

That's one small timid step for the Church of England.



The Church of England has almost concluded a long and at times tedious 'Living in Love and Faith' process of discernment and consultation regarding gay relationships and essentially about whether to allow these to be consummated in Christian marriage. Now the House of Bishops have effectively short-circuited the final decision, meant to be decided by the General Synod in February 2023, by pronouncing that they will not change the Church's fundamental teaching "that holy matrimony is between one man and one woman for life."¹

Notwithstanding that part of that 'fundamental teaching' has long been bypassed in that remarriage in church after divorce is commonplace and permitted, the bishops apparently have felt unable to go further and allow same-sex couples to enjoy the same privilege.

In what seems a timid concession the bishops have grudgingly, it feels, agreed that local clergy will be allowed to bless married same-sex couples and endorse what is already happening in private. There is no sign in this that clergy who are currently in 'civil partnerships' and having to pretend to be in platonic celibate relationships, might themselves convert their status to that of marriage. This despite the distinction between the two types of legal union being little more than an historic political legacy as the State itself journeyed down the same aisle, as it were, years ago.

Archbishop Justin Welby has said "This response [of the bishops] reflects the diversity of views in the Church of England on questions of sexuality, relationships and marriage." Indeed it does and it is true that the bishops, who are themselves clearly not of a common mind on the subjects, are trapped in a pincer movement. This is between what is probably a majority of more liberal parishes and a powerful minority of conservative factions in the Church of England. These latter are largely, although not exclusively, Evangelical in orientation. They are joined by a number of provinces in the wider Anglican Communion, whose cultural background is less orientated to liberal views and which are, in turn greatly influenced by the American 'religious right'.

Thus far, over matters of sexuality and allied considerations, a quasi schism of sorts exists in the Communion. Nevertheless, despite bold, often hostile, efforts to establish an alternative focus of Anglican authority, thus far the breakaway alternatives have not fully succeeded in creating a rival denomination.

Could it yet be that the Holy Spirit is blowing through the Church? Historically perceived the influence of the Spirit is radical rather than restrained and change comes with cost and pain. In this view those who long for full equal recognition for the God-given loving relationships of two people of any sex to be afforded the endorsement of the Church of England, have been offered a tentative small forward momentum.

Interestingly, in the other three provinces of the United Kingdom, the Episcopal Church of Scotland does marry same-sex couples, the Church in Wales will bless them and the Church of Ireland will allow prayers to be said. This is something of a mixed bag but broadly speaking moving in the same direction, although at different speeds. The Church of England, rarely in the vanguard of anything and noted for its Establishment inertia, follows on behind as an also ran. In the meantime, despite disingenuous protestations to the contrary by the Church hierarchy about welcoming and valuing them, same-sex partners still suffer terrible discrimination.ⁱⁱ

Nicholas Henderson

Editor: Anglicanism.org

20th January 2023

Feast of St Sebastian, martyred for being a Christian

ⁱ <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2023/01/english-bishops-uphold-marriage-doctrine-and-offer-pastoral-resources-for-same-sex-couples.aspx>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/church-of-england-bishops-god-general-synod-justin-welby-b2265969.html>