documents.

The 1999 *Marriage: A Teaching Document* states,

The social and emotional steps by which couples come to enter marriage are often complicated, and some finally think about lifelong commitment only when they are already living together. This route of approaching marriage is exposed to uncertainties and tensions and is not to be recommended. But it was not uncommon in earlier periods of history, and the important thing is simply that the point of commitment should be reached. (p. 3)

Later, it also addresses couples directly:

But it may be, in fact, that you have resolved the question of your future between yourselves already, that you are quite certain of your lasting commitment to each other, and are living naturally together among your friends as husband and wife. Even so, the Church would encourage you to make the public stand that is implied in your way of life, expressing your promises to one another and praying together, as others pray with you, for God's assistance. In any case, the strength of your relationship and its potential for service to the community depend upon your enjoying a full and confident relationship with God and his people. (p.9).

This is a hugely nuanced and careful exposition, which makes space for real life, and for the fact that people are on a journey of discipleship, so that they do not start out embodying an ideal (and,

arguably, even those who marry at the start of their relationships do not embody the ideal either – all couples move and ask for God to help them grow towards holiness and fulness of life).

Men and Women in Marriage, 2013, goes further:

In pastoral responses a degree of flexibility may be called for in finding ways to express the Church's teaching practically. In affirming its belief in marriage as the form the Creator has given us for intimate and permanent relationship of a man and a woman, the Church does not treat questions of what is possible in hard circumstances or exceptional conditions as simply closed. They require pastoral wisdom.

This, again, makes pastoral accommodation or provision possible, or, in other words, makes it possible to respond to and work with, the reality of people's lives, rather than try and operate on an ideal plane only. The ideal is maintained, but it is something to work towards and hold alongside pastoral wisdom, compassion and walking with realities that often defy possibilities of ideals.

These two documents show that the doctrine of marriage in relation to marriage as the fullest and given place for sexual expression is clear, but that its boundaries may be more porous than is sometimes allowed, and can flex to accommodate pastoral realities. How far this response can 'flex', and in what form, is still the subject of disagreement, and underlies the need for pastoral provision for those who cannot in conscience accept that this can be done.

This short overview shows that the current proposal sits within a trajectory of the increasing recognition that pastoral responses to changing circumstances and complicated pastoral realities are possible, and need not represent a fundamental change to our doctrine of marriage, but are grace-based responses that enable the people of God to live in a complex world and find ways to grow in faith, hope and love.

Alongside this account of shifting language and concepts, we nevertheless see, in the same teaching documents, the reaffirmation that bodies matter, that what we do with bodies matters, and therefore a reaffirmation of the traditional teaching that sex properly belongs within lifelong, faithful, exclusive and socially and legally recognised relationships. Current proposals for pastoral provision do not change this formulation of the ideal, nor to the concept of marriage being restricted to one man and one woman, but represent a change in our pastoral responses and how we configure living well and growing in faith in the society we inhabit.

The Pastoral Guidance as a replacement for *Issues in Human Sexuality* does retain much of what has been said and mandated before in terms of sexual ethics, in terms of faithfulness, exclusive relationships, the use of power within intimate relationships, the corrosive nature of abusive relationships and of the commodification of sex, for instance. The PLF were conceived of as a genuine pastoral response to a particular, very focused question regarding long-term, faithful, committed, exclusive same-sex relationships between Christians who are seeking to live as faithfully as then can as Christians and LGBTQI+ people. The PLF fall short of speaking of the entire relationship as a way of life, which makes them very different to marriage. They are more restricted, more modest, and acknowledge what we can unambiguously affirm as good: faithfulness, lifelong commitment, mutual love and flourishing, fruitfulness, stability. They are silent on those things on which church has not found a place of consensus.

For some, this will be far too little. Others, on the other hand, will argue that the presence of sexual activity in these relationships undermines the goods that we see. This disagreement is the reason why it has been decided not to change doctrine, and only a more limited pastoral response is being

offered. It is also why careful consideration is being given to appropriate pastoral reassurance and how we may still belong within one church, and continue to discern together, amidst profound disagreements. It is also why the prayers will only be offered on a limited basis, by those who have prayerfully discerned that such a pastoral response is appropriate in specific circumstances. This pastoral response nevertheless can make a space to affirm joyfully all that is good and of God, and pray for a couple that they may grow in holiness and that God would be present with them as they seek to develop in faith, discipleship and love.

2.2 THE CHANGING SHAPE OF DISAGREEMENT

As we explore the roots of the Church's decision to offer a pastoral provision, it is also important to trace how the shape of our disagreement has evolved and changed, and led to the space we seek to inhabit today.

Whilst the different basic lines of argument around same-sex relationships have not changed, language and concepts in teaching about marriage and in reflecting on same-sex relationships has changed immensely, and this is obvious in the evolution from 1967 to today. Change in language and tone is significant, because language shapes the way we see reality. To change *how* we speak inevitably changes what it is we speak of.

2.2.1 A changing language in speaking of LGBTQI+ Christians

Reports since the 1960s are striking in their language about LGBTQI+ people. Despite attempts at pastoral concern, the language of earlier reports is largely othering of LGBTQI+ people – they are the 'other', rather than 'one of us'; they are spoken of almost entirely in terms of male same-sex relationships, with consistent concern expressed about what was perceived as 'homosexual lifestyles'. They are spoken about as 'homosexuals' or 'homophiles', and the initials LGBTQI+ only really come into full use in LLF. Before that, gay men were the 'other', while lesbians and trans people were only mentioned rarely. The 1967 report still speaks primarily of 'homosexual behaviour' rather than consider sexual orientation as a concept. The shift to LLF's concern for speaking with, rather than about, people, for using people's own preferred self-identification, and to acknowledge orientation as a given, is both gradual and hugely significant, because it changes the Church's understanding of sex and sexual identity in a way that gives a different background for conversations about sex and marriage. It means that when the words 'sex' or 'sexuality' are used in teaching, or referred to (even obliquely in liturgical texts or canons), while on the surface the teaching has not necessarily changed, the deeper meaning has, because what is conveyed by the words has evolved.

Earlier reports are clear about maintaining the position that 'homosexual activity' is sinful, but they nevertheless wrestle with what a pastoral response should look like. The 1987 *Osborne Report* talks of homosexual activity as sin but urges pastoral wisdom and keeping sexual matters private (private not meaning secret, but restricted to pastoral contexts – though this approach risks leading to what the Pastoral Principles have called the 'evil of silence').

Issues in Human Sexuality (1991), despite remaining a highly controversial and painful document, continues the trend of increasing nuance and pastoral provision; it talks about those who say they are called to live in long term faithful active same-sex relationships and says, 'we respect their integrity' – at the same time as saying it goes against what they asked for (5.21). Here and more widely, this goes beyond a description of 'some believe this, others believe that' and actually recognises the integrity of this position, without necessarily approving of it. This in many ways is part of the trajectory towards recognising that it is possible to hold different views on this matter with Christian integrity. It is a move beyond previous talk of 'homosexual activity' as sin only. The

significance of the shift is that it permits a divergence of views that is not categorised or caricatured simply as wilful sin and ignoring teaching. In Biblical terms, wilful sin, particularly on sexual matters, falls under the type of behaviour that Paul speaks about in 1 Corinthians 5 or Jesus in Matthew 18.15-17, when a 'brother or sister' is confronted yet refuses to change, knowing that their behaviour is wrong. Accepting that another's position has integrity moves the debate to a different plane: we are now talking of people who are seeking to live holy lives, but come to different conclusions in study and prayer. This in some ways is closer (though not identical) to the discussions about disagreement on meat sacrificed to idols, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 8. The teaching of the Church remains unchanged in *Issues*, but the way in which LGBTQI+ people and their life of faith are spoken of is evolving significantly.

Finally, there is a clear thread through all previous reports and statements, apart from the *Higton Motion*, in calling for compassionate pastoral provision. Already, the 1967 *Report to the Board of the Working Party on Homosexuality* states: 'The community has an obligation to meet the needs of homosexual men and women in that they are brothers and sisters in Christ.' This early statement is significant: responding well is the duty of the whole church, and it is based on a fundamental fellowship in Christ. There is no sense in which LGBTQI+ people (and their allies) are considered as not part of the fellowship of Christ's people here, and responses are firmly categorised as a pastoral matter.

Already in this 1967 report, and in all subsequent full reports, there is an increasingly clear condemnation of homophobia, with an ever-widening definition of what homophobia consists of. The 1987 *Osborne Report* goes as far as condemning homophobia as a sin on equal footing with the sin that others describe homosexual activity to be. *Lambeth 1.10d* famously calls the Communion to 'condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex'. This emphasis carries on subsequently, and finds itself expressed most fully in the LLF call to repentance for the way the church has treated LGBTQI+ people.

2.2.2 Acknowledging the goods present in same-sex relationships

Together with a recognition of the integrity of a position alternative to what is seen as the ideal or the 'right' position, we find that successive reports also increasingly make room to recognise the goods in same-sex relationships. 'Goods' that were previously restricted to heterosexual marriage are now recognised in same-sex couples (and, incidentally, also increasingly recognised in non-married opposite-sex couples). This is a significant shift, in that it signals an acceptance that sexual activity outside marriage does not automatically take away all the goods in a relationship (earlier reports do not state this as an unqualified conclusion, but rather include it in a range of ways of thinking that coexist in the church). Instead, a gradation of goods is recognised, which does not displace or diminish marriage as the proper or fuller expression of intimate, sexual relationships, but recognises the reality of living in the world as ambiguous, mixed, and touched by grace as much as – or more than – by sin. This paves the way for talk of pastoral accommodation and provision.

This is how it works in successive reports:

Already in 1967, there is a move to start to recognise the goods in same-sex relationships, though this is initially very tentative. The *Report to the Board of the Working Party on Homosexuality*, acknowledges disagreement then around same-sex couples living a 'settled life' with a 'steady partner'.

By 1979, the *Gloucester Report* goes a little further and wonders whether same-sex relationships may be 'as genuine expressions of love as other human relationships' (5.3-5.5).

The *Osborne Report* in 1987 makes a clear distinction between different types of same-sex activity and talks of 'mature' and 'long-standing' relationships as qualitatively different, and something that must be recognised regardless of one's beliefs (p.53).

Issues in Human Sexuality, in 1991, section 4.6 makes parallels between clearly destructive patterns of sexuality in same and opposite sex relationships, and then contrasts this to 'those who grow in fidelity and mutual caring, understanding and support, whose partnerships are a blessing to the world around them, and who achieve great, even heroic, sacrifice and devotion.' This goes further than simply identifying 'goods' and actually states the value of same-sex relationships as a social blessing to others, beyond a couple.

The *House of Bishops Guidance on Same-Sex Marriage* in 2014 states, 'As we said in our response to the consultation prior to the same sex marriage legislation, "the proposition that same sex relationships can embody crucial social virtues is not in dispute. Same sex relationships often embody genuine mutuality and fidelity...., two of the virtues which the Book of Common Prayer uses to commend marriage. The Church of England seeks to see those virtues maximised in society".' The idea that this is 'not in dispute' represents a significant change in how we speak of same-sex relationships in relation to marriage and to teaching about the rightful place of sexual activity. While it does not quite change the doctrine of marriage, it does change the way the doctrine of marriage shapes a response to other types of relationships.

This 2014 statement also shows how it is possible to speak of other relationships as embodying some of the virtues of marriage, without compromising the doctrine of marriage itself, or arguing for a change in that doctrine. If anything, it is the reaffirmation of the core principles that makes it possible to acknowledge what may be good in other relationships, and commend those goods, and pray that they may grow further.

3 LIVING WITH REALITY

All human beings are made in the image of God and called into the likeness of Christ. While this is the fundamental, joyous reality in which we are invited to dwell, this can only be done by actual human beings living in specific times and places across time: God's fundamental call on humanity does not change, though understandings of what it means to be a flourishing person in community and relationship can and do shift over time. Within the past one hundred years, British society's social mores as well as religious and cultural understandings around sexuality and gender have shifted significantly.

These shifts are reflected, not least, in the extent to which every tradition in the Church acknowledges not only that prejudice against LGBTQI+ people is deeply wrong and sinful, but has sought to repent of the Church's ingrained history of homophobia. Indeed, one of the fruits of the Church's developing understanding of what it means to be seek Christ in our complex modern society is a richer pastoral theology, a greater humility, and an openness to learn from what God is revealing in society. As the church has acknowledged both its own contextual and human richness as well as its own failings, limitations and partiality, a richer understanding of God's full and transforming participation in his world has been revealed.

All human beings and all human relationships fall short of the holiness and goodness of God shown in Jesus Christ. While the Church has discerned that marriage represents one icon of human flourishing, even within such relationships there is only ever an approximation to God's fidelity and holiness. Human beings fall short. It is the nature of being human that conversion to Christ is – for both communities and persons – a work in progress.

As such, any real, substantive and generous pastoral provision for the reality of human relationships – even those most in the church would suggest are closest to modelling the holiness of Christ – requires due humility and graciousness. Pastoral provision is predicated on a recognition that in the face of the glorious grace of Christ, we are all falling short; our human failings and limitations, as well as the Church's history of prejudice and persecution, caution us against over-confident pronouncements about the complex and rich diversity of human identity and relationships. As the Church steps ever deeper into its pilgrimage with the holy, living God, we are called to discern with generosity and love and seek God in what is actually happening.

Just as the Church's recent work on the family, *Love Matters*⁵, has discerned the rich and moving ways in which different households can hold the goods of family, the Prayers of Love and Faith are part of an ongoing work of discernment. The Church is called to be a community seeking to discern God's faithful and holy love in action. God's action in history never fails to surprise – by taking root in unexpected places and among unexpected people. While there remain significant disagreements about the extent to which committed, exclusive and faithful LGBT+ relationships carry within them the goods of holy and faithful relationships, the Prayer of Love and Faith are offered in recognition of the hope, promise and joy those relationships can show forth.

3.1 GRACE

Pastoral provision is based on the ongoing struggle of all human beings with living in the world, growing and learning, but also finding ways to make life liveable in a world that is often harsh and incomprehensible. Pastoral provision is based, first and foremost, on a practical theology of grace.

Jesus Christ bids his disciples to imitate the perfection of their heavenly Father, calls his disciples to follow him, bearing their crosses, and endorses the primacy of the commands to love God with all of ourselves and our neighbours as ourselves. The Gospel takes the form of empowering, liberating law. Christ enjoins us to ask the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit and sends that same Spirit upon the Church. These commands extend to forms of shared life and to sexual ethics.

Pastoral provision does not weaken the demands of the gospel upon our lives but recognises the grace that precedes and accompanies them and which is their spirit: the grace in which Jesus Christ became poor for our sake, humbling himself to our condition; the grace in which he comes, anointed by the Spirit of God, to proclaim the release of captives, the recovery of sight and the liberation of the oppressed. The purpose of such provision is not to lay impossible burdens nor to cheapen God's grace but to encourage the pursuit of Christ-likeness in the midst of our continuing discernment and to afford the support of Christian community as the setting for that difficult endeavour. It seeks to recognise, honour and build up the members of the body, mindful of our common weaknesses and the failings of the Church, while taking care for others' consciences. It encourages all of us to deepen our life with Christ and our commitment to love of God and neighbour, as we form part of the same church.

⁵ [Love Matters: Final report of the Commission | The Church of England](#)

Grace within the pastoral provision may be first and foremost grace towards one another, in recognition of our common humanity, our common frailty, and our collective not-knowing. It is a choice to care tenderly for one another, by listening to those who say that the traditional discipline of the Church has laid unbearable burdens upon them, which, they, after careful prayer and study, do not think are justified; and it is listening carefully to those who, after equal prayer and study, still think that the traditional teaching and discipline of the Church are right, and life-giving, and cannot be moved away from, even if the change is a change in pastoral practice rather than a formal change of doctrine. Grace is what is leading us towards trying to find ways to enable every member of the Church to live as faithfully as they can at a time when we have not discerned a common way forward. This document seeks to explain primarily the pastoral provision of the PLF; the pastoral provision needed for reassurance for those who cannot accept that the PLF will be used by fellow priests and bishops, and therefore feel that communion is impaired within the Body, will be explored with equal care at a later stage.

To return to the PLF, a well-designed pastoral provision can help us discern where God is at work, and invite us to grow within it. It can help us focus on nurturing habits that will help us grow in holiness. Holiness is formed by being immersed in habits and practices which foster the capacity for repentance and forgiveness, generosity and compassion, fidelity and the pursuit of justice and mercy. The PLF name all of these goods as gifts of God, which couples are called to grow into, to nurture in their common life and seek to display in their relationships with others.

In this sense, the PLF as pastoral provision act as part of the discernment of what needs nurturing in our lives. But they do not function on their own; just like any other prayers or forms of service, they are held within the wider container of the Church's teaching and preaching, its traditions and its engagement with Scripture. The PLF are not an encapsulation of all our doctrine; they are one, particular contribution to our common life, and one that consciously seeks to emphasise what is good and embody a concept of 'contagious holiness': the sense that the walk of discipleship is enhanced by a practice of discerning what is good in our lives. This practice does and should not stand alone. We also need other practices embedded in our liturgies, worship and life together, that help us recognise our erring, such as repentance, teaching or correction. These complement and balance what the PLF do – just like a marriage service on its own does not address all the possible distortions of relationships that may need addressing, but fits into a much more expansive picture of the Christian life. The PLF will find different inflections in different church traditions, they may be used to a greater or lesser degree, and some branches of the church will not use them at all. This is within the nature of pastoral provision: it is about real, specific people, in relationship with their communities. It is about conscience and creating a space within which it is possible to act differently from what has been possible in the past, but without a change in doctrine, which introduces a degree of provisionality and space for difference and disagreement. Pastoral provision can never be compulsory. Yet it is the hope that the PLF can offer nuanced ways for local communities to explore what their response should be in their own contexts.

3.2 PASTORAL ACCOMMODATION AND PASTORAL PROVISION

Pastoral provision is an extension, with some significant differences, of the well-established concept of pastoral accommodation. It is not a brand new idea, or an innovation designed to try and solve a thorny problem. Pastoral provision, a way of enabling life in the word, has been a feature of the life of the people of God since the beginning of times.

The Old Testament chronicles a long history of pastoral provision for a people struggling to live well, sometimes because of their own choices, but just as often, because of the choices of others, or

simply because of the complexity and brokenness of the world. Chapter 9 of the *LLF book* explores this story in some depth. Overall it is difficult to read the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of David and Solomon, of the great figures of the Old Testament, without seeing grace at work alongside judgment, and God's constant blessing and presence despite much that seems to deny or diminish life in all its fullness. Life in the Old Testament is spent in tension between the high demands of covenant and promise, and the reality that it is only by grace and compassion that the people of God can be enabled to sustain life and faith. The New Testament follows in this trajectory, with stories of Jesus holding a vision of life in all its fullness as an outcome of outrageous grace and acceptance. Pastoral provision seeks to embody the same vision.

The history of the Church has also yielded a long practice of pastoral provision. Once again, there is no time to explore this in extensive detail, but a look at the post-war years is helpful in showing how pastoral provision fits within a clear trajectory of recognising the goods of different relationships.

Before highlighting these, it is helpful to note that we have often talked of pastoral *accommodation*; but the language of accommodation is laden with implicit power dynamics; it has a chequered history, and can be used to reinforce the sense that some people's lives are somehow 'second-class'. It is still cast within the theological space of 'remedy for sin'. For some, this framing seems entirely appropriate; for others it is deeply offensive and subverts the Church's affirmation of goods in faithful, permanent, exclusive same-sex relationships. This profound difference over the applicability of pastoral accommodation to the PLF is a symptom of the Church's present disagreements.

Pastoral provision on the other hand seeks to focus firmly on what is good, and encourage growth through the identification of God at work. It is set within the landscape of a lack of corporate agreement. It also seeks to respond to a slightly different question: how do we find ways of living healthily and faithfully when the disciplines and laws of our church make it impossible for some to see a way towards life that is both bearable and holy? It is rooted in the acknowledgement of the deep pain that has been expressed by LGBTQI+ Christians, together with our increasing understanding of social and scientific understandings of sexuality, as explored in the *LLF Book*, chapter 6⁶. It is an attempt to navigate a landscape where we see good we may want to celebrate, pain we may want to acknowledge and remedy, repentance we need to engage in for our collective hardness of heart, the provisionality of what we know and the need to hold one another with care and tenderness, without imposing unbearable burdens on one another, and the continued uncertainty in our common life that prevents us from clear and unanimous decision-making.

Pastoral provision builds on developments in the related concept of pastoral accommodation in the history of the Church in the 20th and 21st centuries, where a growing number of documents over the years have spoken of 'pastoral accommodation' in one form or another. As already highlighted, in these documents, to allow for pastoral accommodation, or pastoral provision, does not change the primary doctrine of the church, or the formulation of the 'ideal', but takes realistically the challenges, pain and messiness of real, particular human lives. Pastoral accommodation draws on the many Biblical examples of God working with – and blessing – people as and where they are, despite their falling short of the ideal in multiple ways – some because of sin, some because of weakness, damage or hurt, some because of the ways that communities and groups behave so that individuals cannot always do as they would prefer to do.

⁶ For more detail, see [LLF Hub>Further Resources>Library>Social and Biological Sciences](#)

Talk of pastoral accommodation is found throughout previous documents, but becomes noticeably more affirmative over the years, away from simply 'grace towards sinners' and towards an understanding of how we may respond to those who want to grow in holiness in ways that are realistic and rooted in the real, non-ideal, lives of real people at specific times and in specific places. Pastoral provisions help bridge the recognition of ideals with the need to respond pastorally with grace, compassion, and a degree of provisionality and humility about what we do or do not know.

The 1987 *Osborne Report* reflects on the pastoral reality that having to enable people to live well with something which may not be considered the ideal is part and parcel of normal Christian life, and that God often works with people 'by way of interim solutions' (p. 54).

Issues in Human Sexuality (1991) expresses the tension between the need for pastoral accommodation as a matter of justice, and the need to preserve a sense of the ideal:

Justice does indeed demand that the Church should be free in its pastoral discretion to accommodate a God-given ideal to human need, so that individuals are not turned away from God and their neighbour but helped to grow in love towards both from within their own situation. But the Church is also bound to take care that the ideal itself is not misrepresented or obscured; and to this end the example of its ordained ministers is of crucial significance.

Some Issues in Human Sexuality (2003) reiterates the principle, and highlights the fact that more room has been made for pastoral accommodation and dialogue on other matters of sexual morality than on homosexuality – often more generously and with less ongoing unease.

What we find is a consistent pattern in the development of an Anglican approach to sexual ethics. This pattern has two key elements. The first of these is a reassertion of Christian principles such as the lifelong nature of marriage, the production of children as one of the purposes of marriage, and the sacredness of human life, including the life of the unborn child. The second is a willingness to allow the outworking of these principles in practice to be shaped by pastoral realities and dilemmas such as realities of marital breakdown and the need and desire for couples to limit the number of their children, and the dilemmas posed by backstreet abortions and the threat that an unborn child could pose to the life of the mother. (1.2.62-65)

Men and Women in Marriage (2013) further explains how pastoral accommodation does not change doctrine, but enables life to proceed in a movement of coming closer to God:

The meaning of such pastoral accommodations can be misunderstood, as though the Church were solving pastoral difficulties by redefining marriage from the ground up, which it cannot do. What it can do is devise accommodations for specific conditions, bearing witness in special ways to the abiding importance of the norm. Well-designed accommodations proclaim the form of life given by God's creative goodness and bring those in difficult positions into closer approximation to it. They mark the point where teaching and pastoral care coincide. (49)

The PLF seek to constitute the type of legitimate pastoral provision described here, where the prayers bear witness to the norm by affirming the goods that can be seen in relationships (such as permanence, fidelity etc) and enable those who receive the prayers to grow in their life with God.

Pastoral provision recognises the uncertainty of our current time (where there is uncertainty about the outcome of the whole church's discernment, even though many individuals on all sides are very

certain that they are right), and does not stigmatise people but acknowledges the provisionality of our knowledge and responses in ways that err on the side of grace rather than judgement.

Some have asked, quite appropriately, whether routine accommodation/provision then becomes a *de facto* change in doctrine. The challenge has some weight: doctrine is not simply produced by official pronouncements but in an iterative process of dialogue between conceptual formulation and embodiment in practice. However, it is quite clear, looking at the history of the church and at Scripture, that pastoral accommodation and the practice of grace and compassion have always been part of the life of the people of God⁷ – what varies is the degree and consistency with which it is offered, and the groups it is extended to (women have traditionally been granted much less grace and accommodation than men in the area of sexuality, for instance). To introduce a consistent way of pastoral provision would be to stand in a long line of the pastoral practice of finding ways to help people move forward in holiness in a world that falls far short of any ideals, without giving up on the idea of a proper or fuller configuration of relationships altogether. This would bring out more explicitly the principle that grace is a central concept in Christian doctrine, which interacts strongly with the pastoral outworkings of doctrines like the doctrine of marriage.

3.3 PASTORAL PROVISION, LAW AND PUBLIC WORSHIP

The Church of England, like all Christian Churches, depends for its life upon God's gracious gifts and mercy. The graced life of the church is an ordered life; law is not opposed to the gospel but serves the way it shapes our life together, receiving and responding to God's grace. These laws state what may, or may not be permissible in worship and what may or may not, constitute an appropriate use of services. It would be easy to oppose law and grace. Yet this is not the way of the Gospel. Jesus himself proclaimed that he has not 'come to abolish the law or the prophets ... not to abolish but to fulfil' (Matthew 5.17). A Pastoral Provision takes the law seriously, and acknowledges that the doctrine of our church with regards to marriage may not be undermined by the provision or the text of new commended or authorised prayers. This is particularly important for Anglican Churches given the role of prayer and worship in shaping and forming doctrine. The question for the PLF therefore is whether grace and provision can be encapsulated within formal prayers, particularly given that, because of the disagreements among us, they will not all be used in the same way across the Church, and some would disagree that public prayers can be used for such purposes. The question applies to both the provision of the PLF, and the extent of reassurance that can be offered to those for whom this represents an impairment of communion, though this specific question will be explored in work on reassurance rather than here.

Here we need to consider what it is the PLF are seeking to do, and not to do. The PLF witness to the enduring message of the doctrine of marriage, by affirming very clear goods that bear a family resemblance to the goods of marriage: stability, faithfulness, exclusive, lifelong commitment, fruitfulness, mutual nurture and work for the flourishing of each partner and all those with whom a couple comes into contact. But the PLF fall short of affirming a couple's entire way of life as 'made holy by God' and 'blessed' as a marriage service would do. This position reflects our uncertainty about how to conclude our discernment. The PLF do not seek to simulate marriage, or pretend that our Church has made a decision to extend marriage to same-sex couples. But they do discern and affirm what is good, and pray for God's presence and blessing over the people within the relationship. They are 'prayers on the way': the way of people seeking to grow in God, but also the

⁷ See the LLF book, chapters 9 and 10, pp. 175-216.

way of a Church seeking to discern how to respond well to the diversity of the Body, and to the complexity of a rapidly changing social context.

The questions the Church of England is facing are questions asked by many other churches and denominations. Recent comments by Pope Francis on 25th September 2023 echo the Church of England's wish to offer suitable pastoral provision. The wrestling within the Roman Catholic Church, where some churches in specific contexts have started offering blessings for same-sex couples, is very similar, attempting to balance law, grace, forms of public worship and blessings.

In reference to a submission from 5 cardinals to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and in response to the second question contesting whether 'the claim that the widespread practice of the blessing of same-sex unions would be in accord with Revelation and the Magisterium,' the pope wrote: 'The Church has a very clear conception of marriage: an exclusive, stable and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the begetting of children. Only this union is called marriage.'

He went on: 'For this reason the Church avoids any kind of rite or sacramental that could contradict this conviction and give the impression that something that is not marriage is recognized as marriage.'

'In dealing with people, however, we must not lose pastoral charity, which must permeate all our decisions and attitudes. The defence of objective truth is not the only expression of this charity, which is also made up of kindness, patience, understanding, tenderness, and encouragement. Therefore, we cannot become judges who only deny, reject, and exclude.'

'Therefore, pastoral prudence must adequately discern whether there are forms of blessing, requested by one or more persons, that would not transmit a mistaken conception of marriage. Because when a blessing is requested, one is expressing a request for help from God, a plea to be able to live better, a trust in a Father who can help us to live better.'⁸

The Pope's words on 'blessings' again echo some of the underpinning for the PLF.

3.4 BLESSING

A particular question associated with the PLF is the role of blessings. A full paper is available on the LLF Hub exploring how we may understand the place of blessing within the PLF.⁹

A shorter account can be given here. First, it is important to highlight that understandings of what blessings represent differ across the Church of England; as often, being a broad church leads us to a place of having different underlying understandings to what looks like a common practice. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that at least in our formal, authorised liturgies, blessing is always conferred on people, and it is something that God confers, and not something that the Church itself confers as a ratification of morality or worth.

This is in line with a Biblical understanding of blessing.

⁸ For an account of the news story, see [Pope suggests Catholic Church could bless same-sex couples - BBC News](#)

⁹ [Bible: Blessing and LLF \(churchofengland.org\)](#)

3.4.1 Biblical forms of blessing

Blessing is a core concept and practice in both the Old and the New Testament, and has a long and rich history in the life of the Church.

First and foremost, blessing is one of the modes in which God relates to the world; indeed, in Scripture it is one of the earliest modes of relationship between God and the physical world (blessing is not exclusive to humans, but it is quasi-exclusive to living beings). In the creation story of Genesis, animate life is systematically blessed by God as it comes into being on the fifth and sixth days. In addition, God also blesses time, the seventh day, when life can rest in imitation of the Creator's own rest. The blessing of animate life therefore relates to life having a particular context which will contribute to the realization of that blessing.

Blessing then forms part of the architecture of the relationship between God and creation. The story of Abraham, in particular focuses on blessing, and on the cascading of blessing to others. Blessing in the story of Abraham is very clearly not tied to perfection or the demonstration of moral worth. It is an act of pure grace, of initiation of relationships, and a sign of God's posture towards his people: a posture that always seeks to bless, and works for the flourishing of the other, even when the other is recalcitrant or works against the grain of the blessing they are invited into. The practice of blessing by human beings develops alongside the story of blessing by God. In the Torah, it becomes the responsibility of Aaron and his sons, the tasks of priests, to speak blessing on God's behalf – always in prayer form, and drawing on God's posture of love towards creation.

The Psalms draw on a different way of framing blessing, and identify what may be needed in order to live a life that generates blessing, or that enters into the fullness of the blessing that is prayed for. The wisdom Psalms repeatedly locate blessing in the Torah and following the ways of the Lord. It is not that following the ways of God is needed *in order to* gain blessing; but rather that blessing is fully realised and augmented when living a godly life.

In the New Testament there is also a generosity of outlook prescribed for those who follow Christ. Paul enjoins Christians to "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Rom. 12:14), thereby prescribing both attitude and action in continuity with the words of Jesus, "bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk. 6:28). This is not just a matter of refraining from wanting harm to come to those who are hostile in opposition. Jesus and Paul both envisage Christians actively and prayerfully engaging with God, that what is good for these people should come to them from God (without prescribing what form that should take).

There is an important and constructive tension in the portrayal of blessing as a whole in the Bible. On the one hand, it represents the sovereign and gracious initiative of God towards creation. On the other hand, there are passages which speak of blessing being received in the covenantal context of human obedience to God (Deut. 28:1-14). This tension between "God sovereignly blesses" and "God blesses those who are obedient" is not something to be resolved, but articulates some of the dimensions of love, where love is both unconditionally given and love only thrives when there is mutuality and responsiveness. The tension between grace freely given, and the need for trusting and obedient responsiveness in relation to it, runs through Scripture as a whole. This tension sets blessing as a form of calling: recognising that all things belong to God and come from God, but also that everything is being drawn into God's transforming grace. Blessing both affirms God's initial creative intent and orients us into God's work of redemption and re-creation.

3.4.2 Blessing in the Church

The practice of 'blessing' in the Church is firmly rooted in the patterns of Scripture, with a particular emphasis on the blessing of people.

By around the third century however, we begin to find extensive evidence of various forms of blessing that go beyond early practice, with numerous blessings for objects and places set in liturgical forms and prayers. Whether it is to do with people, objects and ways of living, it is worth reflecting on the distinctions and overlaps between blessing, dedication and consecration. Blessing as rooted in creation and vocation has the widest range. Consecration has the narrowest range as directed primarily towards sacred use or relationship. Dedication sits in between, not setting something, someone or a relationship aside solely for religious purposes, yet setting it very clearly before God for a pattern of holy living. The Church grew to recognise some forms of living as 'consecrated', as in the consecrated singleness of those in religious communities. Marriage became a relationship and configuration of life that was formally 'blessed', as rooted in creation and expressing conditions within which human life flourishes, with a very wide reach.

There is no need here to explore extensively how the notion of 'blessing' has evolved; the habit of blessing both people and certain activities or conditions carried through history, until in the 20th century, liturgical reform pushed back somewhat against widespread use of blessings of objects and refocused liturgical texts on the blessing of people primarily, and occasionally on the context within which life can flourish.

This orientation is clear in Common Worship, where for instance, in the Chrism Mass, the blessing for the oils is not for the oils to be blessed intrinsically, but to be a blessing on those who are anointed. The Marriage Service, in the same way, includes a blessing on the *people* getting married, and for the marriage to be a place of blessing through the presence of Christ. Even the exchange of rings is carefully worded: 'by your blessing let these rings be to *N* and *N* a symbol of unending love and faithfulness, to remind them of the vow and covenant which they have made this day'. The liturgy does not quite say 'bless these rings' but invokes God's blessing for the rings to be a reminder of the conditions within which blessing may flourish.

3.4.3 What does 'blessing' symbolise or express?

At its most basic therefore, the action of blessing represents a reflection of God's intent that another person flourish, and a prayer for them to come into God's life in all its fulness, as defined by God (and therefore 'holy'). As such, blessings relate both to God's creation and to human vocation. One short-hand for blessing might be 'invoking God's power for the good of that which is blessed'. Associated with the direct blessing of people, there may be an acknowledgement that certain conditions or ways of life may be such 'good' that they may in themselves be a blessing or nurture flourishing and blessing – and it is this understanding that shapes the Marriage Service.

In common parlance however, the expression 'give your blessing to' has often come to take on a conditional inflection not always present in biblical theology or more formal theologies¹⁰. More generally, we often 'bless' what we judge good enough rather than bless the person (i.e. pray for

¹⁰ See the Roman Ritual general introduction s.12: 'The celebration of blessings becomes the means for us to profess that as we make use of what God has created we wish to find him and to love and serve him with all fidelity.' This is a prayer, rather than a statement of approval for what already is.

their flourishing) and as part of this blessing hope and pray that they will come into fullness of life according to divine principles.

The distinction is core to the PLF; when we offer a blessing in the context of a relationship, what is it that is being 'blessed'? Is it the relationship, or the persons? Blessing the relationship itself propels us inevitably into the realm of conditional blessing, where blessing is a recognition of something that is already good (or blessed) or at least has the potential to be good and holy, and praying that it would remain good and extend in depth and fruitfulness, rather than a simple blessing of the persons before us. However, a Christian understanding of the human person is never reduced to individuals: human beings are always people-in-relation, and to bless two people together necessarily involves praying for the shape of their relationship. It does, however, remain the case that a prayer for blessing is a prayer for God to act in accordance with God's posture towards the world – one that consistently seeks to draw people closer to himself and enable them to flourish.

3.4.4 The Marriage Service and the PLF

When it comes to marriage, we can make an analogy with the blessing of the Sabbath as a distinctive way of life which promotes blessing. The relationship between the two people entering marriage is never going to be perfect; however, a relationship defined in certain ways – promoting faithfulness, stability, permanency and fruitfulness – can be a context within which human beings flourish and experience blessing. This degree of recognition of certain shapes of life is uncommon in Scripture, and in the life of the Church. Many people seek blessing, for themselves and their endeavours, and can even be dedicated before God. Holy Matrimony however goes a step further.

Holy Matrimony effects a social change in the position of the people taking part, recognised in the church as one of these special ways of living that enables flourishing. Marriage has been seen as highly distinctive among other relationships— for many Christians (including many Anglicans) a sacrament; for all an ordinance hallowed by Christ himself at Cana of Galilee; given a theological / ecclesiological depth of interpretation lacking to other relationships. This is close to the wisdom literature's understanding of holy ways of living being experienced as 'blessing'. The marriage service therefore blesses an individual couple, and affirms marriage as a 'good' within which blessing is more likely to be experienced in its fullness. This understanding of marriage does not preclude the possibility of other relationships being good, or warranting some form of blessing, but it does set aside marriage as a distinctive form of life. The Book of Common Prayer refers to this way of life as 'the estate of marriage'.

The PLF, in contrast, identify goods that bear a family resemblance to marriage, but do not define a specific way of life in its entirety as a way of blessing – there is no definition of a specific 'estate'. As such, it gives a different context to the PLF and its optional prayer of blessing. The blessing of the PLF is a blessing on people, as with all other blessings. It is a prayer for God's action to bring flourishing and fruitfulness, and enables the Church to stand alongside a couple to affirm their desire to walk more closely into the ways of God, and receive the blessings of the Kingdom.

4 THE OFFER OF THE PLF

There, then, are clear differences between what may be done using the PLF resources and what is enacted in the marriage services of the Church of England but it is also important to explain what their use may enact, positively. The marriage liturgy culminates in the proclamation that the couple

are now husband and wife - consent having been given, declarations and vows made, rings exchanged and received. There are essential elements which constitute being married according to the rites and ceremonies of the church of England. The liturgy, like all liturgy, also expresses the need for grace, the support of the community, the teachings of the church and the ongoing work of the Spirit. There is space for forgiveness and fruitfulness. It sets out hopes for life in the world and the hope of the world to come.

In that breadth of liturgical context, it becomes clear what the PLF are not, as already indicated. But it is also possible, in that context, to say more about what they provide. For they create space for the reality of God's presence to be named in human lives. Such a spiritual imagination allows for the expression of human faithfulness and commitment in response to God's faithfulness to us. It extends the invitation for hearts to be turned outwards towards the other, reflecting the goods of a household. Those goods include not only permanence and faithfulness as the hopes of life together but also encompass hospitality, generosity, stability, compassion, mutual support, flourishing and security. All these goods are held within a wider vision of living out of the sacrificial love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Spirit, Christian disciples are called to walk in that way.

The PLF thus name the expectation that the Spirit is at work in human lives, bringing forth such fruit. They express the intention that the relationships of those blessed and prayed for are not only good for those individuals - by way of comfort and strength - but also that wider society benefits through a commitment to mercy, justice, compassion and hospitality.

We have already named, extensively, the difference between the PLF and marriage, as well as the family likeness, and the way in which the PLF are a way of naming goods that our doctrine helps us identify as worth pursuing. They are prayers that enable us to be present in solidarity with a couple; to honour before God the self-giving love and faithfulness they have for one another; to name the virtues they are exhibiting and pray that these may be deepened; to pray for their needs and the whole of their earthly pilgrimage, and pray that God would bring them into flourishing. This is the vision that underlies the opening bidding from the PLF:

Dear friends in Christ,
we gather with *N* and *N* to celebrate with them
their love, faithfulness, and commitment.
We come to hear God's holy word,
and to surround *N* and *N* with our love and prayer
as they seek the blessings of God's kingdom
in their life together.