

Discernment about the whether or not to opt in to use the Prayers of Love and Faith in the Diocese of Bath and Wells

Following the publication of the Pastoral Guidance issued by the Church of England's House of Bishops, Bishop Michael offered guidance about the use of the prayers in the Diocese of Bath and Wells.

“Firstly, I have long and consistently been of the opinion that the use of the prayers of love and faith should be ‘opt in’ rather than ‘opt out’ – used by those who choose to use them but with no expectation that they will, or should, be used by those who don’t.

“Secondly, given the differences that exist among us, I’m also passionate that the decision to use or not use the prayers must be subject first and foremost to the consciences of individual ministers (be they clergy or lay ministers) and should also only be used in any church with the agreement of the PCC.”

Local knowledge, understanding and sensitivity are going to be essential in working out what good discernment will look like. The advice offered below will need to be thought through carefully according to local circumstances. Please do call on your archdeacon if you would value a conversation about how this might work in your particular setting.

Within such an ‘opt in’ system, neither the incumbent nor the PCC should be pressurised to go against their conscience.

Is the time right to make a decision?

Some parishes will receive the opportunity to use the prayers with joy and anticipation. Others will be clear that they will never use them. Some may not feel that the time is yet right to consider their use. Good pastoral discernment is needed by everyone as to whether and when it is the right time to have a discussion about the prayers, and again if it is the right time to come to a decision about their use.

No one should feel under any obligation to be rushed into making decisions or of the need to say anything about their parish’s use or not of the prayers on their website or in other public material.

The position of the incumbent

The first stage of decision-making rests with the incumbent of the benefice who should, as in all things, act according to their conscience. The incumbent:

- may discern that she/he does not wish the prayers to be used in the churches of her/his benefice
- may wish to ‘opt in’ to the use the prayers

- may be unwilling personally to use the prayers, but willing for other ministers (associate clergy, curates, readers or clergy from other parishes) to offer the prayers in the churches of the benefice.
- may be unsure of their own feelings on this question

Where a parish is in vacancy, and therefore has no incumbent, they should consult with their archdeacon.

The position of the PCC

Should the incumbent not wish for the prayers to be used in any of the churches of his/her benefice, that decision means that the prayers will not be used in the benefice and this decision should be respected by the PCC as final.

Should an incumbent express a willingness to explore using the prayers, then the next stage would be for the incumbent to discern together with the PCC whether this would be the right thing for a parish at this time.

Discerning the way together

Considering the use of the prayers in a church demands good spiritual discernment. PCCs may, for example, wish to use a framework such as '[Seeking God's Way Together](#)'. The Deanery and Parish Support team has produced a guide to the Seeking God's Way Together process designed for those who wish to discern their way forward about the use of the Prayers of Love and Faith.

Using such an approach, PCCs may discern that they wish their church to 'opt in' to the use of the prayers in their church, that the prayers should not be used in their church or that they are not yet ready to reach a decision.

The future

It is of course possible that incumbents and PCCs may change their minds about any of the decisions over time but they should not be under pressure to do so.

Communicating that you are offering the Prayers of Love and Faith

Should 'opt in' be decided through the discernment process outlined above, we recommend that a short and simple statement letting people know that a church is offering the prayers should be added to its website and 'A Church Near You' page.

Ongoing support

The first port of call for support is your archdeacon. An immense strength we also have here in our Diocese of Bath and Wells is our team of nine active honorary assistant bishops who are available to offer pastoral support and care for clergy and churches that need them. If you'd appreciate being put in touch with one of our team, please do contact your Archdeacon who'd be glad to put you in contact with an assistant bishop able to help you. For the latest news and updates go to www.bathandwells.org.uk/If