



THE DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD

Bishops' Letter, 23.10.25

Dear friends

The LORD is faithful in all his words and gracious in all his deeds.

The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.

Psalm 145.13b-14

We are writing to you in the light of press releases and media reports last week, in the light of 'direction of travel' decisions made at the most recent meeting of the House of Bishops in relation to the *Prayers of Love and Faith* and the wider '*Living in Love and Faith*' explorations.

First, we want to recognise that the decisions made by the House of Bishops, and also the way that these decisions have been communicated, have impacted severely on individuals and communities in our Diocese. We want to register and lament the severe pain, disappointment and anger which these decisions have caused, especially to those in LGBT+ communities and their allies. We want to assure you that we have been reading and taking to heart some of the distressing blog posts and commentaries which have been published online. It is a particular matter of regret to us that LGBT+ people were not referenced in the official communication which was published by the Church of England last week.

As your bishops, we want you to reiterate our commitment to you as your pastors. We dearly wish to support you, in the midst of the present uncertainty, to flourish in the ministry to which our Lord Jesus has called you. To that end, if a conversation with either of us would be helpful to you, please do let us know. Alternatively, please do remember that you have access to the Bishop's LGBT+ Advisor at LGBTAdvisor@sheffield.anglican.org; you may also like to contact the Patricia Hunt, the Bishop's Advisor in Pastoral Care at patricia.hunt@sheffield.anglican.org

Second, we want to register our own dismay, that the decisions taken at the House of Bishops on Wednesday 8 October were leaked to the press a week later, despite explicit requests for confidentiality to be observed. This meant that careful communications which had been planned were inevitably less well managed. As your bishops, we are united in our view that where commitments to confidentiality have been made, they should be honoured – and that leaks to the press undermine trust and confidence when we would all benefit from building them.

Third, we want to clarify the decisions which were made by the House of Bishops earlier in the month and also the grounds for these decisions.

The key point to note here is that the House of Bishops met in the light of three new and substantial pieces of theological advice and one new and substantial piece of legal advice. The Church of England's *Faith and Order Commission* had been working hard over the summer to resource the House of Bishops with three papers: one exploring if and when the doctrine of the Church can change or develop; another exploring the extent to which 'bespoke' or 'stand-alone' services of the *Prayers of Love and Faith* raise additional complexities for the Church's doctrine of marriage; and a third, exploring whether, or how, the disciplines which currently apply to ordinands or clergy who enter into same-sex civil marriage might be relaxed. Meanwhile, the Church of England's legal team provided accompanying legal advice. Without betraying confidences, we can say that in the light of this advice, the House of Bishops achieved a high degree of consensus in the decisions it reached. We can also say with confidence that both the theological advice and the legal advice are soon to be made public.

The three key decisions taken were as follows:

- First, that while the existing suite of *Prayers of Love and Faith* remain commended for use during ordinary acts of worship, 'bespoke' or 'stand-alone' services (ie, services in which the *Prayers of Love and Faith* are the chief focus) will need to be approved through the Synodical legislative process outlined in Canon B2 – in essence this means that approval will be required by a two-thirds majority in view of the additional (legal and theological) challenges that such services pose. We realise that this threshold is a high one, which may not be realised very soon.
- Second, that (given the canonical expectation that clergy seek to exemplify the doctrine of the Church of England) to permit clergy who enter into same-sex civil marriage to exercise licensed ministries without restriction, a formal legislative process will be required. The House of Bishops has committed to reflect further, with the wider church, on the legal and theological advice lately received, to explore what such a process would involve. Until such a process is complete, existing guidance from the House of Bishops will continue to apply. (This means that meanwhile, bishops will remain unable to sponsor for ordination those who have already entered into same-sex civil marriages).
- Thirdly, and in the light of the decisions above, and on the basis that no change is presently envisaged in the doctrine or discipline of the Church of England, the House of Bishops does not intend at the present time to bring forward any structural provision for those who resist such changes. The House will, however, re-iterate the principle that no-one can be obliged to use the *Prayers of Love and Faith* against their conscience and will articulate a commitment to the principle of non-discrimination and the fair allocation of resources, ordinands and appointments notwithstanding views on the *Prayers of Love and Faith*.

It is undeniably true that in this last regard, the House of Bishops has been wary about any proposal which, after the 2014 settlement to enable the consecration of women as bishops in the Church of England, would further complexify episcopal oversight in a Diocese. However, the key consideration which determined the decisions of the House of Bishops with regard to the first two points above was the theological and legal advice it received.

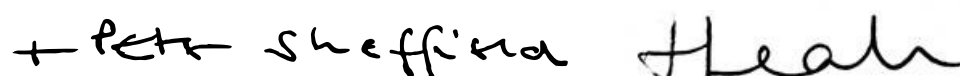
So what happens next? First, we anticipate that the theological and legal advice will be published in the coming weeks and you may like to look out for it. Meanwhile, the *Living in Love and Faith* Programme Board (of which Bishop Pete is a member) will revise a draft Statement by the House of Bishops, in the light of our meeting this month, for final approval in December. These will convey final decisions by the House on the matters itemised above. However, given the degree of consensus in the House this month, in the light of the theological and legal advice received, we do not envisage any substantial shifts.

It will also fall to the House of Bishops to propose business for the General Synod in February 2026. We think it is likely that any proposal will seek to conclude the process set in motion by the February 2023 motion. However, the decisions outlined above clearly imply that legislative, Synodical processes may yet be brought forward, to enable the permission of 'bespoke' services of the *Prayers of Love and Faith* and the relaxation of restrictions currently imposed on ordinands and clergy who enter into same-sex civil marriage.

To finish where we began: we realise that those who wish to see change in the doctrine and disciplines of our church in these matters are experiencing high levels of disappointment and frustration at present and among them of course those who belong to the LGBT+ community – but that those who do not wish to see change are not significantly reassured. We recognise therefore that this decision will likely be difficult for many, or even most, people to receive with confidence.

For that reason, if there are ways in which we can support you, please don't hesitate to let us know. Meanwhile, please be assured of our constant prayers for you. We long for the revitalisation of the Diocese of Sheffield, as we seek to make new disciples and to seek to transform our society and God's world, and we value the part you play in the realisation of that vision. Thank you.

With every blessing,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is 'Pete Sheffield' and the signature on the right is 'Leah'.

The Rt Revd Dr Pete Wilcox
Bishop of Sheffield

The Rt Revd Leah Vasey-Saunders
Bishop of Doncaster