



National and International

Views concerning
Same-Gender Marriage



Diocese of Toronto
Anglican Church of Canada

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL VIEWS CONCERNING SAME-GENDER MARRIAGE

In the many comments received after the presentation at the Diocese of Toronto's Synod 2017 around the proposed changes to the marriage canon, a number of people asked for more information about what is happening in other Christian denominations in Canada and other Anglican churches around the world with regard to same-gender blessings and marriages.

Both nationally and internationally, we can see certain churches engaging in discussions around the place of same-gender relationships within the church community. Indeed, some have moved to a position in which same-sex marriages have become a regular part of their church life. However, it would be fair to say that the majority of Christian denominations, both nationally and internationally, continue to oppose any form of blessing or marriage rite for same-gender relationships.

THE CANADIAN CHURCH LANDSCAPE

The Anglican Church of Canada is currently engaged in two bilateral dialogues, one with the Roman Catholic Church and the other with the United Church of Canada. Since 2001, we are also in a relationship of full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian denomination in Canada. According to a recent national census, close to one-third of the Canadian population declare themselves to be Roman Catholic. While Pope Francis has made a num-



ber of statements in recent years expressing a more pastoral approach to people involved in same-gender relationships, it is clear that this does not extend to a consideration of same-sex blessings or marriages. The following statement made by the President of the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops in a letter to the Prime Minister at the time when changes in the national civil law around marriage were being made still reflects the current Roman Catholic position. “For Catholics, marriage is an issue intimately related to human nature which has been created male and female. Despite the recent decision of the House of Commons, Catholic teaching on this remains consistent and constant: marriage is the exclusive union of one man and one woman.” Churches belonging to the Eastern Orthodox (Russian, Greek, Ukrainian, Romanian, etc.) and Oriental Orthodox (Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, etc.) traditions hold similar positions. The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and Central America, the highest Orthodox Christian representative body in the Americas, reaffirmed in a statement in September 2013 that “the Orthodox Christian teaching on marriage and sexuality, firmly grounded in Holy Scripture, two millennia of Church Tradition, and Canon Law, holds that the sacrament of marriage consists in the union of a man and a woman, and that authentic marriage reflects the sacred unity that exists between Christ and his Bride, the Church”. A similar view is also held by a variety of Protestant churches including the Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Free Methodist communities. It is a view shared also by the Anglican Network in Canada, which was formed in 2005 in opposition to what ANiC members considered to be the heterodox positions on homosexuality and same-sex blessings of the Anglican Church of Canada. ANiC presently consists of 73 parishes in 9 provinces and 2 American states.

However, there are several Canadian church communities that do presently bless same-sex relationships or perform same-gender marriages, including the following:

a) United Church of Canada

In 2003, the General Council of the United Church of Canada decided to ask the federal government to recognize same-sex marriage in federal marriage legislation. The General Council has subsequently welcomed same-sex marriage within the United Church but this does not make same-sex marriage the norm in all United Church congregations. Each congregation is free to develop their own marriage policy and practices.

b) Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

At the Church’s 2011 National Convention, a motion was passed that allowed ELCIC ministers to preside at or bless marriages including those of same-sex couples according to the dictates of their consciences and according to the laws of the province in which they serve.

c) Mennonite Church Canada

This conference represents the largest gathering of Mennonite churches in Canada. In 2015, the first same-gender marriage took place in a congregation of the Mennonite Church Canada. Subsequently, in 2016 the denomination declared that each congregation is free to decide whether to allow same-sex marriages to be performed in their congregation.

d) Metropolitan Community Churches

The first same-sex marriages were conducted at the Metropolitan Community Church in Toronto in 2001 and have continued to be conducted since that date.



THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

Many Anglican Provinces within the Communion oppose the blessing and/or marriage of same-gender couples. This is particularly the case, though not exclusively, in the Provinces of the Global South. These churches have expressed their convictions strongly at Anglican Primates' meetings and elsewhere. There are other churches within the Anglican Communion who either support same-sex marriage at present or who are considering it within the course of their church life and structures. The following are a number of these churches:

a) **The Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia**

The 2014 General Synod of the Church called for proposals for the blessing of same-sex relationships. A working group was established which brought a proposal to the 2016 Synod to authorize new rites of blessings as “additional formularies” rather than doctrinal changes. This proposal was not accepted by the Synod but instead the Synod voted to table the motion with the expectation that at the next General Synod (May 2018) there would be a decision to move forward. Another working group was established to explore structural arrangements which would allow people with widely differing convictions to remain within the Church. It published its final report in January 2018. It recommended that local bishops should be able to decide whether to authorize a service of blessing for same-gender couples in their dioceses, using provisions already within the Church's canons for a “non-formulary service”. It also states that there should be no change to “the Church's teaching on

the nature of marriage which is to affirm marriage as between a man and a woman.” There would also be canonical protections for clergy who decline to conduct such services and for those who decide to perform such services. This report is to be considered at the May 2018 gathering of General Synod.

b) **The Scottish Episcopal Church**

At its June, 2017 meeting of General Synod, the Church voted by a two-thirds majority in all three houses (bishops, clergy, and laity) to alter the Church's canon on marriage, removing the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman, and adding a new section that acknowledges that there are different understandings of marriage which now allow clergy to solemnize marriages between same-sex couples as well as couples of the opposite sex. The revised canon also stipulates that no member of the clergy will be required to solemnize a marriage against their conscience. The vote at Synod came after several years of study and discussion within the Church as part of the Cascade Process involving church members in dialogue on the question of marriage.

c) **The Anglican Church of Australia**

At the 2017 session of the General Synod of the Australian Church, a motion was passed recognizing “that the doctrine of our church, in line with traditional Christian teaching, is that marriage is an exclusive and lifelong union of a man and a woman, and further, recognizes that this has been the subject of several Gener-

al Synod resolutions over the past fifteen years”. While the Church does not allow for same-sex blessings or marriage, there exist a variety of understandings and convictions around same-gender marriage within the Australian Church. During the course of the recent public referendum in the country to allow for same-sex marriages in the civil sphere, the Diocese of Sydney contributed \$1 million dollars to the “No” campaign while seven diocesan bishops from other parts of the country wrote in support of the proposal.

d) Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil

The Church has affirmed its support of same-sex relationships. In 2016, the presiding bishop convened an extraordinary Synod to discuss adding same-sex marriage to the marriage canon. The proposal was not approved but was to be brought forward again at subsequent Synods.

e) Anglican Church of Southern Africa

Same-sex civil unions became legal in South Africa in 2006. At its 2016 General Synod, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa was presented with a motion to allow for “prayers of blessing” to be offered for people in same-sex civil unions. This motion was rejected by the Synod. The proposal continues to be a subject of much debate within the Church. While many bishops and others stand against it, at recent Synods of the diocese of Saldanha Bay and of Pretoria, there have been motions in support of the proposal. The canon law of the Church continues to state that “marriage by divine institution is a lifelong and exclusive union and partnership between one man and one woman.”

f) Church of England

The Synod of the Diocese of Hereford put forward a motion in October of 2017 for consideration at the General Synod of the Church of England in 2018 concerning same-sex blessings. The motion proposes that Anglican clergy be authorized to offer a service of blessing for those couples who have formed a civil partnership or have been married in a secular ceremony. Individual priests and churches would be allowed to opt out of the blessing services. The proposal would not allow for same-sex marriages in Anglican churches. A spokesperson for the Church reiterated that the teaching of the Church of England as reaffirmed in the Bishops’ pastoral statement on same-sex marriage is that such services of blessing are not at present allowed in the Church. The spokesperson continued that it is recognized that there is a real and profound disagreement in the Church of England over questions relating to human sexuality, and the House of Bishops is in the midst of preparing a new teaching document on mar-



riage and sexuality. Already, in dioceses such as London and Southwark, prayers may be offered in parish churches on behalf of those same-sex couples who have entered into civil partnerships. The General Synod of the Church has spent considerable time in recent years in discussing the Church’s understanding of marriage and its response to civil legislation concerning civil partnerships and marriages.

g) The Episcopal Church of the United States

In 2009, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church adopted a resolution allowing individual local bishops to provide “generous pastoral response” to those members of their dioceses entering into same-gender marriages, unions, or partnerships. A committee of the Convention was also tasked with collecting and developing theological and liturgical resources connected to the blessing of same-sex relationships. As a result, at the next General Convention in 2012, an official liturgy of blessing called *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, was approved. In



2015, the General Convention, after the Supreme Court of the United States had ruled in favour of legalizing same-sex marriages in the nation, changed its canon law. The changes removed language defining marriage as between a man and a woman and provided for two new marriage rites with language allowing them to be used by same-sex or opposite-sex couples. The rites are to be used under the discretion and permission of the diocesan bishop. The canon also states that clergy retain the right to refuse to officiate at any wedding.

As a result of these actions of the Episcopal Church of the United States, the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2016 implemented certain restrictions on the participation of American Episcopalians within the Anglican Communion for a three-year period. Episcopalians are excluded from any forums in which doctrine is discussed, including international ecumenical dialogues, and they are also excluded from chairing Anglican Communion committees. These same sanctions were applied in 2017 to the Scottish Episcopal Church after it amended its marriage canon.

CURRENT SITUATION IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

The motion to amend the marriage canon passed its first reading at the July meeting of General Synod in 2016, but because same-sex marriage is a matter of doctrine, it requires a two-thirds majority vote at two consecutive Gen-

eral Synods. In preparation for the next General Synod in 2019, dioceses and ecclesiastical provinces have been asked to consider the motion before the second and final vote. Dioceses across Canada are responding to General Synod's request in different ways. Some are faced by serious logistical and financial constraints which mean that their diocesan Synods will not be able to meet before the gathering of General Synod in 2019. In several dioceses, a presentation followed by facilitated conversations on the proposed change were part of their 2017 Synod meetings. Many of the dioceses are looking to hold regional or deanery gatherings throughout 2018 to facilitate discussion and "holy listening" amongst parishioners. Various resources have been prepared (videos, links to resources, guidelines for "holy listening", Bible studies) which can be used at these gatherings. In most of these dioceses, it is expected that reports from these regional gatherings will be fed into a conversation which will take place at the meeting of their diocesan Synods, which will take place prior to General Synod 2019 (for some, this will be in 2018 while for others it will occur in 2019). Other venues where some dioceses are planning to discuss the motion are at the diocesan Executive Committee and at the diocesan clergy conference. A few dioceses are also hoping to encourage conversation at the parish level, although, for the most part, dioceses have seen the region or deanery to be the key level for local discussions leading into a final discussion at the diocesan Synod. †