

**Conversion of St Paul &
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
25 January 2026
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Readings: Ephesians 4.1–6, 11–16 & Matthew 18.15–22

Today, the feast of the conversion of St Paul, marks the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – a worldwide ecumenical observance when different Christian denominations – believe it or not, there are approximately 250 of them – are encouraged to come together and affirm, for all their differences, a shared Christian identity.

Shortly before the Week began, the House of Bishops released a statement that, among other things, demonstrated the acute need for prayers for Christian unity within the Church of England, never mind beyond it. This has consequences for us all, I think. Let me try to explain why.

Back in 2017, the bishops of the Church of England commissioned a suite of teaching and learning resources under the heading, 'Living in Love and Faith,' to explore human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. These resources were published in 2020 and commended to the church at every level as a two-year consultation of listening and learning together was launched. Literally, thousands of people throughout the Church of England took part, including from St Mark's, with responses gathered together and published in a report, *Listening with Love and Faith*.

This was duly considered by the Bishops with their response presented at February 2023's General Synod (that's the CofE's parliament). General Synod endorsed the Bishops' unequivocal apology to members of the LGBTQI+ community expressing regret for failing to be welcoming, as well as for any harm suffered by them within the life of the Church.

Synod also approved the finalisation and use of prayers that would celebrate faithfulness in relationships, including provision for blessing same-sex partnerships and civil marriages, as well as covenanted friendships.

Prayers of Love and Faith were duly issued later in 2023 providing 'resources in praying with and for a same-sex couple who love one another and who wish to give thanks for and mark that love in faith before God.'

The introduction accompanying these prayers clarifies that same-sex relationships do not constitute Holy Matrimony in the Church's eyes, but also affirms that it is important (I'm quoting here) 'to recognise all that is good, and holy, and faithful in these relationships and enable the people in these relationships to place themselves before God and ask for God's blessing for their journey of love and faith.'

As things stand at the moment, *Prayers of Love and Faith* for blessing a same-sex couple have been authorised for use within existing acts of worship, such as this service.

Although provision was made by General Synod for a trial usage of these prayers in standalone services, after taking further legal advice, the Bishops decided against it.

Then, earlier this month, as I mentioned at the beginning, the House of Bishops issued a statement specifying that, given the differences of opinion within the Church of England, standalone services of blessing of same-sex couples could not be authorised at this stage. Apparently, a new Working Group is to be commissioned with its recommendations returning to General Synod some time in the future for debate and, possibly, authorisation.

I don't know about you, but if one of the motivations behind the six-year 'Living in Love and Faith' consultation was to ensure that members of the LGBTQI+ community felt welcome, safe and able to flourish, then I fear the Church of England still has some way to go.

There has been progress. Hopefully, there has been much respectful listening going on, especially among those who hold different views. We now have some worthwhile resources to help us gain a fuller understanding of human identity, sexuality and relationships. And we do have *Prayers of Love and Faith* and the opportunity to recognise, celebrate and bless same-sex relationships within existing services – something we have already done here.

But the 'Living in Love and Faith' process held out the prospect of so much more for LGBTQI+ people – the prospect of being fully accepted for who they are and afforded comparable opportunities to their heterosexual counterparts to celebrate their loving, faithful relationships within the life of the church. Equally, it invited us all, as the body of Christ, to embrace a fuller integrity, a higher level of inclusivity, to the enrichment of us all and as a witness to the world.

Have we got there? Not yet, I fear. For example, informing a same-sex couple who are legally married that their marriage isn't recognised before God, but that their relationship

is nonetheless worthy of blessing, but not the dignity of a standalone service, doesn't sound very welcoming or inclusive to me.

I deeply regret that and would wish to reassure LGBTQI+ members that, despite what is going on throughout the Church of England, St Mark's is your church every bit as much as it is mine – for this is an invitation-only community, where Christ is the one who invites and Christ invites one and all. My friends, we are all here as guests. No one has more or less right to belong to this community. No one can tell you that because you are not like me, you don't really belong or that because of the way you are, you are not quite right.

Everyone belongs to the body of Christ in this place and I know that Beth, our vicar, supported by the entire leadership team, is committed to building a genuinely inclusive church and will strive, within the law, to demonstrate that in ways which enable each of us, in our glorious variety, to feel at home and to flourish.

Let me share a brief story. Year's ago, when studying in Cambridge, I came across a Roman Catholic Deacon who was married with two teenage children. Later in life, after experiencing a profound identity crisis, Michael finally admitted to himself, and then to others, that he was gay. As you can imagine, this had life-changing consequences for him and his family.

Eventually, his diocesan Bishop got wind of it and Michael was summoned. Learning of these developments, the Bishop informed him that if he intended to live as a gay man, he could no longer minister as a Deacon or be a communicant member of the Roman Catholic Church – excommunication, in all but name.

On hearing that, Michael, in his own inimitable fashion, replied, 'This is my church as much as it is yours. If you don't like me being gay, why don't you leave.' Now that's a courageous answer, full of just rage, and one I would commend to anyone who feels pushed out or marginalised because of who they are. This is your church; if I don't like the idea of you being a part of it, that's my problem not yours.

Which brings into focus the challenge of Christian unity and what we think this Week of Prayer is for. After all, what kind of unity do we seek, what form would it take, how could it possibly be realised?

Well, putting to one side the current controversy within the Church of England over human sexuality, if two thousand years of Christian history is any guide, Christian unity is unlikely to mean uniformity with everyone worshipping God in the same way, or

unanimity with everyone believing the same things; nor is it likely to mean consensus where everyone agrees on how best to practice the faith, less still union with all Christian denominations and in-groups giving up their independence and merging – heaven forbid!

Is there anything left? you may ask. If Christian Unity isn't about uniformity or unanimity or consensus or union, then what is it about?

I wonder if there might be a clue for us in this morning's Gospel reading, taken from Matthew chapter 18, which incorporates an early church order defining how followers of Jesus are to treat one another and resolve areas of tension and conflict. Listen once again to verse 19:

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

Now, initially, that sounds like consensus or unanimity, but the word in the original Greek, translated here rather inadequately, I think, as 'agree' is *sumfwne,w*, from which we derive 'symphony' – a word conveying something quite different, namely, harmony in diversity, rather than monotony through uniformity.

Could it be that the unity in which God invites us to participate can be likened to a confluence of voices, embracing many different instruments, each with a particular contribution to make, which when played sympathetically and in concert creates a symphony greater than the sum of the parts, where each is enhanced in counterpoint to others?

Let's stay with this analogy for a moment. In a symphony, like an orchestra creating it, difference must be embraced as a strength. It wouldn't do if all the instruments were the same or if all the musicians tried to mimic one another. Nor would a symphony be possible if some of the musicians refused to play with others or tried to compete for the limelight – we would end up with cacophony rather than harmony or no sound at all. There must be co-operation, mutual respect and commitment to the overall vision for symphony to emerge.

Could Christian unity be comparable, I wonder, where difference is not feared or rejected, but respected and embraced, and where all Christians are invited to play their part within God's vision for a world transformed by justice, compassion and love?

In the light of the Bishops' recent statement, for some of us at least, the prospect of continuing to participate in such a unity by remaining within the Church of England must feel like a big ask – even a bridge too far. There has been too much promised, too little realised, too much betrayal, too many hopes dashed, too much pain. I get that.

For what the 'Living in Love and Faith' consultation has highlighted is that some of our differences are not opinions about this belief or that (as important as this can sometimes be), but judgements about what it is to be made in the image of God and whether we can recognise the humanity and sanctity of those who are different from ourselves.

It is difficult to exchange the peace with someone who judges us not only to be in error (we could probably live with that), but to be inherently flawed. That's a rejection not of what we believe, but of who we are.

How this will be resolved within the Church of England is anyone's guess. And while the uncertainty pervades, here at St Mark's, it's our responsibility to continue to support one another in love – bearing witness to the blessings of inclusivity, as we celebrate the glorious diversity of the people of God.

And to anyone feeling pushed out, please remember Michael and his response to the Bishop.

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