

13 July 2017

This is a briefing paper from the Bishop's Council to the Synod to facilitate the debate and enable a vote to be taken at the October Synod on the motion proposed by the Leominster, Ross & Archenfield, Kington & Weobley Deanery Synods.

Proclaiming Christ – Growing Disciples

- Spiritual & Numerical Growth
- Contributing to the Common Good
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DEANERY SYNODS MOTION ON SERVICES OF PRAYER & DEDICATION FOR SAME-SEX COUPLES**1. Background**

- 1.1 The current debate concerning same sex relationships is not new. Its history goes back in modern times to the Wolfenden Report in the 1950s in which it was recommended that homosexuality should be decriminalised. The report gained the warm support of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Church was in the vanguard of the movement for the repeal of laws which were felt to be an intrusion into the realm of private morality.
- 1.2 Following the decriminalisation of sex between consenting adult men in 1967 there was discussion even in the early 1970s surrounding the regard that the Church might have for homosexual relationships. The mood of society was changed however by the outbreak of AIDS in the early 1980s, which was unscientifically blamed almost exclusively upon the gay community in the nation. At that time General Synod passed the so called 'Higton' Motion in 1987 which amongst other statements condemned 'homosexual genital acts.'
- 1.3 The matter did not rest there however and the House of Bishops produced *Issues in Human Sexuality* in 1991. Whilst it was issued as a discussion document which specifically stated it would not be the last word, it has come to form the basis of present church discipline, and is the basis on which members of the clergy can be routinely asked whether they will abide within the standards it sets out, amongst which are that sexual relationships are only licit within marriage as defined by the Canons, namely being between a man and a woman.
- 1.4 Further work, including reflection on Scripture and theology, has been undertaken and published as *More Issues* in 2005, and latterly the *Pilling Report* in 2013. The latter two and other relevant material can be found at www.churchofengland.org/our-views/marriage,-family-and-sexuality-issues/human-sexuality.aspx. We encourage Synod members to read further to inform themselves about the complex issues involved. A short bibliography of relevant books can be found on pp88-90 of the download <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2165248/grace2.pdf> (from the Shared Conversations).
- 1.5 The matter is further complicated by the stated views within the Anglican Communion expressed at the Lambeth Conference of 1998 in Resolution 1.10, and by subsequent resolutions and papers in response to the consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 whilst living openly in a homosexual partnership.

2. The Motion from the Deaneries

That this Synod request the House of Bishops to commend an Order of Prayer and Dedication after the registration of a civil partnership or a same sex marriage for use by ministers in exercise of their discretion under Canon B4, being a form of service neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter, together with guidance that no parish should be obliged to host, nor minister conduct, such a service.

- 2.1 It is modelled directly on the provision made in the 1980s for couples who had remarried after divorce, when there was no consensus as to whether remarriages should take place in church (albeit such marriages were always *legal*, whereas the present legislation does not provide for same-sex marriages in church at all)
- 2.2 The legal language expresses the principle that the order of service, whilst providing officially for the first time for prayer in support of a same-sex couple, should be carefully drafted (as is that for remarriage) to avoid particular theological statements.

2.3 As a commended service, this would be by its nature optional, but the motion asks for guidance to make this clear, and that it would contribute to a 'mixed economy' in which different viewpoints could continue to exist.

3. What will happen if the motion is passed

3.1 It will be added to the Agenda of General Synod, almost certainly 'parked' at least in the short term – but available for debate as and when the Business Committee judge it helpful – which may not happen if the question is resolved by other means.

3.2 Unlike a Private Member's Motion, it remains on the GS Agenda until debated or resolved otherwise – a similar motion from Southwark on women bishops remained on the agenda for over 10 years, and contributed to moving that process forward.

4. Comments from Bishop's Council on the motion

4.1 There is a debate of principle as to whether a motion of this sort is the right way to engage with the sexuality question. Although as noted above the present position of the Church of England is complex, at present the Canons recognise only marriage between a man and a woman (and this position was protected in the Same-Sex Marriage Act) and some would argue that any formal recognition of same-sex relationships, including same-sex marriage, as requested by the motion, would contradict that position (and so it would in fact be impossible to draw up a service that fits the request). On this position such a service should not be introduced until there is wider agreement on a change in the doctrine of marriage.

4.2 Alternatively, it can be argued that such a service could be carefully drafted and is not impossible, and represents something of a compromise for both sides. But given that the Church of England in part defines its doctrine through its authorised liturgies, even if this service did not amount to a change in marriage, it would increase pressure towards such a change, and Diocesan Synod would need to be confident that it wished to make a potentially controversial call.

4.3 Regardless of our decisions in the Synods of the Church of England, it is a reality that same-sex couples whose relationships are now recognised in law exist amongst our population, congregations, and clergy, and the problem of whether, or how, such relationships are treated will be a continuing issue for us to face. The motion offers one possible response to this dilemma.

4.4 Hereford Diocese does not exist in isolation. If we choose to support the motion, it will be noted across the Church of England, the Anglican Communion, and wider Christian community and society at large. We should be mindful of the direct effects on our relationship with our partner dioceses in Tanzania, who are likely to be dismayed at such a resolution. On the other hand, the Scottish Episcopal Church has recently agreed to amend its canons to allow parishes to 'opt-in' to same-sex marriage. It will also contribute to how the Diocese of Hereford is perceived within the Church of England, and members of Synod are asked to consider carefully whether they wish to support a motion which may lead to the diocese being defined in a particular way. This is in the context of an ongoing and developing debate in General Synod and the wider Church of England in which your representatives continue to be engaged in support of a variety of viewpoints.

4.5 A decision either for or against the motion will be resisted by, and cause pain to, faithful members of our diocese on one side or the other. If the motion is rejected, it will be experienced as ongoing rejection and exclusion by gay people who are seeking to follow God in conscientious belief that he calls them to faithful and committed relationships as much as he does heterosexuals who may marry in our churches by right. If the motion is approved, it will be experienced by others as a rejection of faithfulness to Scripture, and may lead those who hold the traditional position to feel unwanted in our diocese.

4.6 The Bishop's Council wishes to affirm, regardless of the decision reached by Diocesan Synod, that we remain a diocese in which a variety of views exist and are encouraged to flourish, and in which we hold difficult differences within a warm fellowship as a small and friendly diocese where we need to work together to build up God's Kingdom.

Approved by the Bishop's Council at their meeting of 15/06/17