

A Critique of *A Way Forward*, the report of the Working Group of the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia.

I. The problems with the report

There can be no doubt that the members of the Working Party that produced *A Way Forward* tried to the best of their ability to produce a report that fulfilled the mandate given to them by Motion 30, the agreement reached at the meeting of the General Synod of the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia in May 2014 about how to take forward the issues of 'rightly-ordered relationships, the doctrine and nature of marriage, and the call from some to ordain partnered gay and lesbian Christians to holy orders.'¹

Their report attempts to maintain their church's traditional doctrine of marriage while making provision for the blessing of same-gender relationships by those who feel that this is the right thing to do. It also attempt to link this development to an understanding of the theology of Anglican ordination and of the theology of marriage.

Unfortunately, their attempt to do this is theologically problematic for the following eight reasons.

First, the report contains no discussion of the difference between legitimate and illegitimate diversity. It claims that unity 'flourishes through variety and diversity' but it does not consider the issue of whether some forms of belief and behaviour are incompatible with the unity that God wills for his people.

For example, Christians have traditionally said that the unity of the Church has to be based on a common belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9) and that the unity of the Church cannot be confined to one ethnic group but has to include disciples of Christ drawn from all nations (Matthew 28:19). This means that a form of unity that permitted people to deny the Lordship of Christ or his resurrection or that excluded a particular ethnic group would be an illegitimate form of unity.

What *A Way Forward* fails to provide is any sort of framework for deciding whether permitting the blessing of same-sex relationships and the ordaining of those within them is compatible with the unity that God wills for his people of whether, like the two examples I have just given, it is incompatible with it.

Secondly, in a similar way, the report contains an inadequate account of doctrinal development.

a. It is not clear how the text which the report cites, Hebrews 1:1-3a, is relevant to the issue of the development of Christian doctrine. It is about the way in which the partial revelation given through the Scriptures of the Old Testament has been superseded by the full revelation given in Christ, not about how Christian belief can or should develop.

b. While it is undoubtedly the case that Christian doctrine has developed over the centuries and that this has led, as the report says, to 'a deeper and richer understanding of the faith,' not all developments of doctrine have been right developments. For example, Arianism, Pelagianism and the theology of the 'German Christians' of the 1930s are all examples of doctrinal development, but most people would argue that they were not right developments because the accounts of the Christian faith that they put forward are in various ways incompatible with the witness of the New Testament.

¹ *A Way Forward*, p.1.

What the report once again fails to provide is any sort of framework for assessing doctrinal development that would indicate whether or not permitting the blessing of same-sex relationships and the blessing of those within them was or was not a right development.

Thirdly, the report fails to provide a convincing theological justification for its proposal to allow the blessing of same-sex civil marriages.

Given the almost identical nature of the two liturgies of blessing put forward by the report as shown in the table above and the repeated use of the term marriage in both of them, and given the repeated references to marriage in the theological arguments put forward to justify the proposed liturgies, it is clear that the report thinks that the form 1 rite of blessing proposed for use with same-sex couples is the blessing of a marriage. To put it simply, if the form 2 rite is the blessing of a marriage (and that is clearly what it is meant to be) then so is the form 1 rite for same-sex couples.

Unfortunately, the arguments put forward by the report do not show that a same-sex relationship can be what the Bible and the unbroken tradition of the Christian Church down the centuries have called marriage.

As the report makes clear in its citations from the *New Zealand Prayer Book* and the 1928 version of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the traditional Christian view of marriage is that it is a relationship between a man and a woman one of the three purposes of which is the procreation of children. The report, however, dispenses with the necessity of either of these elements in favour of the idea that where there is love, union, covenant, gift and a household there can be a marital relationship which the Church can recognise and bless even when the relationship is not between a man and woman and is therefore necessarily incapable of being procreative.

The report ignores entirely the issue of how a same-sex relationship that is intrinsically closed to the possibility of procreation can be called marriage. It therefore fails to give any justification for its departure from the Christian tradition in this regard.

The report justifies dispensing with the requirement for marriage to involve a man and a woman by building on the work of Phyllis Tribble and arguing that in the creation account in Genesis 2 what is important for the 'first earth creature' is not 'finding a partner of the opposite sex but a partner of the apposite sex.' The fact that Adam's companion was Eve was thus right for him, and an opposite sex partner would be right for someone of a heterosexual disposition, but for someone of a homosexual orientation the 'apposite partner' would be someone of the same sex.

It is this belief in the dispensability of the partner being someone of the opposite sex that lies behind the re-wording of the Genesis 2 account in the form 1 rite of blessing.

'In the beginning, when God created the first human,
God declared that it is not good for us to remain alone.
Out of compassion, God created a companion
flesh of flesh and bone of bone,
so that two people could comfort and care for each other,
and thereby a pattern of mutual support and faithful partnership
was established from the very beginning.'

In this re-wording the fact that Adam and Eve were male and female is irrelevant. All that matters is that they were two people of whatever sex.

In response to this argument there are two points that need to be made.

a. In Genesis 2 we are not dealing with a sexually undifferentiated 'earth creature,' but with a male human being. As the American Old Testament scholar Richard Davidson puts it: 'There is no hint in the text of an originally bisexual or sexually undifferentiated being split into two different sexes.'² After the creation of Eve Adam is clearly a male human being and there is nothing in the text to suggest that he only became male as a result of the creation of Eve. To quote Davidson again: 'Nothing has changed in the makeup of 'the human' during his sleep except the loss of a rib.'³

b. The reason that the woman is the 'opposite' companion for this man is precisely because as a woman she is sexually 'opposite' to him.

In Genesis 1:27 (and 5:2) human beings are said to have been created in God's image and likeness as two opposite sexes, male and female, and as such they are given a mandate to procreate in Genesis 1:28. The way the book of Genesis is constructed the reader is expected to have read Genesis 1 first and to read Genesis 2 in the light of it. This means that Genesis 2 needs to be seen as a narrative expansion of Genesis 1:26-28 explaining in the form of a story why God created human beings as male and female. The point of the story is that the only fit companion for the man is a woman and any doctrine of marriage based on this story has to reflect this fact. Men and women, says Genesis 2, were made for each other and the nature of marriage as a relationship between men and women reflects this fact ('*Therefore* a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.').

Furthermore, it is as a marital couple consisting of a man and a woman that Adam and Eve are able to fulfil the command to 'be fruitful and multiply' in Genesis 1:28. Marriage and procreation go together as we see in Genesis 3:15-16 and Genesis 4:1-2.

What the report offers, therefore, is an account of marriage that contradicts the account of the offered in the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, an account of marriage which Jesus himself treats as a normative in his discussion of marriage and divorce recorded in the Gospels (Matthew 19:3-12, Mark 10:2-12) and which has therefore been accepted as normative by every subsequent generation of the Christian Church up to the present day.

What the report is offering is an entirely novel definition of what marriage is and it fails to show any good reason why this new definition should be accepted.

Fourthly, the report is clear that what is being blessed is a 'one flesh' sexual union: 'this is certainly a bodily union, one of intimate physical presence with one's partner.'⁴ This means that what the report is proposing is explicitly the blessing of same-sex sexual activity.

However, the report entirely fails to engage with the fact that the Bible consistently views such activity in extremely negative terms, regarding it as an 'abomination' that signifies the way in which the human race has rejected its creator, that violates God's law and that has the capacity to exclude people from the life of God's kingdom (see Genesis 19, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Deuteronomy 23:17-18, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Timothy 1:10 and Jude 7). The report simply ignores the fact that such texts exist.

It also entirely ignores the 'historic understanding held by Christians for two millennia that homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian discipleship, and church discipline may be

² Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh – Sexuality in the Old Testament*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007, p.20.

³ *Ibid*, p.20.

⁴ *A Way Forward* p.15.

necessary if the practice is habitual.⁵ The witness of both Scripture and Tradition is thus treated as though it did not exist.

Following Rowan Williams, the report argues that sexual desire is 'a good gift from God' because it enables people to bring joy to one another. What it does not consider at all is the fact that the Bible, and the Christian tradition following the Bible, have consistently held that the only legitimate context for the expression of sexual desire is heterosexual marriage because the context for which sex was designed by God is the union between husband and wife. As before, this consistent tradition is simply ignored.

Fifthly, the report proposes that someone in a same-sex civil marriage that has been blessed by the Church should be regarded as living a 'rightly ordered' life and therefore should be eligible for ordination and declares that this will 'not involve lowering the standard required for ordination.'⁶

This argument depends entirely on an acceptance of the view that a same-sex marriage blessed by the Church is a 'rightly ordered' relationship. 'Rightly ordered' here means what has traditionally been called 'holy' and as we have seen the report fails to make out a convincing case that a sexually active same-sex relationship should be seen as either marriage or holy. In the absence of such a convincing case it is hard to see why what is involved should not be seen as a lowering of the standard for ordination.

From a traditional Christian point of view there is also conversely something very odd about the suggestion that someone in a heterosexual civil marriage that conforms to the pattern set out in Genesis 2:24 is not living a 'rightly ordered' life and is therefore ineligible for ordination until their relationship has been blessed according to the liturgical form set out in the report. This proposed requirement for an additional blessing is not part of the existing Canon relating to ministry and it begs the question as to why an existing heterosexual marriage requires a blessing in order to be 'rightly ordered.' Surely a faithful, monogamous, heterosexual marriage is in itself the right ordering of a person's sexual life?

Sixthly, the report claims that what is proposed does not involve 'a change in the Church's doctrine of marriage.' This claim is impossible to sustain.

As we have already noted, the doctrine of marriage set out in the existing formularies of the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia (in line with the historic understanding of the Christian Church as a whole) is that it is a relationship between a man and a woman one of the purposes of which is the procreation of children. What the report is proposing is that this understanding of marriage should be extended to include as well a relationship between two people of the same sex whose relationship has the marks of love, union, covenant, gift and household even though such a relationship would be intrinsically closed to the possibility of procreation.

This extension would without doubt involve a change in doctrine. Even though the traditional view of marriage would remain in place, the fact that another view of marriage would be officially accepted by the church alongside it and would form the basis for the church's practice would mean that a doctrinal change had taken place. If what is proposed is not doctrinal change it would be difficult to know what would be.

⁵ S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness – The consistent Christian teaching on homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition*, Nashville: Baker Academic, 2016, p. 141.

⁶ *A Way Forward*, p.9.

This would also mean that in spite of the fact that dioceses and individual clergy would be able to decline to accept the new services of blessing it would still be the case that they would be part of a church whose doctrine had changed. The church as a whole would have changed its position even if they declined to change with it.

Whether or not such a change would involve a 'Departure from the Doctrine and Sacraments of Christ' and therefore be in violation of the Te Pouhere (constitution) of the church depends, as the report says, on what is meant by the term 'the Doctrine of Christ.' It is difficult for someone who is not an expert on the Te Pouhere to offer a fully informed opinion about the matter, but the words of the report:

'... General Synod / te Hīnota Whānui is bound to hold and maintain 'the Doctrine and Sacraments of Christ as the Lord commanded in Holy Scripture and as explained in

The Book of Common Prayer 1662

Te Rawiri

The Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons

The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion

A New Zealand Prayer Book – He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa' '7

seem to rule out a minimalist approach that restricts the 'Doctrine of Christ' to some particular aspect, or aspects, of Christian doctrine. What seems more plausible is that the term refers in general terms to the whole of the teaching given by Christ to his people in the Bible and subsequently reflected in the four formularies mentioned. This being the case, the traditional doctrine of marriage set out in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and *A New Zealand Prayer Book* would form part of the 'Doctrine of Christ' which the General Synod 'is bound to hold and maintain.' It would then follow that the proposal for the blessing of same-sex marriages contained in the report would be unconstitutional.

Seventhly, the report ignores entirely the teaching of the Anglican Communion about marriage and human sexuality as set out in Lambeth 1.10 and what impact any change in the doctrine and practice of the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia would have on its relations with other churches in the Communion. It also ignores entirely the question of what effect such a change would have on wider ecumenical relationships. Just as it ignores the witness of the Church down the ages the report also ignores the wider Church today.

Eighthly, the final problem about the report is about what it might portend for the future. If the only criteria for marriage is love, union, covenant, gift and household it is difficult to see on what grounds polygamous marriages (which already get a favourable mention in the report as examples of marital constancy⁸), or incestuous marriages would be ruled out as candidates for blessing if they meet the criteria laid down in the report of being permitted by state law. On what theological grounds would the report rule them out?

II. The significance of the report for the wider Anglican debate about same-sex relationships

The significance of this report for the wider Anglican debate about same-sex relationships is that it shows that no church can have it both ways when it comes to the doctrine of marriage. It is impossible for a church to consistently uphold a traditional Christian view of marriage while at the

⁷ *Ibid*, p.19.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.15.

same time being willing to bless same-sex relationships as an alternative form of marriage. The path taken by the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia is therefore one that other Anglican churches (including the Church of England) should not go down.

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