

## **Statement of the Anglican Indigenous Bishops to the Commission on the Marriage Canon**

To our Relatives in Christ,

It is not easy for us to approach you on the issue of marriage in contemporary society, for us, a dangerously complex cross-cultural discussion. Though we have strong feelings and commitments on these matters, we are reluctant to speak. The intense and divisive nature of this discussion in the larger Canadian society is made much more threatening in our communities by our extended experience of misunderstanding and harmful judgment by Western institutions, especially the Church. The way the language and politics around the issues of marriage and sexuality divide people makes it seem all but impossible for our true thoughts and feelings to be heard. We have come to believe, however, that we must take the risk of expressing what we understand to be the opinions of our elders. For years now, we have been in prayer—we have meditated on Scripture, listened to what our elders have to say, and thought about the traditional ways of our peoples. With these we come to you, praying for the Spirit of Truth to lead us to the right.

Despite our mixed feelings, we are grateful that you give us an opportunity to speak. We speak to you as Indigenous Bishops and we will try to speak in an advisory manner, expressing, not only our opinion, but an account of some of the breadth of opinion among Indigenous people. We understand ourselves to be bishops for all our peoples, regardless of their opinion, sexuality, or faith. Though we take responsibility for what we say here, we have discussed these ideas with many and, more particularly, sought the counsel of one of our elders in the preparation of this statement. The most important parts of our report communicate what we understand our elders to be saying about marriage. It must be understood that this is spoken in the very real and hazardous context of our community life and the crisis in our family life today. This context is directly connected to the very painful history of colonization and its ongoing stress, poverty, and dispossession.

It is not forgotten by our elders and peoples that a great deal of this history was activated by attempts to destroy our families by the government and church. This leads to our primary position in this discussion. It is no longer acceptable to impose Western cultural questions and approaches on our societies, as if they were another segment or faction of a Euro-North American whole, either needing to be updated, tolerated, or assimilated in to the larger body. We absolutely reserve the right to make these choices and decisions, now and forever, on our own terms and in our own way.

At present, we do not hear our concerns and approach in either side of this very strained discussion. Our approach is not understood by either, and so we must, as far apart from that conflict as is possible, express our position with as much clarity as we are able. Our second primary position is, therefore, that our understanding of marriage appears to be quite different from the dominating society and both sides of this discussion within it.

For the rest of Canadian society, marriage appears to be a social contract between two people, who have the right, under law and as a human right, to form their family life in any way they see fit. (We can understand this point of view, since we are—sometimes by choice and

happily, sometimes with no choice and unhappily—compelled to be a part of the larger whole. We understand the Canadian society and its norms much better than it understands us.) In the understanding of the larger society, the focus of marriage is the individual choice, well-being, and happiness of the couple.

Although the well-being and happiness of couples is essential, for our elders marriage is a ceremony of the community and the primary place where we enact our understanding of Creation and the relationship of God to the universe. It is a ceremonial act that portrays our world view; it is our cosmology. What the ceremony says to the community is every bit as important as what it says to the couple. Many of our communities connect this ceremony to our experience of acceptance, salvation, and freedom in Christ. Marriage has become, for them, a picture of this mutual acceptance. Today, this is, in many communities, an affirmation of our Indigenous life and, though it may seem to be strange to many, an affirmation of our life before the arrival of Westerners and their missionaries.

Marriage is, in Indigenous understanding, an act in the spiritual realm, activated by ceremony and the commitment and love of the couples and their families. Encouraged by Christian theology and the reading of Scripture, many Indigenous Peoples enthusiastically held on to a view of marriage that saw the ceremony as activating a number of hidden but healing present rivers of spirit within the larger community. It is not that this is the only place in Creation where this happens. It is, however, the place where our elders see it in a clear and complete way. In this, the differences of sexuality, family, and clan, expressed in the marriage ceremony and family life protocols, were a necessary and essential part of this flow. Older members of the commission may remember a time when the Western view of marriage was also more sympathetic to the spiritual nature of Indigenous marriage. In this view, the spiritual character of the act was the most important part and the elements that predominate today were secondary and were derived from the first.

Though we are painfully aware that many people can no longer even imagine our cosmology or our understanding of marriage, the inspiration we receive from the world view of our elders is our only motivation; it is the encouragement that brings us to speak in the face of almost certain misunderstandings and opposition. Other questions raised about sexuality may receive various levels of reception within our communities, like anywhere else. For the most part, Indigenous counter-statements to modern trends in the understanding of sexuality were not directed at gays and lesbians, who have been and remain—in those of our communities that remain healthy, balanced, and inspired by Indigenous values—an accepted part of our communities. With this statement, we affirm that we understand gay and lesbian Indigenous people to be members of our communities and family. Not only worthy of our pastoral care and welcome, they are our brothers, sisters, children, and elders. There is no place for hatred and separation in Indigenous communities and, especially, in Indigenous Christian communities.

It is difficult to know, in the widespread and deep destruction of our history and traditions by colonial occupation, what our views were in the past, in times prior to the advent of European occupation and domination. Though many, if not most, of our societies appear to have had protocols of welcome and acceptance for homosexual members, we see little evidence that these practices were thought to be similar to marriage. Though these things were treated in various ways across our many and varied communities, we understand that there are many similarities

between the way marriage is viewed in the past and the way it is understood by many of our elders today.

We know that, for many, our insistence that 1) Indigenous communities must decide and rule on these matters on their own, and that 2) marriage is understood differently in our communities, will be seen as opinions that are tied to colonization and designed to express hurtful and hateful attitudes towards the gay and lesbian community. We disagree. We also hope to show that this is not true by our actions, through our fellowship, compassion, and love toward all people. We must always, at the same time, simply and resolutely declare what we believe to be true and what we believe is for the best.

Among our own people we acknowledge that there is no clear consensus about many aspects of these things. This is why we have taken the approach of this statement, speaking to our understanding of what our elders are saying, but also acknowledging that there are those who disagree—to them we extend our hand in the hope of mutual compassion and love. We know that there is also disagreement among our elders about what our own response should be, if the Anglican Church of Canada changes its teachings and laws about marriage. Some view this as intolerable, a few find this acceptable, and many would be willing to accept that we disagree with the larger church on these matters, as long as our societies, communities, and nations have the acknowledged and welcome freedom to act on their own. This last view is certainly the most widely held across the whole of our discussions on the issue. As we report these views, we cannot predict how this discussion will go forward among us. We can assure everyone that, if changes are made in church teachings and practice, there will be an extended conversation among our communities regarding an acceptable way forward.

We, as the Indigenous bishops of Indigenous communities, declare our commitment to what we understand to be the traditional, spiritual, and Indigenous understanding of marriage. We, therefore, cannot accept any changes that might be made without consultation with our communities. We pledge our love and pastoral care to all, within and without our communities, whatever their position may be. We uphold the inherent right and ability of our communities to make these decisions on their own. Finally, we promise to continue in a spirit of reconciliation and conversation with any who are willing to join us in the fellowship of Christ's disciples. With this statement, we believe that we must also commit ourselves to the renewal of family life in our communities, through our love and respect for every one of our members. At the same time, this discussion and the crisis of our communities, call us to begin a new era of the honoring of the ceremony and discipline of marriage.

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