

The Blessing of Same-Sex Unions

Draft Discussion Document for Consultation

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At this point in the history of discussion of the issue of the blessing of same-sex unions it is clear that there is no consensus on the way forward. There are layers of conversations continuing that all connect with the blessing of same-sex unions. On a macro level there is the conversation around human sexuality – its nature, appropriate boundaries and intersection with traditional values in faith-based communities. The significance of sexual intimacy and intercourse, after being separated from procreation through the widespread availability of contraception in the mid 20th century, remains to be more fully explored, including theologically. General Synod 2007 asked the Faith, Worship & Ministry Committee to consult the church on the Christian perspective of human sexuality and will report to General Synod 2010.

The change in civil society to permit same-sex couples to marry has added another layer to the discussion in the church. General Synod 2007 has asked the national Faith, Worship & Ministry Committee to look at the Marriage Canon (XXI) to see what changes might be required to incorporate ‘all legally qualified persons’, which now includes same-sex couples. The definition of marriage is coming under closer scrutiny as differing theological perspectives on its sacramental nature are examined. As well, the exact nature of blessing has generated more discussion. Is it thanksgiving for the signs of God’s presence discerned? Is it adding something to the relationship not already there? What is the nuptial blessing?

All of the above point to the multi-layered complexity of the current situation within which clarity and consensus has not yet emerged. The situation is messy – with increasing diversity across the Anglican Church of Canada as individual dioceses engage in different responses. Discernment continues locally, nationally and internationally. We do not yet have a clear vision for the future nor a single solution.

The current status for the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Diocese of Toronto in particular, is adherence to the Pastoral Statement of the House of Bishops of 2007 within which a wide pastoral generosity has been encouraged. The College of Bishops believes that, at this time, any further response should lie within the pastoral realm and not seek to be legislative. Any movement towards recognition of same-sex unions as marriage or of authorized liturgical rites would move us into the purview of General Synod and not diocesan authority. In the history of the church, there have been long-term non-marital commitments that have been blessed such as those in monastic communities. These offer alternative models to consider.

Proposed Pastoral Response:

In this light, the following outline of a pastoral response is proposed by the Bishops for discussion and recommendations. It is intended that the guidelines would be part of discussions at the upcoming May session of Synod for wider consultation before implementation.

- a. Episcopal permission to be given to a limited number of parishes, based on episcopal discernment, to offer prayers and blessing to same-sex couples in stable long-term committed relationships.
- b. Episcopal guidelines on the nature of the prayers/blessing will be established. A particular rite will not be authorized.
- c. Episcopal permission for blessings will be required.
- d. Evaluation of this pastoral response will be undertaken after one year.
- e. No parish or clergy will be required to participate.
- f. A Bishop's Commission will be formed to create the guidelines, monitor activity and review.