

St. Michael Report – Study Guide

ST. MICHAEL REPORT

The St. Michael Report is an important document in the life of our church. General Synod 2004 voted to defer a clause of a resolution calling the church to "affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod, with the concurrence of its bishop, to authorize the blessing of committed same sex unions." In deferring the resolution it requested the Primate's Theological Commission "to review, consider and report to the Council of General Synod, by its spring 2006 meeting, whether the blessing of committed same sex unions is a matter of doctrine." The commission worked hard to complete its report in time for adequate study and response by the people of the Anglican Church across the country. It was presented to the Primate in May 2005.

The report represents the careful reflections of a diverse group of theologians of the Anglican Church of Canada on the question of whether the issue of blessing same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine. An issue of doctrine goes to the heart of what defines us as Christian and Anglican. Changes in doctrine are treated with gravity and care in discussion and reflection before being accepted. The discernment of the nature of changes requires all members of the Church to share in the discussion and reflection as we prepare for General Synod 2007.

Therefore, the Faith, Worship & Ministry Committee of General Synod has prepared the following study to help explore the report. Please consider it carefully and then share your insights, discussion,

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questions and suggestions with us. The responses will be collated and considered in preparation for General Synod in Winnipeg 2007.

STUDY FORMAT

Each congregation, parish or diocese will have its own preferred methods of engaging in discussion and study. The following questions/suggestions may be used over several sessions (1 – 1 ½ hours) or offered as a longer study event (half or full-day). In whatever format you choose please incorporate the following:

I. Guidelines for each participant:

Prior to the study sessions: Read the whole report.

As you read the St. Michael Report:

1. **Read** the biblical references in the report as you read each paragraph.
2. **Jot down**
 - i. words – ideas that challenge or affirm your own understanding,
 - ii. words or concepts for which you need further explanation
 - iii. questions you have.
3. Bring your notes to the study.

II. Guidelines for facilitators:

1. Establish rules for participation that allow all perspectives to be shared freely.

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2. Appoint a recorder to note the process used, any helpful observations – eg. What worked well and what did not, and the information summary of the discussion to be shared with Faith, Worship & Ministry Committee.
3. **Ensure that notes are sent to FWM via e-mail or post. (Address & email on page 9)**

A. DOCTRINES – WHAT ARE THEY?

Introduction: (St.M. Para 8-12)

The following introduction explores the nature of doctrines and their relationship to our faith and worship.

DOCTRINES are the building blocks of our faith. God's people throughout the ages have distilled their experience of God into ideas/words/formulations that express their understanding of God and God's relationship with the world. These formulations answer the fundamental questions:

Who is God?

What is God like?

How does God communicate with us?

What does God expect of us?

For example, when Moses meets God in the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-14) and asks, 'Whom shall I say sent me?' God answers, "I am". An important first doctrine is that God exists, God 'is'.

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Through the experiences of God's people in meeting and learning about and from God, through their writings (collected in the Bible), through the life of the church and through our own experience we acquire the building blocks (doctrines) that give shape to our world and how we see and know ourselves in it as people of God. These building blocks form the framework of the Creeds. The Nicene and Apostle's creeds are the centre of all Christian faith communities - the essential affirmations that identify us as Christians. They are held and agreed upon by most Churches and cannot be arbitrarily changed or abandoned without bringing into question one's identity as a Christian.

From these affirmations the Church expands its understanding of the implications of each into our relationships with God, with ourselves and with others. These further affirmations are considered 'doctrine' because they are linked to the nature of God and God's activity in the world.

Anglicans have historically expressed our doctrines in the words of our worship services, our liturgies. We use the Creeds regularly and expect the language of our prayer books to reflect carefully what we believe. Examining our prayer books reveals the shape of our doctrines.

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Exploration Exercise:

Exercise 1: Looking at one of our prayer books (*Book of Common Prayer or Book of Alternative Services*) **read:**

- a. the introduction and confession in the BAS, pg. 191
- b. Exhortation & confession in BCP, pg. 4ff
- c. Or Baptismal liturgies of BCP or BAS

What doctrines or ‘building blocks’ are contained in them?

How do our liturgies teach us doctrine?

Exercise 2

A farmer compared the contrast between core and ‘adiaphora’ doctrines like this: *There are some things that are essential to a tractor – You have to have an engine, transmission and wheels. But an air-conditioned cab is optional! Mirrors may be helpful but not critical!*

Imagine that the doctrines of the church nest together like a series of concentric circles.

Core Doctrines –(those concerned with the nature of God, Jesus & the Spirit and the activity of God redeeming the world) would lie closest to the centre.

Adiaphora - (those matters on which we can disagree without threatening unity) would be further away from the centre.

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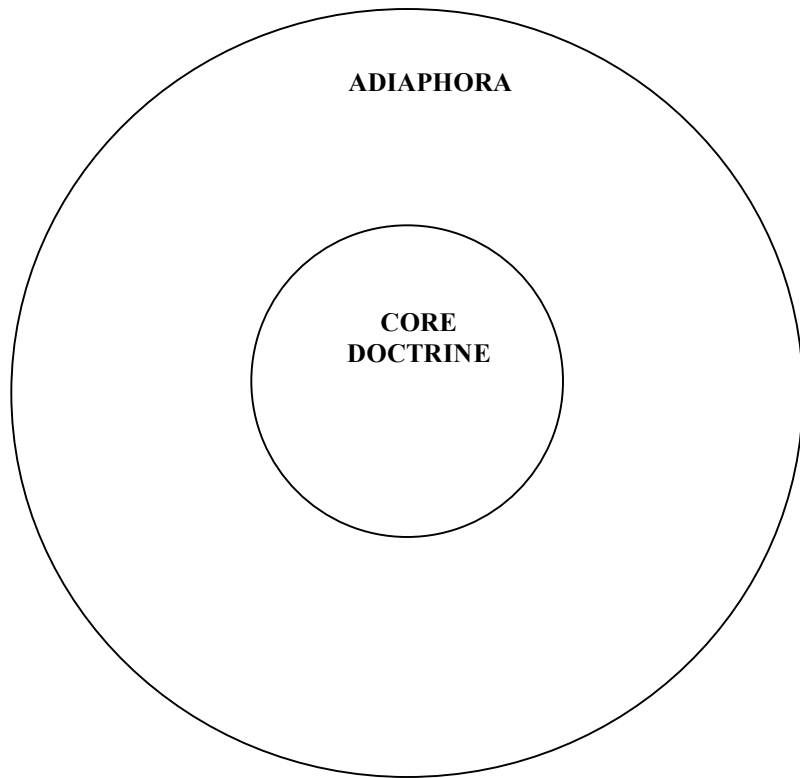
Individually: Take the doctrines in the list below and place them in the circles according to how close to the centre they lie **for you.**

In groups of two or three: Share your diagrams with each other and note similarities and differences in your choices.

Discuss why you placed doctrines where you did.

SAMPLE LIST OF DOCTRINES

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Holy Matrimony | God the Creator |
| Trinity | Blessing people |
| Private Confession | Mary, her role in Church |
| Baptism | Reconciliation |
| Ordination | Intercession of the saints |
| Absolution | Eucharist |
| Anointing for healing | Blessing a civil marriage |
| Blessing of homes/churches | Full Communion with Lutherans |
| Virgin birth of Jesus | Blessing a same-sex union |
| Incarnation | Creation |
| Confirmation | Atonement |
| Salvation | |
|(add others) | |



Development of Doctrine (Paragraphs 13-16)

“In my journey of faith the permanence and changelessness of God was a background to thinking or talking about God. This gave stability in faith that was a foundation for all else. This concept however then became linked with the changelessness of doctrine, ie God is always the same so doctrine must always be the same. It has been a difficult journey at times to separate the nature of God from the ways in which we talk about the nature of God and thus the implications for our human relationships.”

(An Anglican priest)

- A. Recall the church teachings of your youth
Which of those have changed in the teaching and/or practice of the church since then?
- B. Discuss the process for that change and your memories of the effect on you, your parish, your family and/or your community.
Did any of the changes threaten the unity of your family or parish?
- C. In Paragraph 16 are two questions in regards to choosing the balance between our own context and being part of a wider Communion:

Is it theologically and doctrinally responsible for one member church of the Communion to approve a course of action which it has reason to believe may be destructive of the unity of the Communion?

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Is it theologically and doctrinally responsible to accept unity as the value which transcends all others, and therefore for a member church of the Communion to refrain from making a decision when it believe it has an urgent gospel mandate to proceed?

Discuss the tensions in each question.
What issues or doctrines, for you, are more important than unity? Why?

B. SCRIPTURE

Interpretation of Scripture (Paragraphs 4-7)

Exploration Exercise

Discuss in small groups:

- i) How do you think our own culture influences our reading of scripture?
- ii) “...the Scriptures contain ‘all things necessary for salvation.’ This is different from asserting that all things contained in Scriptures are necessary for salvation.” (Para. 5)

Identify the ‘things necessary for salvation’ in your understanding.

Identify some parts of Scripture that are not necessary for salvation in your understanding.

How do we choose?

If not for salvation, what is their purpose?

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C. CULTURE

Cultural Effects (Paragraphs 17-19)

Individually: Think of the culture in which you first remember attending church- a particular part of Canada or another country; primary language used; traditions practiced.....

Write a brief description in one paragraph.

Find another person who grew up in a different culture or part of the country.

Share your description.

What is the same/different in your experiences?

Describe your family and/or community practices around weddings & marriage.

How have these changed in society in your experience?

How have these changed in the church in your experience?

D. DOCTRINES & OUR LIVES

Doctrinal Implications:

Doctrines have implications for our thinking, speaking and actions. The following questions/reflections are offered to explore the link between doctrines and our daily lives.

If your group is large – you may choose to divide the group and have different groups address different doctrines. If the group is small – choose 2 or 3 of the following to explore together.

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I. Salvation Paragraphs 22-23

God offers us the path of life. Despite our failures and deliberate actions we are offered forgiveness through Christ and are reconciled to God. We are invited into holy living. In baptism we promise to shape our lives to reflect the image of God in us and through us.

What influence does being saved & ‘marked as Christ’s own forever’ have on the activities we undertake with our bodies?

II. Incarnation: Paragraph 24 and Theological Anthropology Paragraphs 26-29

We are created in the image of God. By becoming human Jesus shows us the possibilities of revealing God through a human life. The possibility of allowing our lives to be transformed so that we reveal God to others means that everything we do with our bodies is important and reveals something of our spirit.

Where in your experience do you see people in whom the life of God is transparent and visible?

Where is the ‘image of God’ obscured by actions or words?

How are choices around our sexuality and its expression linked to the incarnation?

III. Holy Spirit Paragraph 25

Discuss your understanding of sin.

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Have you experienced a ‘sinner’ to be a ‘means of grace’ for you?

Has the Holy Spirit acted through someone very different from you to open you to God?

The Holy Spirit is the advocate and guide as we try to live as Jesus taught us to – revealing our sin and reminding us of God’s goodness, love & grace.

How do we listen to the Holy Spirit – individually? corporately?

How would we know whether our decision on the issue of same-sex blessings/marriage is a ‘faithful, Spirit-led development of Christian doctrine’ (Para 44)?

IV. Human Relationships & Sanctification – Paragraphs 30-37

Human beings are created as male and female and then live in the world in relationship to one another in any of a number of states – single, married, divorced, widowed, co-habiting. Culture often dictates the social status and acceptability of different relationships and differs from community to community.

Is ‘complementarity’ – being created male and female for the other - essential in intimate human relationships for you (Para 31)?

In your experience, how well does our Church recognize and support single people (never married, divorced, separated, widowed - heterosexual or homosexual) as part of the body of Christ (Para 37)?

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V. Holy Matrimony Paragraphs 38-41

Read the preface to Canon XX1 (Appendix A) Article 1.

“The purposes of marriage are mutual fellowship, support, and comfort, and the procreation (if it may be) and nurture of children, and the creation of a relationship in which sexuality may serve personal fulfilment in a community of faithful love.”

Definition of same-sex Union from footnote Page 8: *The Commission has taken the phrase ‘same-sex unions’ to mean committed, adult, monogamous, intended lifelong, same-sex relationships which include sexual intimacy.*

What aspects of the purposes of marriage are incompatible with a same-sex union?

What aspects of the purposes of marriage are compatible with a same-sex union?

What distinguishes a marriage between Christians from a civil marriage?

(Note: Civil Marriage is one conducted by legal representative/justice of the peace for purposes of civil registration without reference to God or spiritual expectations.)

Why would a couple wish to have a civil marriage blessed by the church?

Discuss the similarities and differences between a marriage celebrated and blessed in a church ceremony and a civil ceremony.

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(See appendix for an example of marriage vows required civilly. Compare to celebration of Marriage in BAS (page 528) or The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony (BCP – page 563))

E. SUMMARY

Read the overview and Paragraphs 1-3

Having explored the St. Michael Report and its implications we invite you to discuss the following questions and send your responses to Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan. Your considerations will be important to the deliberations of General Synod in 2007.

1. Discuss the level of doctrinal importance you assign to the issue of same sex blessings. I.e. Is it a ‘confessional’ issue (cf. Paragraph 9 & 10)? Where does it lie, for you, in the spectrum of doctrine between ‘core’ and ‘adiaphora’?
2. Paragraph 16: If the two questions are on a continuum where, for you, should the Anglican Church of Canada be in 2007?
3. What are the implications of the cultural context of Canadian life for ministry and doctrine? (eg. In light of the Canadian recognition of same-sex marriage...)

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4. Re: paragraph 12 *“It is commonly assumed that doctrinal certainty is required before pastoral actions can be taken, but history also demonstrates that clarity emerges when thought and action occur simultaneously.”*

In light of all of the above, how should the Church respond to the pastoral issues we are facing?

Are there actions that need to occur simultaneously with our ongoing discernment?

What might such actions be and what would be an appropriate way of commencing and proceeding with them and assessing them?

Please send responses to:
Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan
C/o 80 Hayden Street
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 3G2
Or abarnett-cowan@national.anglican.ca

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APPENDIX

Civil Marriage Vows as required by Government of Ontario

Form of ceremony

(3) No particular form of ceremony is required except that in some part of the ceremony, in the presence of the person solemnizing the marriage and witnesses, each of the parties shall declare:

I do solemnly declare that I do not know of any lawful impediment why I, AB, may not be joined in matrimony to CD,

Je déclare solennellement que moi, AB, je ne connais aucun empêchement légal à mon mariage avec CD,

and each of the parties shall say to the other:

I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, AB, do take you, CD, to be my lawful wedded wife (or to be my lawful wedded husband or to be my lawful wedded partner or to be my lawful wedded spouse),

Je demande aux personnes qui sont ici présentes d'être témoins que moi, AB, je prends CD comme légitime épouse (ou comme légitime époux ou comme partenaire conjugal légitime ou comme légitime conjoint(e)),

after which the person solemnizing the marriage shall say:

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I, EF, by virtue of the powers vested in me by the *Marriage Act*, do hereby pronounce you AB and CD to be married,

En vertu des pouvoirs qui me sont conférés par la *Loi sur le mariage*, moi, EF, je vous déclare mariés(ées), AB et CD.

2005, c. 5, s. 39 (4).