

Civil Partnerships and the Future of the Church of England

If the decision of the New Westminster diocese in Canada to authorise a liturgy for same-sex blessings in 2003 opened up a rift within the worldwide Anglican Communion, the consecration of Gene Robinson as an Episcopal Bishop in New Hampshire, USA in 2004 widened the fissure still further between liberals and traditionalists. How the Church of England responds to the House of Bishops' statement on Civil Partnerships, will be the next test of its fragile unity.

The Ethical Challenge of Civil Partnerships

The Civil Partnerships legislation creates fundamental ethical challenges for all Christians committed to a biblical and traditional understanding of marriage.

The Act introduces a third category alongside singleness and marriage giving same-sex couples quasi-marital status, rights and protection in law. Anglican Mainstream have noted that "The provisions of the Act are clearly based on marriage, using a table of kindred and affinity in the definition of who can and who cannot register a civil partnership, the provision that one can only have one civil partner, that civil partners must be over the age of consent, and the way in which partnerships can be dissolved." Attempts to extend the provisions of the Act to allow siblings or close relatives to register were rejected by the Government indicating that the intention is solely to provide legitimacy for same-sex relationships.

The Bible and Civil Partnerships

Within Scripture, marriage is seen as a life-long and exclusive union between a man and a woman and that sexual intercourse belongs exclusively within marriage. At the same time, the condemnation of practising homosexuality in Scripture is clear and unequivocal (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:18-2:1; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). While celibacy is seen as a gift from God (1 Corinthians 1:1-7), Paul warns of the day when those who have abandoned the faith will "forbid people to marry" (1 Timothy 4:3). Those who enter a Civil Partnership will create a new and exclusive familial structure that precludes and undermines the biblical teaching on marriage.

The Historic Position of the Church

The teaching of Scripture on the conduct of clergy is clear: "Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach." (1 Timothy 3:2)

Canon Law has consistently taught that the manner of a priest's household must be above reproach. This was recognised as early as the Nicaea canons:

Canon III. Concerning women who have been brought in to live with clergy: The great Synod has stringently forbidden any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or any one of the clergy whatever, to have a *sub introducta* dwelling with him, except only a mother, or sister, or aunt, or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion.

The doctrinal position of the Church of England is summarised in Article XX which states "it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written." The 1998 Lambeth Conference rejected homosexual practice as "incompatible with Scripture". There is therefore no warrant for the House of Bishops to confer legitimacy on that which Scripture and tradition have clearly repudiated.

The Position of the House of Bishops

Essentially, the partnership requires a life-long commitment to another person of the same sex to the exclusion of marriage. The House of Bishops view is that this is not intrinsically incompatible for clergy provided the relationship remains non-sexual. However, Anglican Mainstream have noted that “contrary to the bishop’s interpretation of the legislation, the government’s consultation paper does appear to indicate that the Civil Partnership’s Act is predicated on the assumption of a sexual relationship.” This means the church is now in danger of making a condition for clergy entering a civil partnership, what the government has indicated might be evidence of unreasonable behaviour and grounds for the dissolution of the partnership.

Paul Perkin, vicar of St Mark’s, St Peter’s and St Paul’s Battersea, in an open letter to the House of Bishops, highlighted the inconsistencies of their pastoral advice to clergy.

“You affirm the Primates Letter 2003, on public rites for the blessing of same-sex unions: ‘We as a body cannot support the authorisation of such rites’. Moreover clergy ‘should not provide services of blessing for those who register a civil partnership’. However, ‘where clergy are approached by people asking for prayer in relation to entering into a civil partnership they should respond pastorally and sensitively in the light of the circumstances of each case’. Of course the clergy should always be pastoral and sensitive, but what is this saying? It suggests that homosexual unions may not be blessed publicly and formally, but may be privately and informally! ... I intend always pastorally and sensitively to decline politely any request for such a prayer affirming a same-sex union. Can you clarify for me ‘the light of the circumstances’ in which you would feel it necessary to discipline me for such a refusal, before I go any further?”

“the baptism service requires me to ask of candidates whether they reject all rebellion against God, renounce the corruption of evil, and repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour. It is our practice to delay the baptism of heterosexual adults known to be cohabiting outside marriage, giving time for progress in discipleship. Is the House suggesting that this practice is wrong? If I intend pastorally and sensitively to decline politely any request for such a baptism, can you clarify for me the light of the circumstances in which you would feel it necessary to discipline me for such a refusal, before I go any further?”

Anglican Mainstream have also noted that “It is inconsistent to maintain that, while ‘the same standards apply to all’, no discipline should be applied to those who come (or bring infants) to baptism, confirmation or communion when these services call for an explicit public statement of repentance and commitment ‘to live a new life.’” The House of Bishops’ statement is silent on the specific application of the legislation to those serving in lay leadership positions, whether as Readers, Church Wardens or youth workers.

Andrew Goddard has noted that the House of Bishops “has accepted the Government can amend church legislation without wider consultation in the Church and that church law is currently being amended so as explicitly to treat civil partners as equivalent to spouses. This granting of civil partnerships a status in church law threatens to undermine the Church’s reaching on marriage.”

The Response from Evangelical Anglicans

In July 2005 representatives of New Wine, Reform, Church Society, the Church of England Evangelical Council, the Scottish Anglican Network and Anglican Mainstream wrote an open letter to the English House of Bishops. Signed by Bishop Wallace Benn, the Revs David Banting, Richard Bewes, John Coles, Paul Gardner and seven others, the letter outlined their grave reservations over the House of Bishop's Statement. Urging the Bishops to reconsider and revise their pastoral advice, they expressed the following serious concerns:

- by stating that "lay people who have registered civil partnerships ought not to be asked to give assurances about the nature of their relationship before being admitted to baptism, confirmation and communion", you appear to have abandoned the resolution of November 1987 General Synod "that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met with a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion";
- by agreeing to incorporate into church law by government statute the ambiguous term 'civil partner' wherever the term 'spouse' occurs, church law is about to be changed without a single discussion by General Synod or the dioceses or parishes of the church;
- by affirming the Bible and the Church's teaching on marriage, but proposing not to discourage Christian people from registering civil partnerships (which, despite clearly stated assertions to the contrary, are in effect being treated by the government and society as on a par with marriage), there is significant danger that our nation will be misled rather than clearly guided concerning the will of God for societal and relational health and wellbeing and
- by adopting the stance taken in your 25th July statement there is a serious risk of further impairing the unity of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, already torn by recent events in North America.

In August 2005, the Church of England Evangelical Council issued a response which included the following:

"We urge the House of Bishops to withdraw this compromised and unworkable Statement, while continuing to affirm the historic teaching of the Church. To speak of disciplining the Episcopal Church (USA) and Anglican Church of Canada while continuing along the lines expressed in their Statement quite understandably lays the House of Bishops open to the charge of hypocrisy. It will further exacerbate the division threatening the future of the Anglican Communion. In the meantime, we encourage bishops and clergy to disregard the controversial practical aspects of this Statement while maintaining sensitive pastoral care, and to call all Christians to uphold and practise biblical standards in their ministry and discipleship."

The Response from the Wider Anglican Communion

In July, following publication of the House of Bishop's Statement, the Most Rev Peter Akinola, Archbishop and Primate of All Nigeria, made an outspoken appeal in which he spoke of his "utter dismay"

"The language of the Civil Partnerships Act makes it plain that what is being proposed is same-sex marriage in everything but name. This is even acknowledged in the statement. I find it incomprehensible therefore that the House of Bishops would not find open participation in such "marriages" to be repugnant to Holy Scriptures and incompatible with Holy Orders. The proposal that the bishops will extract a promise from clergy who register

that there will be no sexual intimacy in these relationships is the height of hypocrisy. It is totally unworkable and it invites deception and ridicule. How on earth can this be honoured? For the Church of England to promote such a departure from historic teaching is outrageous... It seems clear that the House of Bishops is determined to chart a course for the Church of England that brings further division at a time when we are still struggling with fragmentation and disunity within the Communion. Let it be known that it is not a path that we can follow. It is also a path that is clearly at odds with the mind of the rest of the Anglican Communion.”

“May I remind the Bishops of the Church of England that, when faced with similar decisions on the part of the Episcopal Church (United States) and the Anglican Church of Canada, discipline was imposed. While I have great affection and respect for the historic role that the Church of England has played in all of our lives, no Church can ignore the teaching of the Bible with impunity, and no Church is beyond discipline.”

“I call on the House of Bishops of the Church of England to renounce their statement and declare their unqualified commitment to the historic faith, teaching, and practice of the Church. Failure to do so will only add to our current crisis. I am, by this statement, asking my brother Primates, their bishops and all the faithful in our Communion to remain calm in the face of this new provocation as we look forward to our next meeting. I also call on all those who cherish and uphold the integrity and sanctity of the Word of God to pray for our beloved Church.” Peter J. Akinola

In October 2005, some 103 Bishops and clergy met for the third Global South to South Encounter to address disunity in the Anglican Communion. The declaration issued at the end of the Summit included the following: “Our own Anglican Communion sadly continues to be weakened by unchecked revisionist teaching and practices, which undermine the divine authority of Scripture. The Anglican Communion is severely wounded by the witness of errant principles of faith and practice which in many parts of our communion have adversely affected our efforts to take the gospel to those in need of God's redeeming and saving love.”

In a landmark resolution passed in November 2005, the Diocese of Pittsburgh has laid down its intent "to stand with all Anglican Churches, Dioceses and Provinces that hold and maintain the 'Historic Faith, Doctrine, Sacrament and Discipline of the one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church' whatever the costs or actions required to do so" should the 2006 Convention of ECUSA continue to ignore the will of the Communion and its expressed teaching on sexuality and human identity.

The End of the Beginning?

The ordinations in Southwark Diocese, earlier this month, conducted by the Right Revd Martin Morrison of the Church of England in South Africa, the landmark decision of Pittsburgh Diocese together with the growing calls from Anglican Mainstream, New Wine, Reform, Church Society, the Church of England Evangelical Council, the Bishops of the Global South and the Primate of Nigeria, may very well be signs that we are about to witness a new Reformation within the Church of England.

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