

The Bishops of the Church of England will be issuing an apology later this week to LGBTQI+ people for the “rejection, exclusion and hostility” they have faced in churches and the impact this has had on their lives.

And they will urge all congregations in their care to welcome same-sex couples “unreservedly and joyfully” as they reaffirm their commitment to a “radical new Christian inclusion founded in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it – based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships, and in a proper 21st Century understanding of being human and of being sexual”.

The proposals, which follow a six-year period of listening, learning and discernment known as Living in Love and Faith, will be outlined in a report to the Church’s General Synod, which meets in London next month.

It will offer the fullest possible pastoral provision without changing the Church’s doctrine of Holy Matrimony for same-sex couples through a range of draft prayers, known as Prayers of Love and Faith, which could be used voluntarily in churches for couples who have marked a significant stage of their relationship such as a civil marriage or civil partnership.

There will be a commitment to produce new pastoral guidance in relation to the discernment of vocation, replacing the 1991 statement “Issues in Human Sexuality”, to which all clergy currently are asked to assent.

Drawing from the feedback received through Living in Love and Faith, the bishops also identify a number of key areas for further reflection and work.

Under the proposals, same-sex couples would still not be able to get married in a Church of England church, but could have a service in which there would be prayers of dedication, thanksgiving or for God’s blessing on the couple in church following a civil marriage or partnership.

The formal teaching of the Church of England as set out in the canons and authorised liturgies – that Holy Matrimony is between one man and one woman for life – would not change.

The prayers would be voluntary for clergy to use and could be used in different combinations reflecting the theological diversity of the Church.

The proposals for the Church of England follow a discussion at the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops from around the world last year on topics including same-sex marriage and blessings.

During that discussion, the Archbishop of Canterbury made clear that the majority of the churches in the Anglican Communion continue to affirm traditional teaching on marriage, but that some have already come to a different view on sexuality “after long prayer, deep study and reflection on understandings of human nature” and now bless or celebrate same-sex unions.

Alongside the published report the bishops of the Church of England will be publishing a letter in which they apologise to LGBTQI+ people.

The letter will also speak honestly about their ongoing disagreements over the possibility of changing the Church’s teaching on marriage itself.

But they will emphasise a clear and strong desire to continue to “walk together” amid their differences.

The Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, who chaired the group of bishops which led the process of discernment and decision making, said: "I want to offer my heartfelt thanks to all who have participated in the process which has brought us to this point.

"I know that this has been costly and painful for many on all sides of the debate and has touched on deeply personal matters and strongly held beliefs.

"We have been moved by what we have heard and seen. And what has come through very clearly, even though there continues to be disagreement among the bishops and among the wider church on these questions, is a strong desire to continue to share our life together in Christ with all our differences."

The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said: "Over the last six years, we have been confronted time and time again with examples of the rejection, exclusion, and hostility that many LGBTI+ people have received in churches.

"Both personally and on behalf of my fellow bishops I would like to express our deep sorrow and grief at the way LGBTQI+ people and those they love have been treated by the Church which, most of all, ought to recognise everyone as precious and created in the image of God.

"We are deeply sorry and ashamed and want to take this opportunity to begin again in the spirit of repentance which our faith teaches us.

"This is not the end of that journey but we have reached a milestone and I hope that these prayers of love and faith can provide a way for us all to celebrate and affirm same-sex relationships."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said: "I would like to thank all those across the Church of England who have participated in this deeply prayerful and theologically grounded process of discernment over the last six years.

"This response reflects the diversity of views in the Church of England on questions of sexuality, relationships and marriage – I rejoice in that diversity and I welcome this way of reflecting it in the life of our church.

"I am under no illusions that what we are proposing today will appear to go too far for some and not nearly far enough for others, but it is my hope that what we have agreed will be received in a spirit of generosity, seeking the common good.

"Most of all I hope it can offer a way for the Church of England, publicly and unequivocally, to say to all Christians and especially LGBTQI+ people that you are welcome and a valued and precious part of the body of Christ."

Once the proposals have been debated by Synod, the House of Bishops will refine the prayers and then commend them for use.

Meanwhile a new group would be set up to produce new pastoral guidance to explain the practical implications of the bishops' proposals and replace previous guidance and statements including Issues in Human Sexuality.

Synod will be asked to discuss the proposals in detail during its meeting from February 6 to 9, with the main debate on the proposals due to take place on February 8.

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

1 John 4.16

For further information, please visit: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/draft-prayers-thanksgiving-dedication-and-gods-blessing-same-sex>

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