



Rev. Dave Clancey

‘A Way Forward’ Review

“Of making many books there is no end,” the Teacher warns us in Ecclesiastes 12:12. The same may be said for Anglican reports.

The Teacher also notes that “much study wearies the body”; something which may also apply to the reading of these reports! And yet the Report we are presented with - *A Way Forward* - is, according to our archbishops, “the very best this Church is capable of.” It surely deserves careful study and engagement, not only because of the quality attributed to it by our archbishops, but also because of the way forward it proposes. What follows are some preliminary reflections on the Report, both in light of Motion 30 and the implications of what the Report might mean for our Church. Much more can and should be said. What follows will enable, we pray, Latimer members to consider for themselves the Report and the Way Forward proposed for our Church.

BACKGROUND

The Way Forward Working Group came into being through Motion 30. This Motion, passed by General Synod in 2014, called for a Group to be formed and report back to the 2016 General Synod about how Motion 30 might be implemented. Motion 30 contained a number of important statements and requested the following from the Group:

- (a) A process and structure by which those who believe the blessing of same-gender relationships is contrary to scripture, doctrine, tikanga 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.

Note the parallelism between the two clauses. A process and structure was required for both those who agree and those who disagree. ‘Integrity’ was to be maintained for those who hold a traditionalist view, and for those who seek the blessing of same-gender relationships.

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The Working Group was also required to offer “A proposal for a new liturgy to bless right ordered same-gender relationships” and “A process and legislation (whether church or parliamentary) by which a new liturgy to bless right ordered same-gender relationships may be adopted.”

However, this was all to happen within an existing doctrinal understanding of human sexuality, previously stated in Motion 30:

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.

This is important background, for *A Way Forward* Report must be assessed not only against Scripture, but also against its brief. Has it delivered what was asked of it?

¹ The Archbishops’ WFWG Covering Letter www.anglicantaonga.org.nz/Features/Extra/Arch. Accessed 16 March 2016.

AN OVERVIEW

The *A Way Forward* Report was released on February 22nd, 2016. While a minor point, it is worth noting that two versions of the document have been made available. It appears that the second has sought to tidy up a number of the formatting issues apparent in the first report. But it has also made at least one change in content (changing a sentence to speak of 1 Corinthians 12 rather than 1 Corinthians 13) in Section Three.

The Report recognises that the group was not unanimous in the Report, specifically as to whether the proposed liturgies departed from the Doctrine and Sacraments of Christ. The Report contains a “theological platform” (section 3) upon which their proposals are made, and upon this platform offers their proposal that the Church should provide blessing for people who have been married in a civil ceremony. By doing so the Church would determine those relationships to be “rightly ordered”, and those in such “rightly ordered” relationships would be eligible to be considered for ordination.

The Report also contains the mechanics necessary to change the Canons and Formularies of our Church to attain such proposals, and the details of the liturgical rites proposed.

The Report provides this summary:

For the sake of utmost clarity: what is being proposed is the blessing of a relationship that manifests a number of virtues that honour each partner and God (and, thus, can be called a ‘Holy Union’). In line with Motion 30, it is the case that such couples also need to be already legally married. The marriage itself will have occurred elsewhere, and the working group acknowledges that this will fall short of some Christian same-sex couples’ hopes because they cannot be married ‘in church’.
(p.12)

The primary ‘process and structure’ by which integrity would be maintained is found in the suggestion that each individual diocese or amorangi would be able to choose as to whether

they would allow such blessings to occur. Should they choose to allow such blessings to happen, no minister would be required to perform such blessings. Additionally, the Report suggests that bishops and priests should not be permitted to travel into another diocese for the purposes of conducting such a blessing. The Working Group believes that this is sufficient to “enable every priest and bishop in the Anglican Church of this province to retain their integrity within the Church” (p4).

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REFLECTION

By way of reflection, one primary issue deserves consideration - the doctrine of marriage. *A Way Forward* draws a distinction between civil marriage and marriages recognised by the church. The basis for this is found historically in that since the 1970s New Zealand law has provided for state-recognised (i.e., civil) marriages that are fully independent of any Christian church. The amendment to the Marriage Act in 2013 introduced the possibility that any two people (irrespective of gender) could be married by the state. The *A Way Forward* Report assumes that because the name ‘marriage’ is used by the state, all relationships with that name should be treated as such by the church. This is a very significant, and questionable, assumption and one which requires theological reflection. Historically, Christians have viewed marriage as a creation ordinance. A marriage is a life-long union between a man and a woman (as Motion 30 affirms). A marriage between a man and a woman is a good thing, even when it hasn’t been ‘blessed’ by the church - its intrinsic goodness is found in God’s establishment of this union in Genesis 2. Therefore calling a

relationship ‘marriage’ doesn’t make it so, and the Church’s blessing of a life-long union between a man and a woman is unnecessary for it to be “rightly ordered.”

Within the Report the basis for this change is found Section 9 - Changes to Title G Canon III. It is remarkable that such a significant and foundational change in the practice and thinking of our church would be found in this section and described as being ‘limited’, and, astonishingly, as ‘a simplification rather a substantive change’. The change is that the Church here hands over to the State the ability to determine what relationships are deemed to be marriages and therefore what ‘marriages’ the Church may bless. The Report states:

It is proposed the canon [of Marriage] be simplified to prohibit marriages that are not permitted under state law, rather than retaining a separate obligation for priests and bishops to check that any marriage is not a “forbidden” one.

Not only is this poor practice (handing over to another, independent organisation the right to determine what our Church may do), it is also theologically subjecting the church to the State, granting permission to the State to determine what relationships will be deemed to be marriage.

Despite the clear declaration in Motion 30 that the Anglican Church upholds a traditional doctrine of marriage, and the *A Way Forward* Report asserting that they affirm this, early on in the Report there is a statement which does not fit with this. The Introduction notes that the traditional doctrine of marriage upheld in Motion 30 “...precluded any provision being made for same-sex couples to be married in Anglican churches” (p.2). This is a very significant statement, for the Report here (falsely) ties together Anglican doctrine with Anglican location (i.e., Anglican church buildings). However the doctrinal issue at stake here is not about where something happens, but *whether* it should happen at all. The traditional doctrine of marriage doesn’t preclude same-sex marriages taking place in *Anglican churches*: it precludes

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same-sex marriages all together, irrespective of where a marriage ceremony might take place. By wording it this way the Report has subtly left open the possibility of same-sex marriages taking place, providing they are in locations other than Anglican churches, and in doing this has assumed that a same-sex relationship could legitimately be identified as marriage. By the end of the Report this idea has reached fruition, with the proposed liturgy stating “we have gathered in the presence of God to recognise the marriage of N. and N. before Christ’s church...”. Here the relationship between two people of the same gender is explicitly identified as being a marriage. Despite asserting the contrary, *A Way Forward* has not upheld the traditional Anglican doctrine of marriage.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

While Motion 30 requested a ‘process or structure’ whereby those of a traditional view would have their integrity maintained, there is no such process or structure offered in the *A Way Forward* Report. An assertion that any priest or bishop will not have to conduct such a blessing is not a process or structure for maintaining integrity. Nor are the words “It is not anticipated by the group that any such minister could be held to be non-compliant with any relevant parliamentary legislation through electing not to perform a rite of blessing for a couple married under civil legislation” (p.3-4 emphasis added). A process and structure has been provided to allow for such blessings to take place, and for those who disagree with them to not perform them. But for those who disagree with such blessings this is not the same as integrity being maintained. The reason for this is because

essential to a traditionalist integrity is the need to be able to disagree, and work towards the church not conducting such blessings. Traditionalist integrity is that the church must not bless what Scripture calls sin. The process and structure offered does not provide for this, and while it is questionable whether any process or structure could, nevertheless *A Way Forward* has not offered what was asked of it.

There are a number of other practical issues around the proposals offered in *A Way Forward*. For example, it is evident that if the decision to bless (or not) is made at a diocesan level, there is nothing to preclude one diocesan Synod making a decision, and the next Synod reversing that. The pastoral and practical implications (particularly for clergy licensed in that diocese) are immense, and the possibility that this issue will continue to be raised at Synod after Synod is exhausting to say the least. Additionally, what might the implications be for a diocese if their Bishop was in a same-sex relationship? Or what protection is there with regard to the appointment of clergy to a traditionalist parish in a diocese which provides for same-sex blessings?

Questions abound from *A Way Forward*. Is it workable? Is it the best way to provide for two integrities? Has it done what was required of it by Motion 30? But amidst all the questions, criticisms or even commendations of *A Way Forward*, Evangelicals must continue to return to the place that the authority of Scripture has in our Church. We are those who have been called by the Word of God to express our love of Jesus through obedience to his commands. To ignore his Word or to bless what God calls sin is never an option for us.

Read *A Way Forward*. Communicate your thoughts to your Bishop and Standing Committee. Declare your faith in the Lord Jesus who offers full and free forgiveness to all who repent, and stand firm in your commitment to the authority of the Scriptures. And pray that God's will for his people - his holy and perfect will which longs for all people to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved - might be done.