

Summary of Marriage Commission Report

1. Why was the Commission formed?

In response to Resolution C003 of General Synod 2013 the Council of General Synod (CoGS) formed the Marriage Commission to undertake the work requested in the resolution and report back to CoGS.

2. What did General Synod 2013 ask for?

Resolution C003 asked:

Be it resolved that this General Synod:
direct the Council of General Synod to prepare and present a motion at General Synod 2016 to change Canon XXI on Marriage to allow the marriage of same sex couples in the same way as opposite sex couples, and that this motion should include a conscience clause so that no member of the clergy, bishop, congregation or diocese should be constrained to participate in or authorize such marriages against the dictates of their conscience.

This motion will also include supporting documentation that:

- a) demonstrates broad consultation in its preparation;
- b) explains how this motion does not contravene the Solemn Declaration;
- c) confirms immunity under civil law and the Human Rights Code for those bishops, dioceses and priests who refuse to participate in or authorize the marriage of same-sex couples on the basis of conscience; and
- d) provides a biblical and theological rationale for this change in teaching on the nature of Christian marriage.

3. What exactly did the Commission study? (See Section 1)

The Terms of Reference given to the Commission asked for the following:

The Commission will consider and prepare documentation about the following matters specified in General Synod Resolution C003:

- a) the Solemn Declaration in relation to this matter;
- b) the immunity under the civil law and the Human Rights Codes of the various provinces and Territories within Canada of those bishops, dioceses and priests who refuse to participate in or authorize the marriage of same-sex couples on the basis of conscience; and
- c) a biblical and theological rationale for this change in teaching on the nature of



Christian marriage.....

And this Report will include:

- i. a recommended wording of the enabling Motion called for in General Synod Resolution C003; and
- ii. a recommended wording of the conscience clause called for in General Synod Resolution C003.

4. What does the report contain?

The report includes:

- an introduction of our method for consultation; **(see Section 2)**
- reflection on the relationship of the Solemn Declaration with the proposed change; **(see Section 3)**
- legal consultation on a proposed conscience clause, **(see Section 4)**
- a biblical and theological rationale **(see Section 5)**
- a proposed motion for General Synod including a conscience clause. **(see Appendix)**
- Draft Motion **(See Appendix)**

5. Does changing the Canon contravene the Solemn Declaration? (see Section 3)

The Solemn Declaration is a founding document for the Anglican Church of Canada (1893). The Declaration of Principles of the Anglican Church of Canada declares that we are to be ‘in harmony’ with that Solemn Declaration, which includes full communion with the Church of England, the ecumenical creeds, the Scriptures, sacraments and apostolic orders. The determination of whether a particular change is ‘in harmony’ with the Declaration is the responsibility of General Synod. The Anglican Church of Canada has made changes in the past, sometimes prior to similar changes being made by the Church of England. Each change requires careful consideration and approval by the General Synod.

6. Will making these changes to the marriage canon affect our relationships with other churches?

(see Section 2)

It is clear that a change to the marriage canon would cause concern for our Anglican Communion partners as it would for our ecumenical partnership with the Roman Catholic Church. The nature of the change to these relationships has not been named specifically. It would not change our relationship with other full communion or ecumenical dialogue partners, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada or the United Church of Canada, who already offer same-sex marriage.



7. Will changing the Canon make it difficult or impossible for dissenting clergy to follow their consciences? (see Section 4)

The proposed conscience clause included in the resolution changing Canon XXI is intended to protect the rights of bishops, ministers, dioceses, and congregations to follow their conscience in this matter. It is already the case that clergy are not obligated to officiate at a wedding and may decline to do so (See Canon XXI 1.11.d)

8. Is the church allowing its teachings to be dictated by society rather than scripture?

This is an important question, as we are called by St. Paul “not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed through the renewing of our minds.” (Rom 12:1) The report acknowledges the central role scripture plays in Anglicans’ understanding of God’s revelation and places the Bible at the centre of our discussion. It emphasizes that the Bible is interpreted best in the community of the church and, while acknowledging the importance of the history of interpretation over time, also identifies that it is as we place ourselves and the unique circumstances of our time in the biblical narrative of God’s unfolding purpose that we hear God’s word anew.

While it is true that society will sometimes pose questions to the church that will contain the impetus to go deeper, at other times it will be the church’s own people--in this case its gay and lesbian members. This challenge will involve listening afresh to the voice of God through scripture, not only on the question of same-sex marriage but on the meaning of marriage and sexuality for all. It will hear this voice in continuity with the way the church across time and space has heard it, but in a manner appropriate to their own context. Finally, it will hear God’s voice through the gifts of scientific and other kinds of knowledge.

(See 5.1.1)

9. Do the proposed changes in the Marriage Canon represent a change in the Church’s definition of marriage?

The Marriage Canon defines marriage as a lifelong union between two qualified persons, established by God’s grace when couples declare their intent for such a union and exchange vows. This union is in faithful love, to the exclusion of all others, and for better or for worse. This definition would not change. What would change is the understanding of “qualified persons” to now include persons of the same gender. What would also change is the understanding of one of the three purposes of marriage: procreation (if it may be).

(See 5.1.2; 5.2.4)



10. Are the proposed changes in the Marriage Canon being driven by special interest groups within the church?

No. The Anglican Church of Canada has for more than forty years been struggling with the inclusion of its gay and lesbian members. It began to do this at a time when the acceptance of gay and lesbian people was emerging in the Canadian mainstream. It has also come to realize that sins of omission and commission against them required acknowledgement and repentance. A decision to affirm the sanctity of committed same-sex relationships was taken at General Synod 2004. The church's repentance can never be merely understood as accommodating "special interests" within the church, but constitutes a call to the discipline of serious theological reflection.

For the Anglican Church of Canada the sanctity of same-sex relationships is no longer in question, even though a number of Anglicans continue to have difficulty reconciling same-sex relationships with their understanding of sexuality and scripture. The question the Report addresses is whether the language of marriage can apply to same-sex relationships characterized as holy. (See 5.1.2)

11. Why make the changes to the Marriage Canon? Isn't blessing civilly-married same-sex relationships enough?

Section 5.3.2 addresses this question directly. There are two broad problems with the status quo. First, blessing civil marriages denies to same-sex couples the sacramental significance of marriage in the context of Christian worship that is available for heterosexual couples. Second, the service of blessing expressly forbids the restating of vows, taking for granted the validity of whatever vows were said, whether these vows were consistent with a Christian view of marriage or not.

12. How do you understand the differences between civil marriage and marriage in the church?

Although we use the same word when a couple is married by a justice of the peace or in the Christian Church, there is a distinction between legal marriage and what the church teaches about marriage. (5.2.1) In the civil realm, marriage is a legal contract determining property and inheritance rights, and providing stability for social order.

When Christians talk about marriage, they mean more than a civil ceremony that happens to take place in a church, with a priest or minister presiding instead of a magistrate. Articulating that "more" is what we mean by a theology of marriage. Marriage is understood to be a Christian way



of life (5.2.4), and is located within the biblical narrative of a good creation fallen into sin but under redemptive grace in Jesus Christ, and pointing toward the new creation. Marriage is thus an aspect of discipleship. It looks back at the covenanting Creator who gifted all things with life (5.2.5), and ahead to the renewal of all things after the image of Jesus Christ. Marriage remembers the companionship, even communion, of the first humans in the garden. But it also looks ahead to “the uniting of all things in Christ” (Eph 1:9-10) which is symbolized in the mystery of the church’s relation to Jesus Christ (Eph 5:32). This relation reorders and reorients marriage (5.2.4), which is why some Anglicans call marriage a sacrament (5.2.8).

13. What about the creation accounts?

Section 5.2.3 highlights the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, noting their differences and addressing ways in which they can be understood more broadly beyond exclusively describing heterosexual marriage and procreation. God did indeed create humans male and female, according to the first creation story (Gen 1:1-2:3). Genesis tells us that God blessed them and commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” (Gen 1:27) Clearly procreation is intended here, and biological difference is necessary to that (5.2.2). However, nothing is said in this passage about marriage. The first mention of marriage is in the second creation story (Gen 2:4-25), though there is no mention there of procreation. The purpose of marriage is companionship, a helper “suitable” for the man in his task of taking care of the garden. This purpose can be realized in same- or opposite-sex marriage.

14. What does Jesus teach about marriage? Doesn’t he say about marriage , “God created them male and female” (Matthew 19:3-12; Mark 10:1-12)

The question asked in Matthew 19 (cf. Mark 10:1-12) pertains to marriage and divorce, asked by the Pharisees as a way to trap Jesus. **Section 5.2.3** explores this question in relation to the creation accounts noting that Jesus and the apostles in later texts focus on the nature of the relationship ‘in Christ’ to Christ and the church. Jesus puts the two creation stories together, but he does so in such a way as to reinforce the permanence of the marriage bond, not the gender of the partners. (See 5.2.3.1)

15. Do the proposed changes in the Marriage Canon destroy the symbol of marriage as image of Christ and his bride, the church?

Paul draws on the rich imagery of heterosexual marriage to speak of the relationship between Christ and the church in Eph 5. Yet what is in view here is neither biological complementarity nor procreation but self-giving love. Indeed, the love of Christ for the church is the pattern for marriage. (See 5.2.3.2)



16. Do the proposed changes in the Marriage Canon change the meaning of marriage for heterosexual couples?

They do not change the meaning of marriage but broaden it to include same-sex unions. If adopted, same-sex marriage would become part of the rich, symbolic tapestry of marriage. The purposes of marriage would be retained, but the idea of procreation expanded to embrace “fruitfulness and the capacity to give life” (Jean Vanier).

(See 5.2.7.2)

17. What exactly is being proposed?

The Report charts a third way between imitating what has been done in civil marriage (simply changing “man and woman” to “the couple”) and maintaining the status quo of blessing same-sex civil marriages (see #6 above). Neither is adequate to the challenge of the resolution placed before the church, which is incorporating same-sex relationships into the church’s understanding of marriage in a biblically and theologically responsible way. Marriage in Christian tradition is spoken of in at least two different kinds of ways. First, marriage is understood as a creation-ordinance established for the filling of the earth. Second, marriage is understood as a sign of redemption of the broken creation and the reconciliation of all things in Christ. While same-sex marriage pertains more to the second, rather than to the first, understanding it serves as a sign of this unity in Christ.

(See 5.3.3)

18. How will General Synod proceed with the proposed resolution?

Since the marriage canon is considered a matter of doctrine a change to this canon will require approval by two successive General Synods. Therefore, if it passes at GS2016 it will need to come back to General Synod 2019 before being enacted. In order to pass this canon will require a two-thirds majority in each Order (laity, clergy and bishops) on both occasions. In between the two Synods it is referred to diocesan and Provincial Synods for consideration. It is a decision that the church will have to reach, not by arguments alone, but by prayerful discernment of the movement of the Spirit in our midst. (See 5.4)

