

13 March 2009

The Rt. Rev'd Colin Johnson and the College of Bishops
Diocese of Toronto

Regarding: *The Blessing of Same-Sex Unions: Draft Discussion Document for Consultation* (January 29, 2009)

It is with grave concern that we write to ask you, the College of Bishops of the Diocese of Toronto, not to proceed with the proposed "Pastoral Response" regarding same-sex blessings. Our first concern is with the response itself: "to offer prayers and blessing to same-sex couples in stable long-term relationships." It is difficult to distinguish this proposal from the "local option" for same-sex blessings. The objection to the local option has always been – from both liberal and conservative perspectives -- that what is at issue here is marriage. The St. Michael's Report (par. 39) concluded that "any proposed blessing of a same-sex relationship would be analogous to a marriage to such a degree as to require the church to understand it coherently in relation to the doctrine of marriage." Therefore any priestly blessing – however designated -- on a "long-term committed" sexual relationship belongs within the purview of General Synod and the Canons on marriage.

Further, as the St. Michael Report has made clear, the matter of same-sex blessings, while itself non-core or non-credal, is integral to matters of doctrine, matters of belief that have profound significance for who we are as human beings in relation to God. It touches on the doctrine of the Creator God, and the way in which our human nature is given by God that we may be, by the simple fact of our existence as male and female together, creatures in the image of God. It touches on the doctrine of sin, and the way in which even sexual desire is distorted by the turning away from God, yielding no longer only joy, but shame and pain. It touches finally on the doctrine of redemption and the NT's vision of Christian marriage as an image (and more than an image: an outward and visible sign) of the restored relationship, the longed-for peace, between God and humanity. In the union, physical and emotional and spiritual, of man and woman in marriage, in the *difference* there brought into its intended harmony, there is an intimation and a pledge of the communion with God and with each other lost in the garden and restored on the cross (cf. Eph. 5.31-32). Marriage is by the providence of God caught up in the saving purposes of God, even in the hoped-for communion with God that is the goal of creation and for which even now all creation groans as it waits in hope. If creation matters, if we are not simply Gnostic, then the physical difference between man and woman matters too: it is in this real difference that marriage may be a sign, by the grace of God, of God's redemption.

And so, it is not a matter to be treated lightly. It is not a matter to be entered into by subterfuge, as if we were really doing something else. The proposed pastoral response, insofar as it involves the blessing of a sexual relationship, takes us into the realm of marriage and the doctrines and canons of the church. Therefore we continue to ask not only that the bishops of this diocese will respect the polity of the church, its synods and

global councils, but that the church will be faithful to its gospel, its own ancient narrative of creation and redemption, of sin and salvation, in which even the marriage of man and woman has its place.

Our second concern has to do with the rationale for the proposed pastoral action.

There are three problems with it. First, it misrepresents the current situation. The letter suggests that we are still engaged as a church in “conversation” toward “consensus.” We are, however, already in schism. Some bishops and some clergy and congregations have resigned from their dioceses in the ACC in order to serve under the bishops of other provinces; others continue to join them. A new province is in the making. We have had the conversation about human sexuality and marriage: we have utterly failed to reach consensus. The ACC now comprises people who hold two opposed and irreconcilable views on marriage and on the morality of same-sex relationships. To proceed now with a local option for same-sex blessings is not to respond in a pastoral way to an unclear situation. The situation is perfectly clear: we are divided. The issue is now this: can we live together in a way that is honest and faithful in the midst of such disagreement?

Second, the rationale suggests that the church needs to adjust its marriage canon in light of the decisions of the civil courts about the nature of marriage. This is to make the vision of the church dependent on a secular vision. The Christian understanding of marriage, however, is based on a scriptural narrative about the world. It is not our task to make Christian marriage fit into secular society’s narrative of individual rights and freedoms and the blessedness of desire. Our calling is to be shaped and formed by the world as it exists in the Bible and in the witness of the church. In this scriptural understanding of the world we form, as Christians, a different society: the church catholic. No change can be “required” of the marriage canon by the civil society. It can be required only by the Word of God and the *consensus fidelium*, the mind of the universal church.

Likewise, to say that contraception entails a redefinition of marriage is to get it backwards. It is the task of the church to come to an understanding of contraception that is consistent with and furthers the Christian vision of marriage: its rich meaning as a sign of God’s intended restoration of the world, and the mystery of its power to create new life (an image not only of the creative, but of the redeeming purposes of God begun in the birth of Isaac). Marriage matters, in the divine economy, and sex is central to it, not merely as a means of self-fulfillment but as an instrument of God’s grace.

Third, and crucially, the language of the rationale does not encourage the kind of trust that is necessary if we are to co-exist in a divided church. Is it fair to call the decision of some dioceses in favour of same-sex blessings “diversity”? Their decision is in contravention of GS 2007, the St. Michael Report, the Windsor Report, Lambeth 1998 and 2008 and the expressed wishes of our own Primate. From the viewpoint of traditionalists around the world, the independent actions of these dioceses are not “diverse” but “inflammatory.” Or, again, is it fair to propose as a model for same-sex blessings, the blessing of monastic friendships? Just where would the vow of celibacy enter into a same-sex blessing? If it is a sexual relationship the diocese intends to bless,

what can it possibly mean to propose a celibate relationship as a model? Or, again, the question about the exact nature of blessing. The question is not whether a blessing is “thanksgiving for signs of God’s presence already discerned” or “adding something to a relationship:” it is both. The question is whether the sign of God’s presence can be discerned in a same-sex relationship, and whether it is theologically and morally appropriate to ask God to bless as a marriage a relationship that contradicts (as traditionalists argue) the God-given nature of marriage.

For all these reasons we would ask you to reconsider the proposal and its rationale. We would ask you to find a way forward that takes account honestly of the divided state of our diocese (and the ACC) and the gospel call, which we feel keenly, both to faithful witness and to unity. We are at an impasse. We hold, as a church, not a “diversity” of opinion, but two opposed and irreconcilable visions. A truly pastoral response would be, we suggest, to recognize the impasse and to ask how we might live together in the midst of profound disagreement.

Yours in Christ,

The Rev. Catherine Sider Hamilton

The Rev. Brian McVitty

The Rev. Canon Kim Beard

The Rev. Peter Mills

The Rev. Dr. Murray Henderson

The Rev. Canon Bruce McCallum

The Rev. Peter Blundell

The Rev. Jim Seagram

The Rev. Dr. Dean Mercer

The Rev. Andre Leroux

The Rev. Canon Matthias Der

The Rev. Simon Li

Dr. Roseanne Kydd

The Rev. Dr. Ron Kydd