

Prior Reading for Human Sexuality Discussion morning – Sat 17 January 2026

A. Context

Over the last 60 years Britain has become much more liberal in its attitudes towards homosexuality. From a position where sex between two men was illegal, homosexual people were often vilified and sometimes subjected to conversion therapy, we have now moved to a position where same-sex marriage is legal, sexuality is recognised as a protected characteristic, and LGBTQIA+ identity is celebrated at regular Pride events. The British Social Attitudes Survey found that whereas in 1983, 17% believed that 'sexual relations between adults of the same sex' was 'not wrong at all', by 2023 67% felt that way. Over the same period the proportion who said same sex relations are 'always wrong' had fallen from 50% to just 9%.

Within the Church of England has come recognition that the Church has caused and continues to cause hurt and unnecessary suffering to LGBTQIA+ people by failing to love them as God loves them, by discriminating against them and by failing to root out homophobic attitudes. Alongside this recognition has come the desire of many within the Church to be fully welcoming and inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people. For the liberal arm of the Church this means celebrating same-sex relationships as God-given and compatible with following Christ. For the conservative arm of the Church, same-sex relationships are not compatible with biblical teaching and so same-sex attracted people are required to remain celibate.

Over the past decade the Church of England has been debating these issues, and in 2020 invited the whole Church to embark on a learning journey, 'Living on Love and Faith' (LLF), with the aim of helping people to explore biblical teaching, listen to different perspectives and together discern the way ahead for the Church. This culminated, in December 2023, in the provision of 'Prayers of Love and Faith' (PLF), a set of resources for 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. PLF are not intended to be a form of same-sex marriage. The decision on whether or not to offer PLF rests with each individual parish.

Within our parish we took part in LLF in 2021 and have since been on a journey of discernment around issues of sexuality, recognising the breadth of views within our congregations, our desire to offer a generous welcome to all and our commitment to scripture. PLF is a potential milestone on this journey; it gives us the opportunity to say yes, no or not yet. Before making any decision the PCC is eager to hear the views of the whole parish and prayerfully discern together what is the right way forward for us at this time. In doing so we are committed to listening well to one another and to scripture, loving one another and walking together as God's people in spite of our inevitable disagreements.

B. Biblical views of same-sex relationships

The biblical arguments regarding same-sex relationships are complex, with interpretations varying widely among different traditions and scholars. Here is a brief summary of the main points for and against the affirmation of same-sex relationships based on biblical texts and theology:

Arguments Against Same-Sex Relationships (Traditional Interpretation)

These arguments generally conclude that the Bible consistently reserves sexual intimacy only for the

covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, and that same-sex sexual acts are sinful.

1. **Creation Narrative (Genesis 1 & 2):**

- a. Marriage is instituted as the union of a man and a woman ("male and female he created them... a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"). This is interpreted as establishing a permanent, complementary, heterosexual norm for sexual relations. Jesus affirmed this standard (e.g., in **Matthew 19:4-6**).
- b. Opponents argue this establishes heterosexual union as the normative and divinely intended context for sexual intimacy.

2. **The "Holiness Code" Prohibitions (Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13):**

- a. These verses explicitly prohibit a man from "lying with a male as with a woman," calling it an "abomination."
- b. Traditional interpreters see these as timeless moral commands rather than culturally limited ones.

3. **Paul's Condemnation**

- a. **Romans 1:26-27** The Apostle Paul describes same-sex relations (both male and female) as a consequence of rejecting God, calling them "unnatural" and "shameful acts." This is understood as a universal moral prohibition, not just a cultural one.
- b. **1 Corinthians 6:9-10 & 1 Timothy 1:9-10** These passages list "homosexuals" (translations of the disputed Greek terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God, taking them as a clear condemnation of same-sex sexual activity.
- c. Traditionalists argue these passages reaffirm the creation order and moral continuity between Old and New Testaments.

4. **Complementarity and Symbolism**

- a. Male-female sexual complementarity is often seen as reflecting the image of God and Christ's relationship with the Church.
- b. Same-sex unions are viewed as unable to represent this theological symbolism.

Arguments For Same-Sex Relationships (Affirming Interpretation)

These arguments generally conclude that the traditional understanding of biblical prohibitions do not apply to loving, committed same-sex relationships, or that love and justice take precedent.

1. **Specificity of Old Testament Laws (Leviticus):**

- Some argue that the Levitical laws are part of the Jewish ceremonial or purity code and are not binding on Christians today (like dietary laws).
- Others suggest the prohibitions were aimed at specific ancient practices like ritual cultic prostitution, male-on-male rape, or sex aimed at dishonouring another man and were exploitative, not loving, consensual relationships as we understand today.
- Therefore, they claim the Bible does not directly address modern same-sex unions.

2. **Jesus' Ethic of Love and Justice:**

- A common point is that Jesus himself never explicitly addressed same-sex relationships, focusing instead on themes of radical love, justice, and general sexual purity (like lust and divorce), emphasize love, mercy, and the fruit of one's life (Matthew 7:16, John 13:34-35).

- Supporters argue that faithful, monogamous same-sex relationships can embody Christlike love and should be judged by their fruits, not gender pairing.
3. **Reinterpretation of Paul (Romans, Corinthians, Timothy):**
 - It is argued that Paul's condemnations referenced in section 3 above were directed at abusive, exploitative, or lust-driven acts, such as sex with boys, or heterosexual people engaging in same-sex acts as a sign of excessive passion/degradation, not a faithful, committed same-sex orientation that was not understood at the time.
 - The Greek words translated as "homosexuals" (*arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*) are argued to be ambiguous and may refer to male prostitutes or the exploitative participants in a sexual act, not any same-sex sexual act.
 4. **The Sin of Sodom (Genesis 19):**
 - Interpreters in this view argue that the primary sin of Sodom was **inhospitality** and attempted **gang rape** (violence), not same-sex intimacy itself, citing passages like Ezekiel 16:49 which emphasize Sodom's "pride, fullness of food, and luxurious ease, but failed to help the poor and needy."
 5. **Inclusion and the Work of the Spirit (Acts 10; Galatians 3:28)**
 - The early church's inclusion of Gentiles against prior expectations is seen as a model for expanding understanding of who can be fully included in God's covenant.
 - "There is neither male nor female... for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
 6. **The Trajectory of Scripture:**
 - This approach argues that the overall "arc" of the Bible moves toward greater inclusion and justice, much like the changing understanding of slavery or the inclusion of Gentiles. Therefore, a modern affirmation of faithful same-sex relationships is seen as consistent with the spirit of the Gospel message of love (**Romans 13:10**).
 7. **Celibacy is a Gift, Not a Requirement:**
 - It is argued that since the Bible states it is "not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18) and that celibacy is a gift only for some (Matthew 19:11-12), forcing lifelong celibacy on all same-sex attracted people who desire committed partnership is unduly harsh and contrary to God's purpose for human relationship.

Other considerations

- Some Christians who are same sex attracted believe the traditional view of scripture and choose to be in loving same sex relationships, but remain celibate
- Some Christians who believe same-sex relationships are not unbiblical will nevertheless view Christian marriage as only between a man and a woman with something like civil partnerships appropriate for same-sex relationships
- The bible affirms singleness whether out of choice or not – Jesus was single, Paul encourages people who are unmarried to stay single as he was (1 Corinthians 7:8).

Prayers of Love and Faith

In December 2023 the House of Bishops commended the Prayers of Love and Faith for use in regular public worship services. They write:

"The [Prayers of Love and Faith](#) are offered as 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. To celebrate

in God's presence the commitment two people have made to each other is an occasion for rejoicing. The texts are offered to express thanksgiving and hope, with prayer that those who are dedicating their life together to God may grow in faith, love and service as God's blessing rests upon them."

The resources include prayers for a covenanted friendship (which may be between persons of the same or opposite sexes), a suite of prayers that may be used to mark the commitment of a same sex couple and prayers for the blessing of a home. Whilst the prayers have been commended for churches to use, some bishops including the bishop of Guildford dissented.

The full texts are here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/prayers-of-love-and-faith.pdf>

FAQ

Are PLF a form of same-sex marriage? No, The Church of England teaches that Holy Matrimony is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. Nonetheless, they recognise that marriage is not open to all and that other forms of relationship contain qualities and goods that are worth affirming and celebrating. The PLF should not give the impression of simulating marriage. No parts of the authorized text for the solemnization of Holy Matrimony may be used in a service using the PLF.

How can PLF be used? They can be used informally in private prayer or within a regular service but may not at present be used within a standalone service.

Can some of the prayers be used but not all of them? Yes, churches may choose which prayers to use to suit different circumstances, for example they may choose only to offer private prayers or they may choose not to offer prayers that include blessings.

When will the prayers be able to be used in standalone services? Authorization for using PLF in standalone services is being sought in the General Synod. If authorised, it is anticipated that their use would need to be agreed between PCC and incumbent, and reflected in a PCC resolution, following wider consultation. Churches would then have to notify the bishop and the area dean of a decision to opt in. (This formal agreement is not needed to use them as part of a regular service.)

Who can PLF be offered to? This would be a pastoral decision taken by the minister in conversation with a couple. Ministers should be satisfied that the couple's relationship is permanent, faithful, stable and exclusive, with a desire to grow in holiness. The prayers could be offered to regular congregants, those living within the parish and those with a strong pastoral connection to the parish. Couples are free to request the prayers within any church in their area.

Which churches already offer PLF? Locally they are available at Sheerwater, Clandon and Holy Trinity Guildford.

What preparation is required? This is at the discretion of the local church and minister. Preparation may be done together with or separately from marriage preparation classes depending on what is felt most appropriate for the situation.

Can PLF be used for a couple where one or both partners have transitioned? It is already possible for a person who has transitioned to marry in their legally acquired gender within an opposite-sex marriage in church, but the usual legal obligation for parish priests to marry them does not apply. The PLF were designed to be broad and generous. It would be entirely appropriate and consistent with the intent of the PLF for them to be used to affirm the relationship of a couple where one partner has transitioned, and to pray for God's help and support as they seek to grow in love and faith together

Do PLF presuppose sexual activity? The PLF make no assumptions with regards to sexual intimacy. Instead they seek to encourage the relationship as a whole to display virtues of stability, faithfulness,

loyalty and exclusivity and to seek God's help in growing in those. It would not be appropriate for a minister to ask questions that concentrate on the details of any couple's intimate relationship – whether this is a couple asking for the PLF, or an opposite-sex wedding couple.

Who chooses whether or not to use PLF within a parish? This is solely the decision of the minister with cure of souls but good practice is to discuss their use with the PCC and agree a policy that enables everyone to move forward together. The PCC may also decide to consult with the congregation. The PCC may not veto their use as part of regular services. Transparency about church practices is encouraged as this means that potential newcomers know what to expect.

Who is allowed to use PLF? In the context of a service of public worship, the PLF should only be used by licensed ministers, lay or ordained, and with PTO, under the authority of the minister with the cure of souls. A minister cannot be obliged to offer the prayers against their conscience. There is no legal obligation for a minister to offer them.

Are PLF biblical? The Bible speaks with a range of voice on many topics including sexual relationships. The biblical rationale for offering these prayers rests on the generous and inclusive welcome offered by Christ but this sits in tension with texts that forbid same-sex relationships.

Why are PLF controversial? Many are disappointed because the prayers fall short of affirming same-sex relationships as equal to heterosexual relationships. Others believe PLF go too far by commending relationships that are outside of traditional Christian teaching.

Why would we consider offering PLF? LGBTQI Christians have long been marginalised in the Church and left uncertain of whether they will be accepted. Offering PLF would send a clear message that LGBTQI people will be welcomed and affirmed in our churches, regardless of whether or not they are in a relationship. They would support people to flourish in long-term loving relationships and help them draw closer to God, thus fulfilling a pastoral need.

Why would we consider not offering PLF? There is no clear biblical mandate for same-sex relationships, on the contrary several texts condemn same-sex relationships, thus PLF could be driving people further from God by reinforcing sinful behaviour. Arguably, LGBTQI people can be welcomed without having their relationships affirmed. A further concern is the potential of PLF to lead to upset and division in the congregation.

How could a church explain their decision not to offer the prayers? Churches will need to decide how far they explain this in their public presence (such as social media), and how to respond pastorally to questions from those who ask. Transparency and honesty, with kindness and generosity, are strongly recommended. Where churches are challenged by local groups or people for not opting in, appropriate support should be offered by archdeacons and diocesan communications officers.

How can a church remain united where members hold different views about PLF? Christians hold a variety of views on many aspects of faith and life that are not core parts of the gospel. Unity comes from our membership of the body of Christ, which transcends our different beliefs and opinions. We can work out this unity by respecting one another as children of God, listening carefully to one another, exploring our own views more deeply, finding common ground and above all praying that we may be one in Christ.