

## Prayer after abortion

[Oliver O'Donovan, in his evidence to the Pilling Report](#) referred to a proposed prayer after abortion as an example of pastoral accommodation:

It is difficult for people to get their minds around pastoral accommodation, they are so used to thinking that everything they do incarnates the justice and love of God. Synod could not get its mind around it a generation ago, in the face of a most interesting proposal to include a prayer to be used after an abortion in *Common Worship*. Synod thought it was being asked to invoke the blessing of God on an abortion. But the text of the prayer acknowledged sorrowfully that a human life had been taken; it could have sustained a witness to the meaning of the act that is certainly not maintained by simply taking no notice.

This would appear to refer to a 1979 proposal (and hence likely related to the *Alternative Service Book*) when Bishop John Taylor of Winchester proposed the following prayer by Peter Firth later Bishop of Malmesbury:

Heavenly Father, you are the giver of life, and you share with us the care of the life that is given.

Into your hands we commit in trust the developing life that we have cut short.

Look in merciful judgement on the decision that we have made, and assure us in all our uncertainty that your love for us can never change. Amen.

Here the act in response to which prayer is offered is clearly described in ways which, although some might prefer the prayer to be starker and others might wish it was less so, fit the description of good pastoral accommodation in terms of bearing witness to Christian teaching in this difficult context – life is God's gift, we are called to share in the care of life which is given and yet we have cut short a developing life and have to plead for God's mercy in judgment. It is not an easy prayer to pray and it is unclear whether it was rejected in a close vote (in a Synod which also rejected proposals to allow women deacons, priests and bishops and the remarriage of divorcees in church) more because some felt it amounted to semi-official endorsement of abortion or because some baulked at expecting someone to describe their abortion in terms which left little doubt as to the moral seriousness of their action.

It is difficult to see how this offers a model which could be translated over into public prayer for a same-sex union. One reason for this is, as was pointed out to me by someone closely involved in the Pilling Report, that prayer after abortion is not dealing with a situation of celebration which is how those wishing prayer after a same-sex union view their situation. But that is precisely to say that they are asking for something other than pastoral accommodation and we are likely to be making a serious error if we think we can meet their concerns by offering pastoral accommodation. To take and adapt O'Donovan's words about what this proposed prayer and indeed any pastoral accommodation is *not*, they are wanting the church to "invoke the blessing of God on a same-sex union". To take the principled description of pastoral accommodation cited earlier, there is no desire for something which rather than blessing would "uphold the principle that marriage was essentially a union of one man and one woman which is the only proper place for sexual intercourse and so same-sex marriages and sexual unions are wrong". Those seeking and those wanting to offer prayers after a civil partnership or a civil same-sex marriage do not wish for prayers to give any sense – as this proposed prayer after abortion did – that they "acknowledge sorrowfully" that their union places them in a "difficult position" needing to be brought "into closer approximation" to "the form of life given by God's creative goodness"

Paper by Andrew Goddard, October 2016

In summary, this is an example of pastoral accommodation and it highlights the difficulty of taking this approach as a way forward in relation to same-sex union.