

### Southwark Cathedral and the House of Bishops' Pastoral Guidance (Shorter Version)

Reports of a service in Southwark Cathedral marking the civil partnership of two Anglican clergywomen in the context of a service of Holy Communion have led to serious concerns being raised by a number of evangelicals, particularly in Southwark Diocese but also further afield. Although it is clear that such services have been offered by the Cathedral for some time (and are effectively [advertised on their website](#)) 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material currently being used by Southwark Cathedral contravenes the 2005 House of Bishops guidelines and should be withdrawn". The Cathedral, however, claims that "the Chapter abides by the pastoral statement of the bishops as a matter of policy".

#### The liturgy

The service outline which Dr Davie reproduces is noteworthy at least as much for what is missing as what is present: not a separate service but part of a normal service, no readings relating to the union, no vows, no rings, no separate blessing of the couple or their union. All these elements are clear signs that the Cathedral is attempting to welcome gay couples and enable them to mark their partnership in church while also respecting the teaching of the Church of England. So why are there concerns? They relate to two broad areas – the choreography and the two public prayers.

Less significant perhaps is the choreography but the invitation of the couple to receive Communion together before the congregation, their joint prayer and the minister's prayer for them kneeling at the altar rail after Communion, and the blessing of the whole congregation while the couple kneel at the altar rail would make the service appear to all but the most liturgically astute observers as indistinguishable from a blessing of their union.

The prayers are, interestingly, lifted from the authorised Service of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage. The couple's joint prayer 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.

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 which 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. 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 words of the priest's prayer on their own are also unobjectionable and it is significant that the following prayer in the authorised service after a civil marriage (the Aaronic blessing of the couple from Numbers 6) is omitted. What is prayed is a paraphrase of Philippians 1:6 and asks 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.

### **The liturgy and the bishops' pastoral guidance**

Martin Davie raises three objections to this. First, that it amounts to "an authorised public liturgy in connection with the registering of civil partnerships" which the bishops state "it would not be right to produce". Although more a "liturgy within a liturgy" this appears to be undeniable. The reason for this episcopal judgment is the ambiguous nature of civil partnerships – something the liturgy does nothing to clarify although the elements above point to it implying a marital or quasi-marital character. If the service is also offered to those in a civil same-sex marriage the liturgy is even more difficult to defend. Second, Dr Davie claims that despite not using the "blessing" word the prayers are "for the specific purpose of blessing a Civil Partnership". Given the omissions this charge is not as well supported although his statement that because "to bless someone means to ask in prayer that someone will experience the favour of God in a particular way" the priest's prayer constitutes a blessing, together with the choreography and source of the prayers, substantiate the weaker claim that "the material therefore violates the spirit if not the letter of the House of Bishops guidelines". Third, the question is raised about using the service for a sexual relationship but this would only apply to some partnerships and nothing in the liturgy suggests the relationship is sexual. Here the nature of pastoral preparation for the service would shed light on how seriously the Cathedral takes the bishops' regulation and discipline and Church teaching.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the liturgy has clearly been very carefully put together and the Cathedral believes it to be in line with the Pastoral Guidance and presumably also consistent with the bishops' recent commitment to enable "maximum pastoral freedom within the law". It represents, therefore, a good test case example of "pastoral accommodation". As Davie's analysis and the additional points above show, there are still some serious questions as to whether, in practice, it is within the guidelines and teaching of the church and it is hard to see how it respects Lambeth I.10 which advises against anything "legitimising" same-sex union.

The new House of Bishops' Pastoral Group will presumably be considering such services and its members face a very difficult task. Some wish the church to do much more than this and if even this is not permitted by current teaching and guidance then for them all talk of "welcome" and "radical Christian inclusion" is simply pious, prelatial platitudes. Some believe this is an acceptable Anglican *via media* and needs to be more widely commended. Some see it rather as a subterfuge

undermining the bishops' guidance and the church's teaching, a moving of the goalposts while claiming to play by the rules. They are effectively making a case that if any church genuinely wish to respect this guidance and teaching then 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 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?