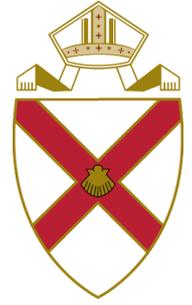


THE BISHOP OF ROCHESTER

The Rt Rev Dr Jonathan Gibbs



To: All licensed and beneficed clergy
All clergy with permission to officiate
All licensed lay ministers
All Churchwardens

15 December 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Living in Love and Faith – next steps

As you may be aware, the House of Bishops took the decision on 12th December to commend the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) together with Parts 1 and 2 of the accompanying pastoral guidance, with effect from 17th December 2023.

Full details about this can be found on the Church of England website here:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/prayers-love-and-faith>

I will not attempt to summarise the information you will find on the Church of England website. I would simply encourage you to read and consider this carefully and prayerfully, at the right time for you.

This is a significant moment in Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process, which has gone on for almost seven years. I realise that the commendation of the prayers by the House of Bishops will be received very differently across our Diocese and the wider church. Some will greet this news with joy, and some with disappointment that things have not gone further. Others will receive the news with concern, believing that it represents a departure from the historic teaching of the Church of England, and there will be many more different reactions besides these.

It is important however to understand what has and has not happened as a result of the House of Bishops' decision to commend the Prayers and pastoral guidance. The "commendation" of the prayers simply means that by a majority vote the House of Bishops has said that it believes these prayers are consistent with the doctrine and teaching of the Church of England, and therefore may be used in good conscience with same-sex couples by those clergy and parishes who wish to do so, provided that this is done in line with the accompanying pastoral guidance. It is also important to emphasise that commendation of the prayers is permissive rather than prescriptive: people *may* choose to use the prayers in accordance with the pastoral guidance, but no-one *must* do so or should feel pressured to do so. This is especially important in situations where there is disagreement between people in the same parish, whether clergy or lay, and careful attention should be paid to the pastoral guidance over handling any such disagreements.

There still remains further discussion to be had in the House of Bishops and elsewhere about a number of important matters, including:

- The provision of "stand-alone" services using the PLF resources and how these might be authorised.
- Pastoral Guidance about what is expected of and permitted for members of the clergy in same-sex relationships.
- Pastoral provision to support and protect all concerned whatever their views on PLF.

My principal concern at this point is to ensure that *everyone* in this Diocese knows that they are loved, supported, and valued as members of the Body of Christ. Bishop Simon and I, together with the Archdeacons, who between us hold a variety of views on the implementation of LLF, are absolutely committed to working together with you to find ways of enabling everyone regardless of their views to flourish as part of the Church in this Diocese.

As we continue to work through the implications of the commendation of the Prayers of Love and Faith, and as some of our parishes begin to make use of the Prayers in their services, may I please encourage patience and generosity in our dealings with one another, both between and within our churches. I do regret that the House of Bishops has not yet agreed the full pastoral guidance that will be required, particularly in relation to clergy in same-sex relationships, and that it has also not yet provided details of pastoral provision for those who disagree, as the absence of these things creates added uncertainty and anxiety for many people on all sides. Nevertheless, I hope and pray that we will bear with one another in love as we work through these issues in the coming months, holding together and supporting another as far as possible.

With this in mind, if you are feeling anxious or under pressure over these issues or are unsure about how to handle them in your own parish, may I encourage you to reach out to your Archdeacon in the first instance, so that they can advise you and signpost you if necessary to other sources of support. In addition, the Archdeacons together with Bishop Simon will be hosting a Zoom "drop-in" to try to answer questions on how to go about making and implementing decisions concerning the use or otherwise of the Prayers of Love and Faith in your local context. This will be held at 7.00pm on Wednesday 17th January and will be open to *all licensed clergy* on this occasion, simply to keep numbers manageable. Details will be sent out in due course and further events may be organised if needed.

In the meantime, in this season of Advent, I hope and pray that we will be able to focus our hearts and minds on the promise of the coming of Immanuel, God with us, and that we will know the peace and joy of Christ in our hearts, homes and communities in the year to come.

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Gibbs', with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

The Rt Revd Dr Jonathan Gibbs
Bishop of Rochester