

## PLF's Theological Rationale: A Critical Conversation

Annex H in [GS 2328](#) offers a theological rationale for the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF). Although it is claimed that it is “articulating the theological rationale that supported the approach taken following the February motion” ([Introductory paper](#), para 5, p.1) it does not refer to the previously central legal and theological rationale in terms of a distinction between civil marriage and holy marriage (discussed [here](#)). It also appears only to have been shared with bishops in early October and its authorship and the nature, degree and timescale of its peer review remains unclear.

### 1. What is needed in any theological rationale?

- 1.1 In PLF the bishops commend the use of new public prayers including prayers of blessing for same-sex couples (which they have previously prohibited) and prayers for people who have entered a legal status the bishops have previously stated departs from church teaching (“Getting married to someone of the same sex would, however, clearly be at variance with the teaching of the Church of England”, [2014 Pastoral Statement](#), para 26).
- 1.2 Any theological rationale therefore needs to offer a justification for this development explaining why previous theological arguments are now being rejected or are being applied differently.
- 1.3 It is therefore clear that something significant has changed in practice, the key questions are (1) what has changed theologically? (2) is that change justifiable?, and (3) is that change sufficient to provide an adequate theological basis for the new practice found in PLF?

### 2. What is the proposed theological rationale?

- 2.1 The central argument is that PLF represents what is called “pastoral provision” (PP) rather than a change in doctrine. Four times in [answers to questions](#) Synod is told PLF “do not represent a change in doctrine” but (without further explanation as to what exactly is meant by this or how it is theologically justified) that PLF does represent “a change in how doctrine and pastoral practice relate to one another” (Qs 10, 69, 74, 93).
- 2.2 This pastoral response claims to be “deeply rooted in tradition and Scripture” (p.90, the pagination in GS 2328 is not consecutive, quotes below give the page number in the whole PDF, to get the page number within Annex H itself subtract 85 from that figure) and “based on the trajectory of pastoral provision already existing in our church and tradition” (p.86, n5).
- 2.3 The bishops sum up the argument in these terms:

In short, the theological basis for pastoral provision is that it is a pastoral outworking for a time of uncertainty that respects the Church of England's unchanged doctrine of marriage, including the aspects of that doctrine that are concerned with sexual intimacy. On that basis, we have concluded that making the PLF available for same-sex couples without there being an assumption as to their sexual relationships would not be *contrary to* the doctrine of the Church of England (Annex A, para 15, p.8)

### 3. What is meant by “pastoral provision”?

3.1 Pastoral provision (PP) is a new phrase and concept in CofE discussion and, although it aims to respect unchanged doctrine, is itself described as “a new insight into doctrine” (Annex A, para 24, p.9).

3.2 Its heart is “acknowledging and celebrating what is good in same-sex relationships even if the Church is unable to commend every aspect of some relationships” (Annex A, para 23, p.9).

3.3 It “recognises that we all fall short of the ideal, of perfect holiness, but there are certain things we can do together, in our prayer, in our worship, in our life together to nurture the kind of virtues and goods that reflect more closely the ways of God” (p.90).

3.4 PP we are told

- “is based, first and foremost, on a practical theology of grace” in “the ongoing struggle of all human beings” (p.98).
- “does not weaken the demands of the gospel upon our lives” or “cheapen God’s grace” but rather makes provision so as “not to lay impossible burdens” but instead to “encourage the pursuit of Christ-likeness” (p.98)
- seeks to embody Christ-likeness by “holding a vision of life in all its fulness as an outcome of outrageous grace and acceptance” (p.100)
- helps “bridge the recognition of ideals with the need to respond pastorally with grace, compassion, and a degree of provisionality and humility about what we do or do not know” (p.101)
- “recognises the uncertainty of our current time...and does not stigmatise people but acknowledges the provisionality of our knowledge and responses in ways that err on the side of grace rather than judgement” (pp.101-2).
- finds “ways to help people move forward in holiness in a world that falls far short of any ideals, without giving up on the idea of a proper or fuller configuration of relationships altogether” (p.102).

3.5 Many of these elements are drawn together in the following account (with numeration added to the published text) which, though it seems to define PP more widely, focusses in on its significance in relation to sexuality:

Pastoral provision...[1] seeks to focus firmly on what is good, and [2] encourage growth through the identification of God at work. It is [3] set within the landscape of a lack of corporate agreement. It also [4] seeks to respond to a....question: how do we find ways of living healthily and faithfully when the disciplines and laws of our church make it impossible for some to see a way towards life that is both bearable and holy? It is [5] rooted in the acknowledgement of the deep pain that has been expressed by LGBTQI+ Christians, together with our increasing understanding of social and scientific understandings of sexuality...(p.100)

These are then summed up in the sentence which follows:

It is an attempt to navigate a landscape where we see [1] good we may want to celebrate, [2] pain we may want to acknowledge and remedy, [3] repentance we need to engage in for our

collective hardness of heart, [4] the provisionality of what we know and [5] the need to hold one another with care and tenderness, without imposing unbearable burdens on one another, and [6] the continued uncertainty in our common life that prevents us from clear and unanimous decision-making (p.100).

3.6 Although not explored (and hard to relate to the definitions above but described in terms of finding “ways to enable every member of the Church to live as faithfully as they can” (p.99)) it is also claimed that this new category of PP gives a rationale for the proposed pastoral reassurance i.e. what is being offered to those who “struggle so much” with PLF that “they need reassurance and a different way of relating within the Body of Christ” (p. 91 cf. p.94 on “the need for pastoral provision for those who cannot in conscience accept that this can be done”). It is also noted that “work is continuing” on “whether pastoral provision can be extended to clergy” (p.86, n3) presumably a reference to the as yet unpublished pastoral guidance and the bishops’ [unannounced but leaked](#) decision that they intend this to permit clergy to enter same-sex marriages and/or a sexual union other than marriage.

3.7 Given how many different elements are being introduced into this concept of PP and its acknowledged novelty there are serious questions as to whether it has been sufficiently tested in corporate discernment to ensure it is robust enough a development – academically, theologically, and practically - to bear the weight that is being put on it. This is crucial because it is being argued that PP theologically justifies PLF as representing “a proper degree of flexibility” and being “compatible with the general Anglican approach” where “the essential doctrines of the Church of England are safeguarded” (Annex A, paras 23, 24, 25, p.9) despite PLF being indicative of a change in doctrine.

#### 4. What is the claim in relation to doctrine?

4.1 The doctrine of marriage is defined in Annex H not only as marriage uniting a man and a woman but as teaching that marriage is the way of life which “is the proper context for sexual intercourse” (p. 91). It is made clear that “the introduction of PLF does not change the shape of marriage in the Church’s doctrine nor its understanding of the place of sexual intimacy within marriage” (*ibid*).

4.2 It would appear therefore that the argument is that “nothing has changed” theologically in terms of doctrine: PP is rather “about conscience” [a key under-explored element in the rationale] and “creating a space within which it is possible to act differently from what has been possible in the past, but without a change in doctrine” (p. 99).

4.3 There is, however, confusion over how strong and definite this reaffirmation of doctrine actually is due to a number of other elements:

- It is also claimed that although “the doctrine of marriage in relation to marriage as the fullest and given place for sexual expression is clear...its boundaries may be more porous than is sometimes allowed, and can flex to accommodate pastoral realities” and the “traditional teaching” is then defined quite differently as “sex properly belongs within lifelong, faithful, exclusive and socially and legally recognised relationships” (p. 94).
- Annex H’s rationale is claimed to be offered for PLF as being “within the boundaries of the 2023 February Synod motion as amended” (p.86, n1) i.e. PLF “should not be contrary to or indicative

of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England" (clause g). Annex H at times makes strong claims for its rationale speaking of:

- "without changing doctrine", p.89;
- "we are not changing the doctrine of the Church", p.89;
- PLF "does not change the shape of marriage in the Church's doctrine nor its understanding of the place of sexual intimacy within marriage", p.91;
- there is not "a formal change in doctrine", p.99;
- PP is "without a change in doctrine", p.99;
- PP "acknowledges that the doctrine of our church with regards to marriage may not be undermined by the provision or the text of new commended or authorised prayers", p.102.

4.4 However, at other times the claim is narrower as in (a) the opening notes which speak of an argument which "does not change doctrine in any essential matter" (p. 86, n.5); (b) "without implicitly changing the doctrine of marriage in any essential matter" (p. 92); (c) PLF are designed "to effect no change...in any essential matter" (p.92)

4.5 The papers as a whole acknowledge that the bishops have been advised (presumably by lawyers and/or theologians in unpublished advice) that "it would be difficult to say that" the currently proposed PLF "was not indicative of any departure from the Church's doctrine" (Annex A, para 17, p.8). They therefore state, "in so far as making the PLF available for couples in an active sexual relationship does involve any departure from doctrine, it nevertheless does not involve a departure from doctrine "in any essential matter"" (Annex A, para 26, p.9).

4.6 It therefore remains unclear whether the theological rationale being proposed is that PP (and so PLF as a worked example of PP) is constrained by "doctrine" or only by "essential doctrine". It is also unclear whether the constraint that it is claimed is being met is that of being "not contrary to" doctrine or the more challenging constraint of being "not indicative of a departure from" doctrine.

4.7 At least three elements signal that Annex H was seeking to provide a rationale for PLF on the basis that it fell within the narrower constraints of not being indicative of a departure from the church's doctrine:

- The lack of any discussion in the theological rationale itself as to how to distinguish "essential doctrine" (there is a very sketchy and weak argument drawing on Annex H set out in Appendix A, which has the feel of being hurriedly prepared, perhaps in the light of new legal or theological advice, paras 21-26, p.9),
- The explicit claim that the rationale for PLF is "within the boundaries of the 2023 February Synod motion as amended" (p.86, n1),
- The statement that if PP is the basis for an action then "*the doctrine of our church with regards to marriage may not be undermined by the provision or the text of new commended or authorised prayers*" (p.102, italics added).

4.8 It is therefore hard to see how this rationale can be the theological basis for what is now being implemented given that it is acknowledged by the bishops that "it would be difficult to say that" the currently proposed PLF "was not indicative of any departure from the Church's doctrine" (Annex A, para 17, p.8).

## 5. What is the claimed “trajectory”?

- 5.1 The claim is that even within the last sixty years “the Church has shifted in its language and expression of marriage, relationships and sexuality, not because the doctrine has changed in any essential matter” but due to “different circumstances” (p.92).
- 5.2 The evidence (only presented briefly and inevitably selectively) covers a number of areas and documents to claim that “the current proposal sits within a trajectory of the increasing recognition that pastoral responses to changing circumstances and complicated pastoral realities are possible, and need not represent a fundamental change to our doctrine of marriage, but are grace-based responses that enable the people of God to live in a complex world and find ways to grow in faith, hope and love” (p.94).
- 5.3 It is also argued that “language and concepts in teaching about marriage and in reflecting on same-sex relationships has changed immensely” and “to change *how* we speak inevitably changes what it is we speak of” such that “while on the surface the teaching has not necessarily changed, the deeper meaning has, because what is conveyed by the words has evolved”(p.95)
- 5.3 There is, clearly, some potential in this argument but it is (i) a novel argument which (ii) can be challenged in relation to its strength concerning there being a clear discernible trajectory. It is noteworthy that the careful, detailed LLF work over many years did not propose such an interpretation. It also (iii) fails to follow through and demonstrate that, even if there is such a trajectory, PLF is a valid or the only or even the best way of developing that trajectory at the current time, especially given that PLF's central novel elements have been available options for many years but always rejected in the past.
- 5.4 In particular, given the concern to respect doctrine, the introduction of new and contentious *liturgical* material is a qualitative change in the form of “pastoral provision”. This distinguishes PLF from most elements noted in the trajectory or (as with the noted changes in relation to the Preface to the Marriage Service) would point to the need for Synodical approval under Canon B2 to ensure PP's concern for upholding doctrine was being implemented.

## 6. What is the relationship of “pastoral provision” (PP) to “pastoral accommodation” (PA)?

- 6.1 Within the history of recent years, the nearest analogue to the idea of PP is that of “pastoral accommodation” (PA). The paper acknowledges this and describes PP as “an extension, with some significant differences, of the well-established concept of pastoral accommodation” (p. 99 and introducing Section 3.2 on these two concepts), effectively seeing PP as a further extension of a trajectory previously expressed in terms of PA (as set out, again briefly and selectively, with reference to various documents on pp.100-102).
- 6.2 The differences in PP arise from what are identified as problems with PA which it is said “is [1] laden with implicit power dynamics; [2]...has a chequered history, and [3] can be used to reinforce the sense that some people's lives are somehow ‘second-class’. It [4] is still cast within the theological space of ‘remedy for sin’...For some...[5] it is deeply offensive and subverts the Church's affirmation of goods in faithful, permanent, exclusive same-sex relationships (p. 100, numeration added).

6.3 This critique, placed alongside the various descriptions of PP (see section 3 above), raise serious questions as to whether the “significant differences” between PP and PA result in PP not being “an extension” of PA but more *an alternative to it and a break from it* in important respects.

6.4 Pastoral accommodation seeks to discern and offer forms of pastoral care and support for all within the body of Christ which recognise and are fitted to their life situation while also continuing to uphold and bear witness to the church’s doctrine and teaching. It is therefore focused on *people* and accommodating them when they may have acted in ways, or find themselves in situations, contrary to or in tension with that teaching. PA is not about affirming *beliefs* (however conscientiously arrived at) or *behaviour* which is contrary to church teaching. PA is not therefore primarily a means to deal with the problem of moral disagreement or challenges to existing doctrine. In fact, because PA bears witness to the church’s doctrine and moral teaching it cannot be embodied in actions which are acknowledged to be indicative of a change in that doctrine (see some of [Sean Doherty’s discussion](#)). This is one reason why the appeal (p.103) to the recent words of Pope Francis are not as strong an argument for PLF as the rationale claims (as explored in the comments by Ian Paul and Edward Dowler [here](#)).

6.5 The difficulties raised by the rationale’s account of PP, and how it contrasts with (more than it extends) past accounts of PA, can be illustrated in relation to three areas which are crucial to the rationale: goods, sin and uncertainty.

## 7. What is the argument concerning “goods”?

7.1 As we have seen, a central feature of PLF taking the form of PP (in supposed contrast to PA) is that the prayers are “acknowledging and celebrating what is good in same-sex relationships” (Annex A, para 23, p.9). This is stated multiple times in various ways e.g. PLF

- is “the kind of response that genuinely rejoices at the goods we can see in same-sex relationships” (p.89),
- “acknowledge what we can unambiguously affirm as good: faithfulness, lifelong commitment, mutual love and flourishing, fruitfulness, stability” (p.94),
- “make a space to affirm joyfully all that is good and of God” (p.95);
- “identify goods” (p.106).

7.2 More significantly, these goods are then related to the goods of marriage as expressed in Christian doctrine so that PLF is claimed “to witness to the enduring message of the doctrine of marriage, by affirming very clear goods that bear a family resemblance to the goods of marriage...” (p.102).

7.3 It is also claimed that this is a recent development in the trajectory of church teaching where “successive reports also increasingly make room to recognise the goods in same-sex relationships. ‘Goods’ that were previously restricted to heterosexual marriage are now recognised in same-sex couples...This is a significant shift” (p.96). This is a strange claim as goods of “faithfulness”, “mutual love and flourishing”, “fruitfulness” and “stability” have long been acknowledged as present in some form in relationships other than marriage such as friendships, family relationships and households (cf. p.107) without this being seen as a ground to provide liturgies to celebrate these relationships or to relate these goods and the patterns of relationship embodying them, to the goods of marriage.

- 7.4 This raises the key but unexplored question as to how the goods of marriage relate to goods discerned within other patterns of relationships. Here there appears to be an assumption that goods identified in same-sex relationships, including same-sex civil marriages, are unambiguous goods and even in some sense equivalent to the goods of marriage (although there is also passing reference to “a gradation of goods”, p.96). In other words, it is presumed that the goods can be detached from marriage as the form of life in which they are embodied and viewed as exactly the same, and consistent with or even bearing positive witness to, the doctrine of marriage, when discerned in other patterns of life.
- 7.5 There is, however, significant ambiguity relating to this appeal to goods, especially given that PP is premised on recognition of “uncertainty” concerning the church’s view of non-marital unions. For example, the good of faithfulness within the created good of marriage is not simply the faithfulness of the married couple to each other (including their sexual faithfulness). It is also their shared faithfulness to the pattern of life established by God which they have embraced (i.e. marriage). This aspect of faithfulness is not present, according to the Church’s doctrine, in non-marital unions. In addition, although there are goods in same-sex relationships, whether or not sexual faithfulness in same-sex relationships is a good is one of the key areas of dispute and corporate uncertainty and is also rejected by the church’s doctrine of marriage.
- 7.6 In addition, the goods of marriage are *goods of marriage as an institution or estate established by God* which couples embrace in the ordering of their lives. They are not primarily to be thought of in terms of *goods of particular individual marriages*. The degree to which the goods are present varies from marriage to marriage (most notably the good of procreation where the lack of this good in a particular marriage is usually a source of pain). However, in relation to PLF and the form of PP it offers, it is clearly stated that PLF “do not define a specific way of life in its entirety as a way of blessing – there is no definition of a specific ‘estate’” (p.106). The nature of the goods being affirmed and celebrated in PLF is therefore different from the goods of marriage and thus not able to bear positive witness unambiguously to those goods (cf. claims on p.102).
- 7.7 This distinction might be connected with one alluded to but not explored in the rationale – there are undoubtedly “goods in same-sex relationships” (p.96) as in any relationship (given the goodness of God’s creation which is never totally destroyed by sin). But this is not the same as speaking of the “goods of same-sex relationships” in a manner paralleling the language of the “goods of marriage” in the Christian tradition. This also appears to make any use of PLF dependent (in a way quite different from the pastoral task when a couple seeks marriage) on the goods being able to be discerned as embodied in the particular relationship of the couple being prayed for. It is unclear how, by whom (it should really be a corporate, ecclesial discernment in some sense), or to what degree (‘unambiguous’ is a high bar) these goods need to be discerned.
- 7.8 The rationale also seems to treat the language of “goods” and the language of “virtue(s)” as effectively interchangeable (e.g. references to “crucial social virtues” and “virtues which the BCP uses to commend marriage” in quotation on p.97 from a text which nevertheless held these claims to be compatible with rejecting same-sex civil marriage and refusing to bless those entering it). This again focuses on the moral qualities (i.e. virtues) of the parties to a specific union and away from the goods of the estate of marriage. It fails to address significant ethical, theological and philosophical questions concerning the similarities and differences between virtues and goods.

## 8. What is being said about sin?

- 8.1 A central argument made for PP is that, in contrast to PA, it focuses on goods and not on sin but it is also acknowledged that a central question the church is wrestling with is “how far its doctrine of marriage may guide recognition of gifts and goods in sexual relationships outside Holy Matrimony” (p.91) given its doctrine that marriage is the proper context for sexual intercourse and so sex in other contexts is a form of sexual immorality (*porneia*).
- 8.2 The approach of PP seeks to emphasise that “all human beings and all human relationships fall short of the holiness and goodness of God shown in Jesus Christ” (p.98), “we all fall short of the ideal, of perfect holiness”, and all our relationships are “deeply distorted by sin” (p.90). The PP rationale rejects a “focus primarily on identifying the absence of virtue, or good, in others” (p.89). It fails, however, to provide an account of how this indisputable truth that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God relates to the varied patterns of relationship which are being prayed for or how this truth is reflected in the prayers so that “the ideal is maintained” as “something to work towards” (p.94). It is therefore unclear how, in the face of sin, the prayers enable us to be “immersed in habits and practices which foster the capacity for repentance and forgiveness” (p.99).
- 8.3 The argument that PP is the right approach rather than that of a change of doctrine and unqualified affirmation is not advanced in the form of a *theological* defence of the received doctrine. It seems to be based instead on the fact that there are those who think that same-sex sexual intimacy is wrong (as the church still teaches) and so believe that, to some degree at least, “the presence of sexual activity in these relationships undermines the goods that we see” (p.94). However, by refusing to acknowledge that there is sin, the PLF and the rationale, fail to address and respond to this theological conviction and concern. PLF thereby undermines the argument that it is the reality that these views are held by many in the church which “is the reason why it has been decided not to change doctrine, and only a more limited pastoral response is being offered” (pp.94-5). In fact, by expressing only an *unambiguous affirmation* of goods, PLF is *unambiguously rejecting* the very premise it proposes for only making a PP.
- 8.4 The argument is that PP is “based, first and foremost, on a practical theology of grace” (p.98) but grace is received and transforms lives through our repentance and leads to renewed commitment to obey God’s commandments and to live with Christ as Lord. The rationale acknowledges this (“the tension between grace freely given, and the need for trusting and obedient responsiveness in relation to it, runs through Scripture as a whole”, p.104) and emphasises the importance of holiness. It fails, however, to set out a positive vision of the pattern of chastity and holy living for a same-sex couple (as discussed [here](#)) and seems to assume that PLF can focus on grace without reference to repentance or obedience because it is “not an encapsulation of all our doctrine...we also need other practices embedded in our liturgies, worship and life together, that help us recognise our erring, such as repentance, teaching or correction. These complement and balance what the PLF do” (p.99).
- 8.5 It is of course the case that all the prayers offered in and by the church are prayers by sinners for fellow-sinners as the rationale offered for PP highlights. However, this does not mean all patterns of life can be the focus of joyful public prayers simply because goods are present but with no regard to those aspects which are sinful and fall short of God’s call to holiness. PLF is introducing public prayers for those whose relationships claim, contrary to church doctrine, to be marriage and/or to be a legitimate form of sexual union. Such prayers have until now been prohibited and



so any theological rationale therefore needs to explain why that previous judgment was in error, especially when there has been no change in the teaching that those elements are a form of sin. The rationale fails to offer such an explanation.

8.6 It would appear that PP (at least in the form it takes in PLF) is therefore susceptible to the mirror-image of the critique that the rationale makes of PA: PP is so focussed on goods that it fails to recognise and properly acknowledge sin as this is identified in the church's teaching. This explains why [Martin Davie has argued](#) that "if the Church of England's doctrines of marriage and sexual ethics are viewed alongside the Church's doctrine concerning the need for repentance and forgiveness for sin, then what they [the bishops] are proposing is necessarily a change of doctrine in an 'essential matter.'"

## 9. What is the claim about "uncertainty"?

9.1 What we are being offered by the bishops is a theological rationale for "pastoral provision in a time of uncertainty" (Annex A, paras 7&8, p.2, para 15, p.8): "the question that faces the church therefore is, what do we do in a time of uncertainty about the way we should take?" (p.88). There is, however, relatively little discussion about why "uncertainty" (rather than e.g. "disagreement" which is [a key theme explored in LLF materials](#) and [the subject of a previous FAOC report](#)) has been highlighted, the nature of this "uncertainty", or why PP in the form it has been articulated and then embodied in PLF is the proper response to this "uncertainty". It is also unclear whether PP is inherently always a response to uncertainty or whether uncertainty is simply a feature of our current context.

9.2 The reaffirmation of the doctrine of the church and the insistence that PP (and so PLF) should not change that doctrine (though with the ambiguities noted above in 4.3-4.8) would seem to suggest that it is not being claimed that our doctrine is uncertain. This, however, is never explicitly stated and some appear to understand PP as necessary because of a corporate uncertainty over whether or not our doctrine is correct: "there are those among us who continue to hold to the teaching of the Church....there are those who long for change, because they have prayerfully come to the conclusion, following the study of Scripture and tradition, that it would be right to change our teaching..." (p.88).

9.3 The focus of the uncertainty appears to be that we find ourselves "in a time of uncertainty *about the way we should take*" (p.88) and that we need to face "the reality of our collective uncertainty as to the way ahead" and are therefore in a time of "corporate not-knowing" (p.89). This effectively acknowledges that we are at an impasse though limited analysis of this reality is offered. In particular, the rationale falls short of acknowledging that this "uncertainty" is in large part due not to widespread uncertainty but rather to there being widely-held but competing and seemingly incompatible (near-)certainties at every level of the church.

9.4 The claim is made that PLF as a form of PP is a better option for "the way we should take" in the face of uncertainty compared to two others: "not to change" and "try to force change through" (p.89). The reasons against the former are that not changing "would be deeply hurtful" to many and "risk being seen as ignoring the commitment we have made as a church to repent from homophobia" (p.89). Though important, neither of these arguments are based on the church's practice of 2000 years having been demonstrated to be false and these failings are also seen as features of PLF by many, perhaps most, wanting change. Similarly, the description offered of the other option ("forcing change through") and the rejection of it because it "would not respect the strong misgivings of large parts of the Body, or the reality of our collective uncertainty as to the

way ahead" (p.89) also apply to the introduction of PLF. In other words, PLF is not obviously a solution to the problem of uncertainty it is framed to resolve and it does not escape the critiques the rationale offers against alternative approaches in order to defend PLF.

9.5 In the face of this uncertainty it is argued that the way forward needs to be marked by "provisionality and humility" (p.89) but it is far from clear in what sense PLF is "provisional" (might it be reversed and if so how?) and the speed and manner in which it (and the theological rationale for it) has been produced and introduced has not been obviously marked by either provisionality or humility.

9.6 In particular the new, decisive step which distinguishes the current proposals from those made in the past (notably [GS 2055](#) back in 2017) is that its "pastoral provision" extends to "liturgical provision". As the rationale notes, "the role of prayer and worship in shaping and forming doctrine" is "particularly important for Anglican Churches" (p.102). The burden of proof, in a "time of uncertainty", must surely therefore be on those introducing controversial new liturgical innovations and the presumption must be against doing so through any means that bypasses the normal and proper synodical processes set out in Canon B2.

## 10. Is the theological rationale persuasive and how might we move forward?

10.1 The above analysis has failed to do justice to all the elements of the theological rationale offered in Annex H. That rationale offers a creative line of argument to justify what is being proposed. Its broad outline will probably prove hard to better in any attempted theological defence of the proposals. One of its problems, however, is that it appears to be just that – a theological rationale rapidly created to justify a broad course of action which had already been decided upon through political processes without reference to this or any other serious theological rationale. It also appears to be a rationale for an outcome whose detailed shape and legal underpinnings have continued to be in constant flux without being guided by the theological arguments set out here.

10.2 The rationale highlights many key areas that need to be addressed if there is to be a theologically cogent and coherent basis for what it is being proposed. In its wrestling with the need to uphold existing doctrine and yet be pastorally generous there are a number of important ingredients identified. If the Church of England were following its previously standard processes (notably through FAOC (the Faith and Order Commission) and in the work leading to the LLF resources) then Annex H would constitute a helpful initial paper which would then be considered within a careful, corporate theological discernment drawing on a range of skilled academics from various traditions within Anglicanism. By this means it would be subject to an iterative process which would sift and refine its arguments before publication and wider evaluation. Such a process could well help us better understand where we now find ourselves, what exactly is being done theologically in PLF, and perhaps offer wisdom as to how we might best proceed. Currently, however, we are some way from this annex's ingredients having produced even an over-ready, let alone a fully-baked, cake and it is far from clear that PLF as currently proposed could be the sort of cake that would result.

10.3 It is noted that for some the central argument for PP as the PLF's rationale "represents far too little and may be considered deeply disappointing and hurtful" (p86, n6). The basis for this response is most likely to be their rejection of the doctrine that PP seeks to uphold rather than PP's change in how doctrine relates to practical practice. The rationale, however, offers them no *theological* defence for upholding that doctrine. For others, the problem is with the rationale's

claim that “appropriate provision does not represent a change in doctrine if it is enshrined in commended or authorised prayers for public worship, rather than an ad hoc, private response” (*ibid*). If there is to be no change in doctrine then it is this critique (which *is* focussed on “a change in how doctrine and pastoral practice relate to one another”) which is most pressing. However, although it is indeed “referred to in the text” this problem it is never fully addressed or answered.

10.4 The argument presented above sets out some of the major difficulties that the rationale faces in defending itself from such a critique by those committed not to undermine the doctrine which Annex H claims to be upholding in its account of PP and defence of PLF. It argues that the “new insight” of PP which is neither adequately justified theologically nor shown to be sufficient to provide a justification for PLF in its current proposed form as a faithful expression of PP.

10.5 This raises both major concerns in relation to the theological basis of PLF and also more widely given that PP is being presented as the theological basis for both pastoral reassurance and possible significant changes to the Pastoral Guidance to replace *Issues*. This highlights once again, the problems with abandoning earlier commitments not to proceed with PLF until the package as a whole was clear and it makes it even more likely that there will not be a consistent and coherent underlying theological rationale for all three areas which the bishops are seeking to address: PLF, guidance, and reassurance.

10.6 Faced with these problems there would appear to be broadly three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) pathways forward that would have some degree of theological integrity and which might enable the Church of England to proceed in a way that minimises conflict and division and maintains as high a degree of communion as possible in the light of where we now are:

- a. Pausing in order to refine and develop further the theological arguments set out here in Annex H and then seeking a consensus for them in their final articulation as an adequate theological rationale for a form of PLF consistent with them and for new pastoral guidance and pastoral reassurance including any “formal structural pastoral provision in this time of uncertainty” (Introduction, para 18, p.3)
- b. Recognising that for “a time of uncertainty” we have well-established processes in relation to liturgical development and so using Canon B2 (and the need for two-thirds support for any change in all 3 Houses of General Synod at the end of the process) for all of PLF,
- c. Acknowledging that our deeper problem is that the Church has within it two significantly sized groupings divided over whether the existing doctrine is right and should shape our pastoral and liturgical life or is wrong and needs to be replaced with an alternative theology that should then shape our pastoral and liturgical life. Each of these has a clear and internally consistent theological rationale. What is therefore likely needed is not an unsatisfactory and unstable mix of supposed doctrinal continuity but with significant practical changes based on a “new insight into doctrine”. Instead, we need to seek some form of new structural settlement which would give to each of these contrasting and competing theologies their own secure, legally defined and episcopally-led ecclesial space with theological integrity and as high a degree of communion as possible between them within the Church of England.