

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

You talked about same-sex blessings at your last General Synod. How come you are doing it again?

In 2004 a portion of one of the resolutions of General Synod was deferred until General Synod 2007 while the Primate's Theological Commission (an appointed group of Canadian Anglican theologians) discussed and reported on whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine. That Commission reported in what is now called, "The St. Michael's Report". The report and the deferred motion will now come before the General Synod in June.

The deferred resolution: 'That this General Synod affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod, with the concurrence of its bishop, to authorize the blessing of same-sex unions.'

What is the difference between a blessing and marriage?

Marriage in the church is the covenant (commitment) between a man and a woman in lifelong mutual fidelity that carries the potential for the procreation of children. Marriage is seen as a reflection of the love of God for the Church, mirrored in the love the couple have for each other.

A blessing is the act of thanking God for evidence in the life of the couple that God is present and active in their relationship – that their relationship reflects the love, faithfulness, mutual self-giving of God - and a prayer that God will help the relationship to become all that God intends.

What is the St. Michael report?

In 2004 the General Synod passed a resolution asking the Primate's Theological Commission to report on whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine. (Doctrine – what we believe about God and the world – shapes the life and work of the Church). The PTC is an appointed body of twelve Anglican theologians from across Canada representing the breadth of theological perspectives in our church. They met and worked intensively and produced a report, called the St. Michael Report in recognition of the location at which it was completed – St. Michael's House (the former home of the Sisters of the Church, Oakville, Ontario). The report can be found at: <http://www.anglican.ca/primate/ptc/index.htm>

What is the Windsor Report?

In response to the actions of the Diocese of New Westminster (Canada) to permit the blessing of same-sex unions and the actions of The Episcopal Church (USA) in consecrating an openly gay bishop in a committed partnership, the Archbishop of Canterbury) appointed an international group of church leaders & theologians to report on the impact of this to the Anglican Communion. Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan was the Canadian representative on the Lambeth Commission on Communion.

The Windsor Report is the result of the deliberations of that group. It outlines concerns expressed across the Anglican Communion over these actions and offered advice as to what needs to happen now to heal relationships. The advice includes the creation of a covenant for all Anglican Churches that wish to remain part of the Anglican Communion. The creation of that covenant is an ongoing task in the Anglican Communion now. The Anglican Church of Canada asked people in the church to read the report and offer their responses. A Task Force of clergy, laity and bishops read the responses and have written a comprehensive response for the Church which can be found at:

<http://www.anglican.ca/faith/identity/wrrg-response.htm>

What has happened between the last General Synod and this one within the church?

Between GS2004 and GS2007 the Anglican Church of Canada has undertaken the following:

- i) Serious consideration of the Windsor Report through receiving responses from dioceses, individuals and theologians across Canada and preparing a response report that is now available.*
- ii) Study and response to the St. Michael Report. A study guide was produced to assist Canadian Anglicans to read and respond to the St. Michael Report. Responses have been reported to the Council of General Synod in preparation for GS2007. Members of the Primate's Theological Commission have traveled across Canada assisting parishes, dioceses and Synods to discuss and understand the report.*
- iii) A resource guide for studying the issues of homosexuality and the blessing of same-sex unions was prepared and is on our website. As other resources have become available they have been posted as well.*
<http://www.anglican.ca/faith/ethics/index.htm>
- iv) Dioceses and parishes were encouraged to continue the listening process requested by the Lambeth Conference 1998 to listen to the voices and concerns of gay and lesbian members of the church.*
- v) The Chancellor and Council of General Synod have given serious consideration to the kind of resolutions that would most appropriately deal with all of the above at General Synod 2007. They settled on five resolutions (see below).*

What is the situation now in the church with same-blessings? With same-sex marriage?

***Same Sex Blessings:** Officially the House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada has requested that all dioceses refrain from permission for the blessing of same-sex unions until General Synod 2007. The Diocese of New Westminster has permitted those parishes that had been granted permission up to that point to continue to do so but has granted no new permissions. The Diocese of Niagara voted at its Synod in 2004 to permit the blessing of same-sex unions in parishes that had approved – however, the Bishop (as is the Bishop's right) withheld permission at this time.*

***Same –Sex Marriage:** The Anglican Church of Canada has not, in any diocese, granted permission for clergy to perform same-sex marriages.*

What is the situation now in New Westminster?

After 3 successive Synods requesting permission for same-sex blessings by increasing majorities, Bishop Michael Ingham granted permission in 2002 for blessings to occur in parishes where the membership of the parish has studied and voted to permit them to occur in that parish. When the House of Bishops requested a moratorium on permission for same-sex blessings the Bishop of New Westminster withheld any further parish permissions but allowed those previously granted to continue.

Have ordinary Anglicans been asked how they feel about this?

All Anglicans have been given the opportunity to respond to the St. Michael Report, the Windsor Report and to express their views to their Diocesan bishop and/or Parish. Our church structure is such that lay people form a significant part of any decision making body in the church and so have a strong voice in its future.

Since the last General Synod, same-sex marriage has been legalized in the country. What effect, if any, does this have with the controversy in the church?

This decision in Canada has raised the question of whether we should be discussing marriage and not just blessing of same-sex unions and whether it is appropriate to bless same-sex partnerships that are not civilly married. The resolutions coming to General Synod 2007 deal only with the blessing of same-sex partnerships since a full discussion of the relationship between such partnerships and marriage has not yet been done. One of the motions before GS2007 does however request that the Marriage Canon (canons are the laws of that govern the Church) be examined to see whether a change should be made to permit all marriages (same-sex or heterosexual) to take place in the church.

How does the situation in the United States compare to the situation in Canada?

The situation in the United States is different from that in Canada. Our church structures operate in a different way. The actions of the Episcopal Church (to consecrate an openly gay bishop) were taken by their General Convention (similar to our General Synod) so represent a policy of the whole national church. They have been requested, by the

Primates of the Anglican Communion to cease any further consecrations of gay bishops and any blessing of same-sex unions. So far no such request has been made of Canada as we have not made any decisions for the whole Canadian Church.

Are other parts of the Anglican Communion talking about this too?

All members of the Anglican Communion were asked, through Resolution 1:10 at the Lambeth Conference 1998, to engage in a listening process with gay and lesbian members of their communities. Many have done so and continue to do so. Many other churches are in ongoing discussions of same-sex issues.

What have Canadian Bishops said about the issue?

The House of Bishops has made statements in 1979 and again in 1997 that are clear about their opposition to any form of discrimination against gay and lesbian people in Canadian society; and the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of our churches as full members by baptism. They have continued to uphold the traditional teaching of the church that marriage in the church is reserved for heterosexual partners; that blessing of same-sex covenanted partners is not permitted in the church. Some individual bishops, such as the Bishop of New Westminster, disagree with the majority and have acted, within the legislation of their own diocese, to bless same-sex unions.

What have Anglican Primates in the Communion said about the issue?

The Anglican Primates of the Communion have met twice since our last General Synod. Although there is some division within the Primate's on these issues, the majority have been distressed by the decisions made by The Episcopal Church (USA) and the Diocese of New Westminster. Their distress is partly due to the nature of the decisions (homosexuality and same-sex unions) but also due to their view that there was insufficient consultation and discussion with the wider communion before these decisions were taken and approved. Many are concerned for what they see as a change in our understanding of scripture. Their most recent communiqué (from Feb 2007) can be found at: http://www.anglican.ca/news/news.php?newsItem=2007-02-19_zpc.news

What exactly will this General Synod be asked to decide?

The Council of General Synod has decided that the following resolutions will assist the church to clarity in its decisions:

1. That this General Synod accept the conclusion of the Primate's Theological Commission's *St. Michael Report* that the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine, but is not core doctrine in the sense of being credal.
2. That resolutions 3 and 4 below be deemed to have been carried only if they receive the affirmative votes of 60 per cent of the members of each Order present

- and voting, and if a vote by dioceses is requested, only if they receive the affirmative votes of 60 per cent of the dioceses whose votes are counted.
3. That this General Synod resolves that the blessing of same-sex unions is consistent with the core doctrine of the Anglican Church of Canada.
 4. (The resolution deferred from 2004) That this General Synod affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod, with the concurrence of its bishop, to authorize the blessing of same-sex unions.
 5. That this General Synod requests the Council of General Synod to consider revision of Canon 21 (On Marriage) including theological rationale to allow marriage of all legally qualified persons and to report back to General Synod 2010.

What is the difference between a motion / resolution and a Canon?

*A resolution put on the floor of General Synod normally requires a simple majority (50% + 1 vote) of votes, voting by 'order' (**see below).*

A Canon becomes part of the 'law' of the Church and therefore requires a higher standard of voting majority. A canon would be introduced at a General Synod and must receive a 2/3's majority of votes to proceed. If it is a canon concerning doctrine, discipline or worship it then must be voted on again at the next f synod (3 years later) and again receive a 2/3's majority before it would go into effect. For example, any change to the Marriage Canon of the Anglican Church of Canada would require two General Synods and 2/3 majority at each Synod.

*** For a simple resolution Bishops vote separately and Clergy and laity together. Upon request by six members of GS, a vote may be required by separate orders in which case Bishops, Clergy and Laity each vote separately requiring a 51% majority in each house to pass. Upon further request by six members of GS, if an affirmative vote has been taken, a vote by dioceses may be requested in which case each diocesan delegation would caucus and present its majority decision. The resolution would then be carried by the majority (50% + 1) of the dioceses. In the case of the resolutions offered by the Council of General Synod on the blessing of same-sex unions, one of the resolutions asks General Synod to increase the voting majority required to 60% in recognition of the seriousness of this issue.*

Do gay people have a say in this controversy in the church?

Gay people are full members of the Anglican Church of Canada and may be found in all levels of the life of the Church. They have an equal opportunity to speak in the various councils of the Church and many have. Integrity is an organization for gay members and their families and it, as an organization, offers its perspective to the Church through its newsletter and presence at many Diocesan and national Synods.

Do gay people have a say in how the question will be resolved?

Gay people have the same opportunity as all members of the Anglican Church of Canada to have a say through their participation as delegates to General Synod, elected by their diocese.

What does “local option” mean?

Local Option is the term used to indicate that, if the General Synod were to permit the blessing of same-sex unions by passing Resolution #4 (above), each local diocese and bishop has authority to decide whether to allow blessings in their area. This would mean that each diocese would be able to study, discern and decide for itself whether the permission would be extended within its diocese. Some dioceses (such as New Westminster) also require that the ‘local option’ definition apply to individual parishes. Only parishes that have studied, discerned and voted to permit the blessing of same-sex unions within their church would be granted permission.

If the General Synod decides to allow same-sex blessings, will all Anglican priests have to do them?

As noted above each diocese would need to decide how that permission would be extended within its area. Anglicans have traditionally allowed for conscience clauses that respect the conscience of individual clerics or parishes. For example, the canon on marriage concerning the remarriage of divorced persons contains provision for clergy who for reasons of conscience will not conduct the service. See Canon XXI – Marriage – Section 29d. http://www.anglican.ca/handbook/221_canon_XXI.pdf

If General Synod decides to allow same-sex blessings, where will that leave Canada with other Canadian churches that disagree? What about other Anglican Provinces that disagree?

Our relationships with other denominations might be affected by such a decision but that would remain to be worked out in our ongoing ecumenical partnerships and dialogues. The Bishops have agreed on a process of Shared Episcopal Oversight for parishes within a diocese that are in disagreement with their Bishop. That process is available to all parishes – on either side of the issue, if they disagree with the position the Bishop and diocese take on the matter of the blessing of same-sex unions.

Our relationships with other Anglican Provinces would need to be worked out in dialogue with each of them. The Anglican Communion is currently discussing the establishment of a covenant for our ongoing relationships with one another and that covenant, when completed and if approved by each Province, would offer guidance on the nature of our relationships.