

CONSIDERING SEXUALITY

Discussions of human sexuality, and in particular homosexuality, have been at the forefront of church deliberations for many years now. Janet Marshall, chair of the Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee addresses in the following article how this synod will approach the issue. The article was originally published on the General Synod Web Forum (<http://www.ministrymatters.ca/settingsail>).

Once again members at next month's General Synod (GS) will be asked to consider issues of human sexuality. This will mark our next step in the now 34-year journey of debate, study, and discernment that began with the commissioning of the first task force by the House of Bishops in 1976.

SINCE GENERAL SYNOD 2007

Much work has been done over the last triennium in response to GS 2007's resolutions and to prepare for this next debate. The Primate's Theological Commission (PTC) produced the Galilee Report (<http://www.anglican.ca/primate/ptc/galilee/1-report.htm>) along with accompanying papers. This study addresses the theological question of whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a faithful, Spirit-led development of Christian doctrine, and Scripture's witness to the integrity of every human person and the question of the sanctity of human relationships.

Also in this triennium, Faith, Worship and Ministry (FWM) took on the task of considering a theological rationale for a change to the marriage canon to allow for the marriage of same-sex couples. The result is the Rothesay Report (<http://www.anglican.ca/about/committees/fwmc/rothesay-report.htm>).

Inspired by the experience of Lambeth and an openness and desire to deepen relationships and understanding, a number of dioceses have formed partnerships—nationally and internationally—for dialogue on matters of human sexuality and of mission. And yes, yet another study process was produced to engage parishes and other diocesan groups in a study of the Christian perspective of human sexuality through the lens of scripture, reason, tradition, and current scientific understanding. However, if truth were told, the response to this program has been lukewarm. It seems like after years of study and discussion, and given the wide diversity of cultures and contexts present within our church, we find ourselves today either saturated with these processes, or still unengaged. These initiatives join the countless other studies, publications and processes available to resource our discernment.

WE DON'T AGREE

In planning for how to frame this synod's debate on sexuality, the Council of General Synod considered what we have learned from our work and journey thus far. The simple fact is that we don't agree.

In light of the work of our theologians and church leaders, synods, pastors, interest groups, and the parish and diocesan groups that have studied and prayed together, we don't agree. In light of our heartfelt commitments to the Gospel, to living God's mission in the world, and to the Anglican Church nationally and internationally, we don't agree on how to resolve our issues regarding sexuality. And we are well practiced in our disagreements. Our suspicions of each other are high as we once again take our sides and prepare for the next debate. Within this context no motion can come to the floor of General Synod without the suspicion of bias or manipulation.

PLANS FOR GENERAL SYNOD 2010

We don't agree—and what is at stake is sustaining a community within the context of a complex and conflicted argument about its moral life. This has shaped the Council of General Synod's decision of how to bring the sexuality discussions to GS 2010. The result is a process that will allow for conversation and listening first, before putting forward a motion. Members of synod will participate in a set of discussions. The content of these discussions will be used to shape the resolutions that will then come to the floor.

The starting point for discussion will be the House of Bishops' statement of October 2008. This is a public statement issued after the experience of Lambeth by our church's leadership, who in themselves embody the diversity of theological, scriptural, ecclesiological, and pastoral commitments present within the church. It shares something of their discussion and struggle and outlines that which, within the challenge of disagreement and diversity, the bishops were able to affirm. It serves to guide the church, naming both requests and hopes for the church as we continue to discern the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

Each discussion group will be facilitated by a synod member. A recorder, recruited locally from outside the synod membership, will be provided for each group. A collation of the discussions will be prepared by the reporters with Bishop Linda Nicholls, chair of the Primate's Theological Commission, and myself as chair of the Faith, Worship and Ministry committee. The prolocutor, Canon Robert Falby, will share the results in plenary. Printed copies of both the complete collation and the summary documents will be made available to GS members between discussion sessions.

What do you think about this different method of discernment for controversial issues at General Synod?

