

Explanatory Memorandum

In September 2018, the Governing Body indicated by informal poll their agreement with the Bench that “it is pastorally unsustainable for the Church to make no formal provision for those in same-gender relationships”. Since then, the bishops have been deliberating what the next steps might be, and what sort of formal provision should be offered to Governing Body for their consideration. In presenting this bill to approve a Rite of the Blessing of Same-sex Unions, the Bench of Bishops is responding to the 2018 motion, which was passed by over a two thirds majority in the Governing Body.

The Christian tradition from the early centuries received the union of one man and one woman for life as the normative and exclusive context for sexual intimacy, and received the Scriptures as enjoining this ideal, despite the fact that different patterns of polygamy are witnessed, and even seem to have tacit approval, in the pages of the Bible.

As with many aspects of human life, however, experience of human relations is rarely as straightforward as the traditional view of the ideal, and Scripture itself bears witness to a process of accommodation in relation, for example, to divorce, while differing levels of tolerance have been shown by the Christian Church down through the centuries to sexual activity in the context of betrothal and so-called “common law marriages”. In the same way, patterns of sexual expression which seem accepted in Scripture without condemnation, such as sexual intercourse between a master and slave, or between a man and a concubine, are clearly now regarded as repugnant.

In the view of the bench, the Scriptures condemn “porneia”, unbridled lust, in which sexual activity is divorced from faithful and mutual commitment. It is true that in Scripture such faithful commitment is always portrayed as between a man and woman in covenanted union (marriage), and all other sexual activity, including references to same-sex activity, is portrayed as an expression of porneia. However, with new social, scientific and psychological understandings of sexuality in the last one and a half centuries, we believe that same-sex relationships can be understood in a radically different way, and that the teaching of Scripture should therefore be re-interrogated.

Same-sex friendships – although without any clear implication of sexual activity – are celebrated in the Bible. If Scripture is correctly read as condemning porneia, then the question can be asked whether loving and faithful long term same-sex commitments are properly categorised as the expression of “unbridled lust” (*cf. Romans 1*)

If this rite is approved for authorisation by the bishops for experimental use, the Governing Body would be acting in a way consonant with the view that the loving and faithful commitment of two persons of the same sex should not be equated with porneia, but is of an entirely different character. Approval of this rite would be stating that the Church in Wales accepts that the loving and faithful commitment of two persons of the same sex, aspiring to life long fidelity and mutual comfort, and who have made a commitment in civil partnership or marriage, is worthy of acceptance by the Church by asking God’s blessing upon their commitment.

The Bench believes that, in the fullness of time, the Governing Body will have to consider whether it wishes to consider a change in the Church’s teaching concerning marriage. This could enable a couple wishing to live in a faithful and mutually committed same-sex relationship to celebrate the rite of marriage in Church. If this step is to be considered, the bench believe that Governing Body will have to make time and provision for a careful

theological consideration of the cases for and against, and make a mature and informed decision about whether it wishes to proceed.

In the meantime, the bishops are persuaded that provision should be made for a Rite of Blessing for committed same-sex relationships as soon as conveniently may be. They are therefore bringing forward this legislation to permit a blessing, but in circumstances which at present go no further than affirming what is permitted in the law of the land, namely a rite designed for those in a same-sex relationship who have already availed themselves of their right in law to contract a civil marriage or civil partnership, where their commitment is similar to the sort of commitment made in the Christian understanding of marriage.

This rite is also intended as specifically for same-sex couples, and is not an attempt to make provision for those heterosexual couples who may now, by law, contract a civil partnership. However, it does draw upon the model of fidelity and life long commitment, to which the Church asks those coming to it for marriage to adhere.

Use of the rite would only be permissive. The bishops understand that acceptance of same-sex partnerships remains a controversial view, and that there are Christians who feel unable to read Scripture and Tradition in the more permissive way the bishops propose. It is intended therefore that the adoption of such rites should not carry with it any requirement on any cleric to act against their conscience and to participate in the celebration of the rite. It is rather permissive for those Christians, and their circles of friends and families who wish it, to be able to be honest and open in celebrating the love and commitment of two people to each other, which they have already made in civil law, in the context of their faith, and inviting God's blessing.

However, it is also a step on the way towards repentance of a history in the Church which has demonised and persecuted gay and lesbian people, forcing them into fear, dishonesty and sometimes even hypocrisy, and which has precluded them from living publicly and honestly lives of committed partnership. The bishops unreservedly and collectively commend the Rite to Governing Body.

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28th October 2020.

Adopted by the Standing Committee
26 November 2020