

Reflection: **The Discussion of Human Sexuality as the Mission of God**
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Date: December 11, 2013 Revised: May 6, 2014

1.0. Introduction to the discussion.

1.1. Call it an occupational hazard: I am focussed on furthering the expression and experience of God's mission. By way of explanation, I am the Archdeacon for Mission Development for the Anglican Diocese of Athabasca. I am focussed on developing the expression and experience of God's mission.

1.2. Briefly, this means that God has a mission and uses the Church to carry it out. That mission is the redemption of the world, created through the Word-to-become-incarnate and for which Jesus the Christ lived, died and was resurrected. God's mission is not to return the world to its pre-Fall state, but to renew the world as we experience it now so that all of creation will experience the abundance of life, grace, generosity, power and love which is God's will for all creation.

1.3. God has a mission. The Church's ministry is to carry out that mission. The core business of the Church is to guide, support and fuel the transformation of souls. The desired outcome of that core business is the reconciliation of the world to God and its salvation.

1.4. Evidence that the mission of God is being developed will be seen as disciples

- a. effectively proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God in words, actions and programs;
- b. teach and mentor new believers in love and these new believers then reach out to baptism and eucharist as important expressions of their growing relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit;
- c. respond to human needs in tangible and meaningful ways through acts of loving service;
- d. challenge unjust human structures and establish relationships marked by peace, justice and reconciliation;
- e. and effectively protect creation and effectively worked towards the renewal of God's creation.

1.5. Since I am so focussed on all of the above—a willing victim of the chief hazard of my vocation—I want to insist that our Church's discussions on human sexuality serve God's mission.

1.6. My intuition is that almost no one affected by or involved in these discussions would say that the discussions have served God's mission. The discussion to date has responded effectively to none of the challenges outlined in 1.3. and 1.4. above. The rhetoric, animosities and bipartisan entrenchments have rather served that other prince's goals.

1.7. That the discussions must continue is not to be doubted. "Just get on with it. Do something! Enough talk already!" Such language reflects not leadership on an issue but rather capitulation to another's agenda, goals and values. The issues surrounding the discussions on human sexuality are fundamental to the identity and ministry of the Church. The language of the discussion is not empty words, but deeply thoughtful and sincerely faith-filled expressions of identity, purpose and even mission. The culture of our society may be tired of discussions such as ours, but we cannot be led around by its assumptions, values and practices. We are obligated to develop our own and that requires the on-going discussions, however difficult or even "endless" they may seem. Discussions must continue until something akin to the mind of Christ appears to arise from within the Church. Clearly, we are not at that stage.

1.8. I suspect that the stage the Anglican Church of Canada is at would be best described in terms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I admit that I am not well-versed enough to outline a process more accurately based on the work of such commissions, but I intuit that we must place ourselves in a position parallel to South Africa following the end of apartheid and parallel to Canada's current experiences of the TRC. Following my experiences at General Synods in 2007, 2010 and 2013, it seems that we must fashion and formulate our discussions using the insights and experiences of the growing emphasis worldwide on truth and reconciliation.

1.9. The wording of Resolution C003 requiring a change to Canon XXI went beyond the previous discussions on the blessing of same gender relationships. The resolution calls for a substantive change in the theology of the Church. In light of this, the additions to the resolution insisting on

- a) broad consultation,
- b) an explanation of how the resolution does not contravene the Solemn Declaration,
- c) a confirmation of immunity from prosecution for those who refuse to authorize or participate in same gender marriages and
- d) a biblical and theological rationale for the change in theology

are mandatory and should simply have been understood as part of the work of the Commission. However, it was also a necessary protection that they should have been spelled out.

2.0. Broad consultation

This paper is part of my contribution to the broad consultation mandated by the resolution.

3.0. The Solemn Declaration

3.1. The resolution assumes that the Solemn Declaration of 1893 is still applicable to the Anglican Church of Canada and our Church has in no way repudiated it. Therefore, dealing with each of the assertions of the Declaration with respect to the resolution is required.

3.2. The suggested change in the doctrine of the Church regarding marriage would result in an impaired communion with many sectors of the “Church of England throughout the world” (*BCP*, p. viii). While it is possible to argue that not committing ourselves to the doctrinal change would impair communion with others, the responsibility for the impairment lies with whatever group is changing, not on the group that remains. Changing the Marriage Canon would definitely contravene the declaration that our Church is in full communion with the Church of England throughout the world and would contravene its stated desire to remain in full communion. On this basis alone, the changes to the canon required by the resolution cannot move ahead.

3.3. The proposed changes to the canons do not contravene the “Creeds as maintained by the undivided primitive Church in the undisputed Ecumenical Councils”. The Creeds have little direct bearing on the Marriage Canon. And, in fact, Holy Writ itself knows nothing of loving, supportive and committed same-gender relationships. However, throughout all of human history, language, culture and society, marriage has been always and exclusively understood as the confirmation of a heterosexual relationship and commitment. The Bible commands and assumes this while not mentioning the possibility of a monogamous, committed and loving same-gender relationship.

3.4. But the Declaration is clear that, “by the help of God” we are committed “to hold and maintain the Doctrine, Sacraments, and Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded in his Holy Word, and as the Church of England hath received and set forth the same”. The proposed change in the Marriage Canon would violate this commitment. It would substantially change the doctrine of marriage as well as its practice. The change would create a substantial break in the life and tradition of the Anglican Church of Canada and of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

3.5. In addition, the proposed change would impair the transmission of the Doctrine, Sacraments, and Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded in his Holy Word, and as the Church of England hath received and set forth the same in 'The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the use of the Church of England; together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, pointed as they are to be sung or said in Churches; and the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons' and in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion...

3.6. In light of the Solemn Declaration alone, the proposed change in the Marriage Canon cannot be put forth and the Commission must refuse to draft a motion recommending such a change. The resolution cannot be carried out.

4.0 Immunity from prosecution

4.1. It appears as if the Canons of the Anglican Church of Canada have no influence or bearing upon the legal systems of the Federal Government, the Provincial Governments and the various human rights tribunals. If this is so, it is impossible for the motion to be fulfilled. A guarantee cannot be made and the canons cannot protect dissenting clergy. The resolution cannot be carried out and the Commission must abandon its work.

5.0 A biblical and theological rationale

5.1. According to the Lambeth Quadrilateral, our Communion still accepts the Old and New Testaments as authoritative and normative when considering issues of faith, doctrine and practice.

5.2. The Old and New Testaments know nothing of the possibility of loving, supportive, committed and monogamous same-gender relationships. In addition, there are no examples of God condoning or blessing such relationships. There are no "same-gender relationships" in the Bible: all same-gender activity is described in terms of violence, rape and apostasy. So, just as there is no mention of genetic engineering in the Bible, there is no mention of healthy and bless-worthy same-gender relationships. Great care must be exercised by the Church in making authoritative statements about both.

5.3. The Old and New Testaments speak of marriage in terms of loving, supportive and committed heterosexual relationships. As time, doctrine and faith progress, such marital relationships are also understood to be monogamous. The only framework for

marriage as an expression of commitment, trust, faith and love to be blessed by God is heterosexual.

5.4. If the question of same-gender marriage is to be considered, it will have to be done using other lenses. The testimony of the Old and New Testaments is clear: the only marriage to be blessed by God is a heterosexual one and there is no other concept for marriage other than heterosexual. We will have to develop a sound theology using other criteria in light of the silence of Scripture about loving, supportive, committed and monogamous same-gender relationships. A biblical rationale supporting the marriage of same-gender couples is not likely possible.

5.5. Marriage in the Church is not a right: it is a privilege. All privileges are granted by a community in response to its own standards, norms and directives. No one has a right to marriage: the Church has always placed boundaries on the privilege of marriage. Currently, these boundaries exclude same-gender couples from marriage and may continue to do so without violating anyone's rights. Same-gender marriage cannot be defined in terms of rights.

5.6. Marriage as practiced in the Anglican Church of Canada is a definitive statement of God's blessing upon a relationship. The Bible cannot be used to support this definitive statement, since it knows nothing of loving, supportive, committed and monogamous same-gender relationships. But are there other grounds on which the Church may definitively declare God's blessing? At this stage in my reflections, I can't seem to discover any that are not based on already questionable views (such as concepts of justice and the rights of individuals).

5.8. If we return to The Marks of Mission, we might ask, "Would enabling the marriage of same-gender couples serve

- a. our effective proclamation of the gospel?" But only amongst those who would agree with the blessing of same-gender marriages.
- b. our ability to teach and mentor new believers in love?" Again, only amongst the same sub-section of society.
- c. our response to human needs?"
- d. God's call to challenge unjust human structures?" Only if heterosexual marriage is unjust to same-gender couples.
- e. the effective renewal of God's creation?" Does not seem to apply.

The application of The Marks of Mission is not helpful in this discussion.

5.7. God has a mission. The Church's ministry is to carry out that mission. The core business of the Church is to guide, support and fuel the transformation of souls. The

desired outcome of that core business is the reconciliation of the world to God and its salvation. Is it possible that enabling the marriage of same-gender couples could further the mission of God through the ministry of the Church? Yes, but only if one considers only the outcome and not the change of theology creating the outcome. That is, enabling the marriage of same-gender couples could “guide, support and fuel the transformation of souls” with the outcome that some people may be reconciled to God and experience salvation who might otherwise not be so reconciled. God’s mission is to reconcile the world to himself as an outcome of his eternal love for humanity. The marriage of a same-gender couple could serve that mission.

5.8. But our theology of marriage would have to change, a theology that cannot be directly supported by scripture or tradition. Does the change negate the value to God’s mission? The ends cannot justify the means. It cannot be enough to say, “We want to be loving to all people, irrespective of sexual orientation, and so we must change our theology of marriage,” if such a statement negates God’s intent for marriage and for mission.

5.9. I suspect that the Communion’s work on admitting women to ordination as deacons, priests and bishops could prove helpful in this discussion. I do not know how to investigate this or employ the insights from it, but I think it could be instructive. The process of that theological transformation as well as the theology on which it was based could well be very helpful.

5.10. It seems that the only valid reason to change the canon is that such a change would represent a loving, supportive and pastoral response to the needs and desires of same-gender couples who have long been excluded from the ministries of the Church. The injustices that have been perpetuated are not based on the definition of marriage but rather on the lack of love and compassion by the membership and leadership of the Church. Changing the canon will not change that. Changing the canon represents only a symptomatic approach to the fundamental injustices and inconsistencies of the Church.

5.9. Is the desire to include same-gender couples in the ministries of the Church by changing the fundamental theology and doctrine of the Church enough to force through the changes despite Scripture and tradition? Since we cannot change the authoritative and normative Bible, I feel that the theology and doctrine based on the same can only change with great effort and with extreme care. Ultimately, a pastoral change to the theology and doctrine of the Church cannot be justified.

6.0. Conclusion

6.1. The process of considering the changes to the Canon on Marriage must be made to serve God's mission, which is to reconcile the world to himself.

6.2. Changing the Marriage Canon represents a change in the doctrine of the Church. As such it must be supported by Scripture as interpreted through tradition by the application of our reason. Changing the Marriage Canon to include the marriage of same-gender couples cannot be supported by Scripture. Such a circumstance was not even imaginable during the genesis of the Bible. If such a change is to be approved, it must be with the use of other theological considerations.

6.3. The tradition of the Church does not support the inclusion of same-gender couples within the limits of the Marriage Canon.

6.4. If Scripture and tradition form the foundations on which our consideration of this question are built, one cannot reasonably argue in favour of the changes to the canon. While the consideration of the question can actually serve to highlight the image of God in which we were created, the determination that the canon should be changed cannot reasonably be supported.

6.5. A pastoral response requiring the proposed changes to the canon is insufficient to change the canon.

6.6. The proposed changes to the canon seem to contravene most of the statements of the Solemn Declaration.

6.7. The proposed changes to the canon cannot guarantee immunity from prosecution for dissenting clergy.

6.8. Resolution C003 as amended cannot be satisfied. The Commission must declare itself unable to draft the changes within the limits of the resolution.