



The Right Reverend Stuart Robinson
Diocesan Bishop

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PASTORAL LETTER CONCERNING 'MARRIAGE EQUALITY'/THE 'REDEFINITION OF MARRIAGE'

Beloved in Christ,

Greetings!

1. As you know, calls for our Australian government to revisit the Marriage Act by granting full legal recognition to same-sex couples have intensified in recent months. Although our government has not signalled how decisions will be taken on this matter, changing public sentiment and international developments *may* set the conditions under which the Act is significantly revised.
2. Australian Christians have responded to this debate in a variety of ways. I note that some have attempted to mobilise their members to defend traditional values and prevent what is considered the redefinition of marriage, and some have advised they will stop performing *all* marriages. On the other hand, others believe that marriage should reflect equality for same-sex couples, and there are those who wait to have their relationships recognised in Christian communities. Most Christians I meet feel genuinely torn by the public debate and confused about what is an appropriate Christian response. Without exception, they desire to love and support their children and friends while being faithful to God and upholding the authority of Scripture.
3. As it happens, the Anglican Church of Australia does have a clear and unambiguous position on marriage. Our nationally authorised and instituted liturgies reflect this unequivocal view – to which I subscribe, as follows:

'Marriage is a life-long union in which a man and a woman are called to give themselves in body, mind and spirit, and so to respond, that from their union will grow a deepening knowledge and love of each other' (A Prayer Book for Australia, p. 647).

4. At our Synod in September, I am already aware that people will want to discuss either the rights and wrongs of homosexuality or the merits and problems of same-sex marriage. It is important for us to remember that there are already some limits around what such discussion can and cannot achieve, because:
 - a. the Commonwealth Government has the constitutional authority to modify the rights and responsibilities associated with civil marriage;
 - b. the Marriage Act requires Anglican parishes in Canberra and Goulburn to perform marriages in conformity with Anglican rites, which are contained in its prayer books;
 - c. proposals to expand the civil recognition of marriage do not override the capacity of churches to conduct ceremonies according to their specific religious rites and beliefs;

- d. the authority to revise Anglican liturgy and the underlying theology of marriage is vested constitutionally with the General Synod and *not* the local diocese. It is not within our diocese's power to change these rites unilaterally; and
5. In the course of any discussion, I also invite you to remember these theological and missional aspects of marriage:
- a. Anglican rites invite people to enter into theological understanding of marriage as an act of faith and discipleship. From this perspective, marriage is an exclusive, life-long covenant entered into voluntarily for mutual companionship; the union of body, mind and spirit; and (God willing) for the bearing of children. It is an expression of discipleship that entails costly self-sacrifice and engagement in Christ's work of redemption.
 - b. The recovery and re-presentation of the theological roots of marriage is becoming increasingly important within our Australian culture. This is particularly so, as fewer people actively participate in Christian communities and therefore imbibe the 'spiritual' nature of marriage as a matter of course. I also acknowledge that the current debate *may* cause Christians of varying hues and situations to feel threatened due to the potential change in the civil landscape, particularly where it could impact deeply held religious values. However, we must be careful that in our uncertainty over the progress of the ordering of civil society we do not lose sight of the opportunity to help others recover the full significance of the marital union that they will not have assumed as a matter of course. This is a matter that includes, but far transcends, the way that relationships are legally recognised in a society.
 - c. Without care, the tone and tenor of our discussion can wound and hurt people deeply and seriously dishonour the name of Jesus Christ. Anglicans with a deep and abiding faith hold a variety of positions concerning same-gender relationships and the adequacy of our existing theological understanding of marriage. Their faithfulness and right to be a member of our church should not be impugned or maligned, I would opine.
 - d. Our Synod is unlikely and unable to resolve the matter simply, quickly or in a way that meets all expectations. The Anglican Communion has been discussing the issues associated with gender and sexuality for nearly two decades. In some parts of the Communion it is closer to five decades. Many feel tired of all this talk and want action now. Others see it as the route to compromise. It follows that my best hope for our Synod is that we discover new ways of handling this matter that pay due attention to the truths expressed on both sides of the argument; that is not over-ambitious or unrealistic about what might be achieved; that models what it is to accept others with whom we disagree; and which leaves every participant able to leave the Synod heartened and hopeful.
 - e. the Anglican Church includes not only parishes but also Anglicare, schools and the development fund. These entities are required to operate without the same conscience protections afforded to parishes. We must be mindful that any Synod discussion reflects the needs of all those who live and work within our church's associated agencies.

6. I am of the view that our challenge, as a diocesan family, is to live out reconciliation with fellow believers who hold views different to our own. Our Lord Jesus reminds us that a tree's fruitfulness is a sign of its quality. This statement is not merely a concern with outcomes or results, but also with the *manner* by which those things are achieved. The reality is that some regard sexuality as matter of central importance to salvation and our identity as a Christian community. Others consider matters of sexuality to be secondary or disputable, for each person to make their decisions as a matter of conscience, and where congregational diversity is legitimate. Our inclination may be to fight, separate and judge others while justifying ourselves as biblical and faithful. As agents of Christ's reconciliation, we must pursue reconciliation among ourselves, especially in the midst of intense theological disagreement.
7. Reconciliation is a fraught affair as life in the Anglican Communion globally testifies. The instruments of unity have endured much strain. Dioceses, parishes, congregations, small groups and families have torn apart as people have separated acrimoniously. In Canada and the US where same-sex marriage has become law, some Anglicans have moved towards full recognition. In other nations, the legal prohibitions against homosexuality have intensified often with the knowledge and support of local churches. Meanwhile, Anglicans across Great Britain have maintained their traditional view and practices. My prayer, as your pastor and friend, is that we might love one another and find, under God, our own Christ-honouring pathway of reconciliation and integrity to follow.
8. For this reason, I have asked our Public Issues Commission (under its able Chair, Bishop Stephen Pickard) to consider how our diocese might move forward together on this matter. We need a process *this* Synod that will allow us all to honour Christ and each other as his disciples in this most difficult of pastoral matters. Now, my anxiety is that our synodical procedures and processes for managing debate could intensify our differences. Rather than enabling us to find a way forward together, they may inadvertently exacerbate misunderstanding and amplify any conflict. Together with the Public Issues Commission, I am working to initiate a process to build trust and mutual understanding in the midst of our profound differences to be used at Synod.
9. So beloved, as you prepare for Synod (either as one who attends or as one who prays for our gathering) and think about this issue, might I encourage you read widely, think deeply and pray unceasingly? May I say that I will be personally most encouraged, as will others at Synod, to hear dialogue that demonstrates that we have deeply engaged with the arguments of others; which represent others accurately, fairly and without rancour. To this end, I offer a *provisional* list of readings at the end of this letter that you might examine - recognising that there are a great many other helpful texts not listed here.
10. I hope and pray that our Synod can help us to find that a way forward together as Jesus' people, Christ's body and God's temple for the sake of a beloved yet broken world. I will keep you apprised of the mechanism for our conversation at Synod once I am settled on a way forward.

Readings:

This reading suggests how Christians might gather to discuss difficult issues:

- Phil Groves' and Angharad Parry Jones' book, *Living Reconciliation* (London, SPCK, 2014)


These readings offer what some deem to be a 'conservative' account of marriage:

- Christopher Ash, *Marriage: sex in the service of God*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003.
- Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "Don't Mess with Marriage: A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Australia to all Australians on the 'Same-sex Marriage' Debate." 2015. Online: <https://www.catholic.org.au/same-sex-attraction/marriage-pastoral-letter>
- Andrew Errington, "Same-sex marriage - what is really at issue?" ABC Religion and Ethics, 30 April 2013. Online: <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/04/30/3747877.htm>
- Jennifer Roback Morse, three articles on 'privatising marriage', 2012. Online: <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2012/04/5069/>

These readings offer what some deem to be a more 'progressive' account of marriage:

- Margaret Farley, *Just Love: a Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008.
- Nigel Chapman, "Probably the Shortest Working Argument for Evangelical Same-sex Marriage". 10 February 2015. Online: http://180.org.au/probably-the-shortest-working-argument-for-evangelical-same-sex-marriage_20150210.html
- Chris Puplick AM and Larry Galbraith, *Marriage Equality For All Australians: Guaranteeing Security and Certainty for Everyone*. Australian Marriage Equality, 2014. Online: http://www.australianmarriageequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Marriage-Equality_Book.pdf
- Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, *Report on the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010* (Commonwealth of Australia: June, 2012). Online: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2010-13/marriageequality2012/report/index

For Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stuart Robinson", with a cross symbol to the left and a long horizontal line extending to the right.

The Right Reverend Stuart Robinson
Bishop of Canberra & Goulburn
29 July 2015