

Southwark Cathedral and the House of Bishops' Pastoral Guidance

Reports of a service in Southwark Cathedral marking the civil partnership of two Anglican clergywomen have led to serious concerns being raised by a number of evangelicals, particularly in Southwark Diocese but also further afield (see e.g. [Anglican Mainstream](#)). Martin Davie has recently offered [an account and evaluation of the liturgy apparently used](#). This concludes that "this material currently being used by Southwark Cathedral contravenes the 2005 House of Bishops guidelines and should be withdrawn".

Background: The Cathedral's Policy and its Origins

This pattern of service appears to be one which the Cathedral has been offering for some time. Their policy is [outlined clearly on their website](#) which claims, in contrast to Dr Davie's judgment, that "the Chapter abides by the pastoral statement of the bishops as a matter of policy". This commitment is also explicitly stated in a [December 2005 sermon](#) by the then Dean, the late Colin Slee which is linked to in the online information about civil partnerships and where, in response to the then new status of civil partnership, he made clear that

This is a Cathedral Church, this is the seat of the Bishop. I will not put the Bishop in a difficult position by playing fast and loose with the order of the Church. I have a high regard for episcopacy and a high doctrine of the ancient orders of the Church. I may argue, protest, debate with, even harass the bishop, but I will always defend his right to expect the conduct of his Cathedral Church to be according to the teaching of the Church of England for the time being. The House of Bishops has recently published a paper in response to the changes in the law. That paper is very mindful of what I have called the vertical splits within the church; it seeks to maintain some unity in a developing debate and accordingly says that we cannot offer public services of blessing for civil partnerships. It will cause us, and many of you, considerable pain but we will not, in this Cathedral, break the regulation and discipline the House of Bishops has placed upon us. If this pain makes room for some people with whom we do not agree to remain members of the Church of England, and therefore to continue to hold a debate with us then it is a price I am willing to pay. I know there are those who are opposed to Civil Partnerships who are unwilling to pay the price of any pain, who demand that everyone in the Church thinks and acts as they do, but I want to work as hard as I can to show the grace and generosity of God and for this place to witness to that gospel.

Martin Davie reports that what the Dean offers civil partners is an opportunity to mark their civil partnership in the context of a celebration of the Eucharist. This fits with Slee's 2005 sermon which suggested that

Our practice here...with regard to divorced people seeking a second marriage offers some experience that may be helpful as well. Until the General Synod said we were free to marry people a second time we did not conduct second marriages here. I remember when there was no blessing service. We encouraged members of our congregation to go to the Registry Office for their Civil Marriage and to take note of weekday service times. Here, every

weekday there are two Eucharists, every Saturday there is one, every day there is morning, midday and evening prayer.

Back in 2013, the Daily Telegraph, exploring possible church responses to same-sex marriage, [reported](#)

At Southwark Cathedral in London, civil partners are offered public prayers of dedication but not as part of a special service. The Dean of Southwark, the Very Rev Andrew Nunn, said: “We haven’t yet considered what to do or what response we would make. Whenever we are asked to respond we always offer prayers but it is not in a private service”

The liturgy

Four parts

Dr Davie reproduces the content of the “marking” which falls into four parts. The first two are uncontentious – one partner is invited to read one of the readings and one to lead the intercessions. Perhaps more contentious, because of the choreography and the clear differentiation from normal practice at a communion service, is that at communion “The couple receive communion together before the rest of the congregation”. It is what happens after Communion that is the focus of controversy: following the prayer after communion the couple kneel at the altar rail and pray a set prayer together after which the priest prays for them. There then follows the seasonal blessing of the whole congregation during which the couple remain kneeling at the altar rail.

Significant omissions

It is important first to note what is *not* included here:

- This is not a service for marking the union but a normal service during which the union is marked. It is quite common for churches to mark various important events in the lives of members the congregation during services although most don't develop a liturgy to do so.
- There are, consequently, no readings related to the union. Presumably the set lectionary readings are used. There is thus no attempt to focus the service on the union or to interpret it through biblical texts.
- The couple are invited to participate in the reading and intercessions but interestingly they do so as individuals not as a couple (this also probably makes it less likely that the intercessions will pray for them)
- There are no:
 - Vows
 - Prayers over and exchange of rings (or other symbols of the union)
 - Formal blessings of the couple alone

All these elements are clear signs that the Cathedral is attempting to follow Colin Slee’s vision of welcoming gay couples and enabling them to mark their partnership in church while also respecting the bishop’s “right to expect the conduct of his Cathedral Church to be according to the teaching of the Church of England for the time being”.

Two public prayers from the Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage

There are, however, two public prayers – one by the couple kneeling at the altar rail and one by the priest. Though Martin Davie does not note this, these prayers are taken from [the approved Service](#)

[of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage](#). Comparing them with this source is illuminating both in terms of what it reveals about the intentions of the Cathedral in offering these prayers and in the echoes that may be heard when they are used in this different setting.

Again it is important to note what, in comparison, is lacking here which clearly shows that this (unlike some liturgies apparently used in some places) is not an adaptation of that authorised service but a borrowing from it to adapt the eucharistic liturgy. The authorised service contains an explanatory preface, prayers of penitence, and readings (with suggested texts) and sermon. The prayers the Cathedral have taken from it form part of the Dedication. This opens with the minister again summarising the church's teaching about marriage and the couple affirming this as their "understanding of the covenant and promise" they have made. They then each resolve to be faithful to the other so long as they both shall live, rings may be blessed, and the congregation promise to uphold and support them. (In the authorised liturgy after a civil marriage the intercessions, which include set prayers for the couple and, if desired, a Eucharist both follow rather than precede this dedication).

The couples' prayer

It is in this context in the authorised service after a civil marriage that the couple then pray the prayer of dedication used at Southwark by the same-sex couple after communion:

Heavenly Father,
we offer you our souls and bodies,
our thoughts and words and deeds,
our love for one another.
Unite our wills in your will,
that we may grow together
in love and peace
all the days of our life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

This opens with a phrase taken from the post-Communion prayer and, as a text, could be prayed by a congregation or a minister on behalf of the congregation without objection. The words commit the couple who pray them – body and soul – to order their thoughts, words, deeds, love and wills in accordance with the will of God.

It is clearly not a prayer of blessing but of self-offering. The key question is whether these words can legitimately be prayed in a public context by just two people if those people are not married and what is being said in and by them about their relationship. A case could perhaps be made for their use in a liturgy for covenanted friendship. This could be one understanding of civil partnership but the problem is that a civil partnership in law lacks clarity about the nature of the relationship. On the one hand it is not marriage but on the other it can now be simply reclassified as marriage (the marriage being backdated to the registration of the civil partnership). The Southwark service similarly lacks any of the framing noted above in the service of prayer and dedication as to the nature of the relationship being marked. The absence of these elements mean the words are highly ambiguous, lacking a clear public or wider meaning as to the form of life the couple have

entered. However, the source of the prayer may be a guide as to what is intended. The couple are praying a prayer taken from an authorised liturgy for a service “in which the couple - already married - wish to dedicate to God their life together” (Note 1 on “the nature of the service”) and where the couple have explicitly committed to live together in marriage as the church understands it. These mean that although an authorised prayer it is only authorised to be prayed by a married couple and so the prayer appears to treat the couple as if their union is a form of marriage or equivalent to marriage. It is hard to think of any other context in approved liturgy where two people jointly pray a prayer together, distinct from and in the presence of the wider congregation.

The priest’s prayer for the couple

After this prayer the Southwark service continues to follow the order of the Service of Prayer and Dedication as the priest prays

Almighty God give you grace to persevere,
that he may complete in you
the work he has already begun,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Once again the words on their own are unobjectionable, indeed they paraphrase Philippians 1:6, and ask for the couple’s life to be ordered by God’s grace and for him to be at work in their lives. It is interesting to ask whether (and why, or why not) someone fully committed to the church’s teaching about marriage and sexual relationships could, when praying privately for two people who were in a same-sex union, sincerely and in good conscience pray for them as two people in these words. Here, however, the wider public and liturgical context and their use specifically to mark a civil partnership invest them with broader and deeper symbolic significance and meaning. Davie also argues that as “to bless someone means to ask in prayer that someone will experience the favour of God in a particular way” this constitutes a prayer of blessing even if it avoids the explicit language of blessing.

In the service of prayer and dedication there follows an additional prayer over the couple, the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:

The Lord bless and watch over you,
the Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you,
the Lord look kindly on you and give you peace
all the days of your life.
Amen.

In contrast, the Southwark service removes the Aaronic blessing on the couple, an omission again clearly seeking to respect the Bishops’ Pastoral Letter even though it could be argued the blessing would be on the two people not on their relationship. It instead has “the seasonal blessing of the whole congregation for which the couple remain kneeling at the altar rail. They then get up and go back to their seats and the Dismissal follows”. Here again the choreography appears to be carefully considered: the blessing is explicitly of the whole congregation but the couple are intentionally

separate, kneeling at the altar rail before the priest who having just prayed for them then prays the seasonal blessing; the couple then return to their seats for the Dismissal rather than processing out from the altar after the blessing, a sign that the service is not a service specifically for them and their partnership.

[The liturgy and the Bishops' Pastoral Guidance](#)

So how should this be evaluated? It has been shown that the variations and omissions do signal respect for the bishops' letter. However, Martin Davie offers three reasons for his argument that, despite the Cathedral's claims and stated intention, they are violating the Bishops' guidance of 2005.

[An authorised public liturgy in connection with the registering of civil partnerships?](#)

First, the guidance is clear that "One consequence of the ambiguity contained within the new legislation is that people in a variety of relationships will be eligible to register a civil partners, some living consistently with the teaching of the Church, others not". The bishops are clear that "in these circumstances it would not be right to produce an authorised public liturgy in connection with the registering of civil partnerships". It does appear difficult to deny that, although not a self-standing liturgy, this is, within the life of the Cathedral, "an authorised public liturgy", effectively a "liturgy within a liturgy". It is also clearly "in connection with the registering of civil partnerships" – the Cathedral website says, "After preparation, people entering a Civil Partnership are welcome to attend any service of the Cathedral, with friends and family if they so wish, to hear the scriptures, pray, and, where appropriate, receive Communion. Normally the clergy would expect this to occur as near as possible to the civil registration of the Partnership".

In relation to church teaching and the Bishops' Pastoral Guidance, at best the liturgy perpetuates the legislative ambiguity which was the bishops' rationale for not producing a liturgy. At worst, because of the source of its specific prayers within authorised liturgy and its choreography, it implicitly, even if not explicitly, signals that the relationship being marked is marital or quasi-marital.

The bishops reiterated their position in their [more recent 2014 statement on same-sex marriage](#) where they wrote (para 20):

The 2005 pastoral statement said that it would not be right to produce an authorized public liturgy in connection with the registering of civil partnerships and that clergy should not provide services of blessing for those who registered civil partnerships. The House did not wish, however, to interfere with the clergy's pastoral discretion about when more informal kind of prayer, at the request of the couple, might be appropriate in the light of the circumstances.

The problems with the service are even greater if the liturgy is also used for those who are in a civil same-sex marriage. Publicly marking the entrance of a couple into a way of life which is not an impediment (given certain assurances) to being ordained or consecrated a bishop within the Church of England is very different from marking a same-sex marriage which is such an impediment given the church's doctrine. If the same liturgy is used for legally married same-sex couples then it strengthens the "worst case" reading above. If, however, the service is not available for them then the marital interpretation of it is probably now less convincing than it was before same-sex marriage: whereas initially those entering a civil partnership could have been saying "I want my relationship to be recognised as marriage but I can't and this is the best I can have", anyone who

now remains in a CP or chooses to enter a CP is clearly thereby saying "I do not want my relationship to be recognised as marriage". Couples in civil partnerships have consciously chosen not to marry and thus shown respect for the church's teaching that marriage is, in the words to which the couple assent in the Service for Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage, "in the will of God, the union of a man and a woman....".

It is not clear what the policy of Southwark Cathedral is here (the website gives information about marriage requests without being clear that marriage is only for opposite sex couples and only refers to civil partnerships not same-sex marriages). However, the use of this or similar liturgies for those in a same-sex marriage is likely to be happening elsewhere, particularly given [the steep drop in the number of civil partnerships in recent years](#). For example, Sam Wells was [quoted in 2013 as saying](#),

There will still be the opportunity in the St Martin-in-the-Fields community to have civil partnerships and for those to be followed by some kind of service of prayer and dedication, they may chose to have a civil marriage now and they may also feel in just the same way ... that they want their friends and the community to pray for them to seek God's blessing and my guess is that that will the available for them in a similar way.

A blessing?

Second, in relation to "blessing", as noted Davie argues that although not using the "blessing" word, the prayers are a blessing and indeed he believes "for the specific purpose of blessing a Civil Partnership". There is here a case to answer although the claim is less solid, particularly given the clear decision not to transfer over the Aaronic blessing on the couple from the authorised liturgy and to stress that the final blessing is on the congregation. However, given the choreography (particularly if the couple are dressed as they would be at a wedding), it is clear that to this part of the service would be experienced by most present as a blessing on a civil partnership and it is certainly much more than an example of "the clergy's pastoral discretion about when more informal kind of prayer, at the request of the couple, might be appropriate in the light of the circumstances" (2014 Guidance). Davie is therefore justified in concluding that "the material therefore violates the spirit if not the letter of the House of Bishops guidelines".

Marking a relationship which rejects Church teaching?

Third, Davie notes that if used for a sexual relationship the service would "violate the requirement that forms of prayer should be in line with the Church's teaching". This is clearly correct but it is not a conclusive critique of the liturgy itself (unless it is held that any liturgy should express that teaching or even require affirmation of it, perhaps paralleling the questions and affirmation in the Service of Prayer and Dedication). This concern applies only to some couples and the service which has caused controversy, involving as it did two priests of the diocese, was one where assurances have at some point presumably been given that the relationship is in accord with church teaching.

It would be interesting to know how, when "approached by people asking for prayer in relation to entering into a civil partnership", as they seek to be on their website, the Cathedral clergy ensure that in their preparation and pastoral support they "have regard to the teaching of the church on sexual morality, celibacy, and the positive value of committed friendships within the Christian tradition" (Guidance, para 18). In their [2014 guidance on same-sex marriage](#) the bishops reiterated the importance of discussing the church's teaching, stating (para 21):

The same approach as commended in the 2005 statement should therefore apply to couples who enter same-sex marriage, on the assumption that any prayer will be accompanied by pastoral discussion of the church's teaching and their reasons for departing from it. Services of blessing should not be provided. Clergy should respond pastorally and sensitively in other ways.

If, as Colin Slee stated, the Cathedral is committed not to “break the regulation and discipline the House of Bishops has placed upon us” in this respect as well as in its liturgy then this criticism of Davie would be further weakened. There is nothing in the liturgy itself which speaks of a sexual relationship and in properly preparing people to pray the prayer in the liturgy, jointly offering God their bodies and asking him to “unite our wills in your will”, they would have made them aware what that prayer entails according to the teaching of the church and (as, for example with baptism vows) then left it to their consciences whether they can pray the prayer.

Conclusion

In summary, the liturgy has clearly been very carefully put together and the Cathedral believes it to be in line with the Guidance and presumably also consistent with the bishops' recent commitment to enable “maximum pastoral freedom within the law”. It therefore represents a good test example of “pastoral accommodation” within the current guidance, especially given the various differences from a marriage service and the service of Prayer and Dedication and its lack of status as a stand-alone liturgy.

Nevertheless, given Martin Davie's critique and the analysis offered above, there are still some serious questions as to whether, in practice, it is within the current guidance and teaching of the church. It is also clear that offering it in the Cathedral church of the diocese is proving divisive. Given that it is in many ways a fairly limited accommodation, this demonstrates the real problem in currently offering *any set form of public prayers* to mark a legal same-sex union, whether civil partnership or marriage, while claiming to follow the bishops' guidance. Furthermore, even if such a service is within CofE guidance it does (as its supporters will probably accept) go against the mind of the Communion in Lambeth I.10 which advises against not just the blessing but also the legitimising of same-sex unions. The six criticisms of liturgical innovations presented by Bishop Keith Sinclair in his dissenting statement within the Pilling Report (paras 475-82) do apply *prima facie* to the Cathedral's policy. This is not surprising as that policy effectively represents an implementation of the main Pilling recommendation in relation to marking a same-sex union.

It is, presumably, services such as this one in Southwark which can be considered by the new Pastoral Group set up by the House of Bishops. Their [formal responsibilities](#) include:

3. Reviewing, and as needed revising, advice provided by the House of Bishops on pastoral ministry to same-sex couples in Church of England congregations, such ministry being understood to include prayer offered by clergy and licensed lay ministers.

4. Offering advice when requested to bishops regarding specific cases they are dealing with in the areas of both pastoral care and discipline involving clergy in same-sex relationships, and clergy responding to lay people in same-sex relationships, to assist the sharing of knowledge and an appropriate level of national consistency in approach.

7. To bring draft advice on pastoral ministry to same-sex couples in Church of England congregations for initial consideration by the House of Bishops, having reflected on how pastoral practices might develop within current teaching.

The reactions to the Southwark practice highlight what a very difficult task the members of that group face. There are at least three broad categories of responses in the church.

Three Anglican responses

For some the Cathedral's approach falls far, far short of what the church should do to welcome and celebrate same-sex couples. From this perspective, if this is all that can be offered to gay and lesbian couples within the current law then it is, in truth, unjust and insulting. If even this is not permitted by current teaching and guidance then all talk of "welcome" and "radical Christian inclusion" is simply pious, prelatical platitudes.

For a second group this solution represents an acceptable, even admirable, Anglican *via media* of legitimate pastoral accommodation and compromise for the sake of unity. It should, therefore, be commended more widely (as apparently it is to enquiring parish clergy in Southwark dioceses). It is a good example of what [the Bishop of Chelmsford set out as his vision in his March Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod](#), leading to widespread concerns among evangelicals in the diocese:

Let me plain: LGBTI+ people are welcome in the churches of the Chelmsford diocese. They are welcome and we want to listen to them and work with them so as to find appropriate ways of expressing their love – for it is not good for human beings to be alone – in permanent, faithful, stable relationships. At the moment there is no consensus in the Church of England for those relationships to be formally blessed in Church, or for the Church of England to embrace same-sex marriage, but the current arrangements do welcome lay people and clergy into civil partnerships and there is no reason why prayers of thanksgiving for these relationships – perhaps a Eucharist – cannot be offered. We do not want same-sex couples to be cut off from the Church, and we want those who come to us seeking God's blessing for their love to receive the guidance, challenge and support of the Church.

For this to happen, however, it either needs to be clearly shown that such services are (as the Cathedral claims but Davie disputes) within the bishops' guidance or that guidance needs to be adapted to enable this form of accommodation.

For a third group, however, as the widespread concern among evangelicals in Guildford and Southwark dioceses shows, such services clearly reject the spirit and probably the letter of the church's current teaching and guidance. For them, services such as this are far from "more informal kind of prayer". Rather than true pastoral accommodation they embody the attitude which Giles Fraser, a priest in Southwark diocese who personally (like many in Southwark) is in the first group and wants much more to be made liturgically available for same-sex couples, [has described in these terms](#):

What this is saying is that you can bless civil partnerships as long as you don't say that is what you are doing...They are winking at people like me saying 'be creative' – it is a classic Anglican fudge. In effect what it is saying is you can do it as long as you don't say that is

what you are doing – call it something different, be as imaginative as you can...But the truth is this is how change happens in the Church of England.

Unlike Giles Fraser this third group are not willing to live with what appears to be duplicitous and lacking integrity – a subterfuge undermining the bishops' guidance and the church's teaching, a moving of the goalposts while claiming to play by the rules. The logic of their position appears to be that, if Southwark Cathedral or any other church genuinely wish to respect the teaching of the church and the guidance of the bishops, all public liturgies for couples in same-sex relationships should, in Davie's words, "be withdrawn", until the church has agreed a clear new theological understanding of same-sex relationships and the bishops have rewritten their current advice in the light of that.

In coming to terms with such a spread of incommensurable views, the Church of England faces a real challenge as to how to respond given the plurality of views about same-sex relationships present within it. This raises the even bigger question: How is it (perhaps simply "is it") possible to hold together in an increasingly secular, post-Christendom cultural context as both a single, undifferentiated, established national church which upholds mono-episcopacy and liturgical agreement founded in common doctrine and also as the mother church of the global Anglican Communion?