

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

The Purpose of the Report

In May 2014 the meeting of the General Synod of the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia reached an agreement known as 'Motion 30' 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.'

This motion did two key things

First, it declared:

'The Church has received and articulated an understanding of intimate human relationships which it expresses through her doctrine of marriage between a man and a woman, and is life-long and monogamous.

We uphold this traditional doctrine of marriage.'

Secondly, it mandated the setting up of a Working Party to recommend to the next General Synod:

(a) A process and structure by which those who believe the blessing of same-gender relationships is contrary to scripture, doctrine, tikanga¹ or civil law, will not be required to perform any liturgy for the blessing of same-gender relationships, will continue to have integrity within the Church, and will remain compliant with the parliamentary legislation within any relevant jurisdiction;

(b) A process and structure by which those who believe the blessing of same-gender relationships is consonant with scripture, doctrine, tikanga and civil law may perform a yet to be developed liturgy for blessing same-gender relationships in a manner which maintains their integrity within the Church, is compliant with the parliamentary legislation within any relevant jurisdiction, and can remain in communion under scripture, doctrine and law; including

(i) A proposal for a new liturgy to bless right ordered same-gender relationships; (ii) A process and legislation (whether church or parliamentary) by which a new liturgy to bless right ordered same-gender relationships may be adopted.'

Recognising that what was recommended by the Working Party would have an impact on the Church's theology of ordination and marriage, the General Synod also asked it to report on: '(a) The theology of ordination to Anglican orders and requirements for that; and (b) The theology of marriage.'

The purpose of *A Way Forward* is to fulfil this mandate.

The Content of the Report

The report consists of four things:

- A theological argument, rooted in a particular reading of Genesis 2, for permitting the blessing of existing civil marriages, including same-sex marriages, in dioceses that agree to this, and for allowing people who have received such a blessing to be ordained in such dioceses.

¹ Maori ways and customs.

- A constitutional argument that such blessings might be lawful under the Church's constitution.
- Draft liturgies for such blessings.
- Proposed changes to the Canons to permit such blessings and subsequent ordinations to happen.

The argument of the report

The report argues that what is proposed will not involve lowering the standard required for ordination because the Church will still require those coming to be ordained to either be celibate or in 'rightly ordered' relationships.

It further argues that it is legitimate to bless civil marriages, including same-sex marriages, because (a) in line with Motion 30 the Church's existing doctrine of marriage and existing marriage rite remain unchanged and (b) the relationships that would be blessed manifest a 'number of virtues that honour each partner and God.' These virtues are love, union (including sexual union) between the couple, a covenant relationship, giving to and receiving from each other, and the creation of a household for the purpose of sanctifying its members.

The report contends that although there the change that is proposed would not necessarily involve a change to the 'Doctrine and Sacraments of Christ' that would be unlawful under the Church's constitution because: (a) the Church does consider marriage a sacrament and (b) it is not clear what the term the 'doctrine of Christ' includes.

The problems with the report

- a. It argues that what is proposed falls within the scope of permissible diversity and legitimate doctrinal development without having first given an adequate theological account of the limits of diversity and what constitutes legitimate doctrinal development.
- b. It fails to give a convincing theological justification for seeing same-sex relationships as marriages and ignores the consistent witness of the Bible and Christian Church against same-sex sexual activity.
- c. It fails to show that the proposed blessing of civil marriages does not involve a *de facto* change in the Church's doctrine of marriage and that ordaining those in same-sex civil marriages would not lower the standard for ordination by abandoning the requirement for holiness of life among those who are ordained.
- d. It ignores the teaching of the Anglican Communion and the impact of what is proposed on links with other Anglican churches and wider ecumenical relationships;
- e. It opens the door theologically to the blessing of polygamous and incestuous relationships since they would seem to fall within its criteria for relationships it would be legitimate to bless provide they were to be authorised by the state.

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 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.

M B Davie 30.4.16