**9. Blessing Same-Sex relationships**

The election in 2003 of Gene Robinson, an openly gay American priest with partner, as Bishop of New Hampshire, opened a simmering cauldron of barely repressed divisions amongst Anglicans around the world. The debate continues unabated.

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I cannot remember when I first heard homosexuality discussed. As a boy I recall some characters who lurked around bathing sheds, but these would be more accurately described as paedophiles. My only instinct was to flee.

Homosexuality was not discussed at school, nor over coffee at my university hostel. It was not part of any teaching or discussion at theological college. I certainly had no awareness that some people might be gay, or even how one might tell. Which all seems frightfully naïve in retrospect, but indicates the circumscribed thinking of the 1950s.

So in 1964 when I was ordained I knew little about a major issue on which most young people today would be well informed. My first exploration of the biblical, ethical and pastoral aspects of homosexuality came via a comprehensive report from the Diocese of Christchurch in 1979. A committee convened by the Rev’d Colin Brown had been working for two years, consulting with members of the gay community as well as with professionals in medicine, psychology, philosophy and law.

Some 35 years later I find the report as relevant today as it was then. It is a model of lucidity, good research, inclusiveness and fairness. It decries the ignorance and prejudice regarding gay and lesbian people. It calls for more education of clergy and those training for ordination. It examines the handful of biblical texts that refer to homosexual acts and points out that the Bible does not address the question of the ‘homosexual condition’ but only acts considered immoral in quite different contexts. Of various viewpoints current at the time, the committee was closest to the view that ‘both homosexual and heterosexual relationships are “natural” features of human life, hence positively good, and the gift of God’. The report aroused hostility in conservative quarters, but I believe it has much to contribute to the current debate.

The Christchurch report also called for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adult males. This became an issue for me in 1985 when I was Vicar of St Peter’s in Wellington and Labour MP Fran Wilde introduced in Parliament a Homosexual Law Reform Bill aiming to achieve such decriminalisation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Several church leaders supported it publicly, but I did not feel ready for this, although support for decriminalisation does not necessarily mean giving moral approval to same-sex relationships. I was also anxious about what the congregation, or wider Church, might think, and hence kept silent. The Bill was passed by Parliament with a narrow majority in July 1986.

Seven years later the National Government’s Associate Minister of Health, Katherine O’Regan, introduced a Bill[[2]](#footnote-2) to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. I was by now Anglican Social Responsibility Commissioner and issued a supporting media statement:

While there are New Zealanders who oppose homosexuality from the standpoint of morality, there can be no doubt that in terms of anti-discrimination this amendment should be promptly enacted…The unfortunate comments of the Police Minister linking homosexuality with paedophilia are not only prejudiced and emotive, but also illogical and wrong.

Again, one could support anti-discrimination without necessarily regarding homosexual acts as moral, but now, at age 53, I was clear on both issues, although it had been a long journey. What had brought me to such clarity? No doubt careful research and reasoning such as in the Christchurch Report were critical in weighing biblical insights with the contemporary context. This addressed the rational side of things, but something deeper was going on in the heart. For me the ‘something deeper’ was my knowledge over many years of gays and lesbians who had become friends.

I am sure that a loving and committed homosexual relationship is acceptable in the eyes of God. This conviction has not resulted primarily from study of the Bible, although I believe it is entirely consistent with Scripture. The point of conviction for me arises from the friendship and collegiality I have shared with gay and lesbian church members, lay and ordained, over many years and in many places. Their experience of Christ, and their commitment in the Christian way, is no different from mine.

To say they are not fully part of the Church is a terrifying judgment which is not ours to make. I could not bring myself to say to someone whom I know to be a committed Christian: ‘Sorry, mate, you’re a good friend but I cannot regard you as part of the Church because you are living in sin.’ Yet that is precisely the message many gay people have received, implicitly or explicitly, and have felt themselves excluded from the Body of Christ. Some churches have refused to give Holy Communion to known gays and lesbians. By contrast, the Church globally and locally has often affirmed their full membership of the Body of Christ.

All our three children have gay godfathers, two of them priests, the other a long-term Anglican church member. At the time we invited them to be godfathers, their sexual orientation was not known to us. But godparents are chosen for their Christian faith and commitment to care spiritually for a godchild, and it was clear each of our three friends met those criteria. Knowing their orientation would have made no difference to our choice. Awareness of someone’s faith and integrity arises out of a personal relationship. It is entirely different from having an intellectual theory about a principle, and applying that principle abstractly to people one does not know.

In 1994, soon after my appointment as assistant bishop in Canberra was announced, I went to Australia for preliminary discussions. Graham Downie, religion reporter for *The Canberra Times,* was keen to interview an incoming bishop, especially one from ‘across the ditch’. Graham had an instinct for stories with an edge and asked me for my views on same-sex relationships. This was tricky. Here was a Kiwi hardly anyone knew, coming to take on pastoral leadership, and having to give a view on a very divisive topic. I was cautious, but said I knew homosexual clergy who exercised faithful, acceptable and thoroughly pastoral ministries which were a great blessing to their parishioners. And that once parishioners experienced such ministry, any initial reservation they might have had was often overcome.

I said it was important that gay clergy and laity should be able to be up-front about their orientation and not to keep it suppressed as something shameful. The headline next day said ‘new bishop has liberal view of homosexuality’, and I found myself replying from New Zealand to a small flurry of protests from some Canberra clergy. Over time I formed good friendships with some of these, although there were a couple of parishes where I was never invited to preach. At the time of our farewell I was especially moved by a letter I received from one of the clergy who had expressed concern at my appointment:

Thank you for your support and friendship over the last few years. Your visits and our personal encounters have been a great encouragement. Thank you for not allowing my alarm at that *Canberra Times* article to be a source of conflict or mistrust. We will miss your willingness to hear and understand. We will miss your gracious, supportive and practical responses to our needs.

I am not wanting to be self-congratulatory in quoting that, but the letter moved me because it showed that in an inclusive church people may have different views but yet still trust one another as fellow members of the Body of Christ.

The Lambeth Conference of bishops in 1998 was a watershed moment in the life of the Anglican Communion. Some 800 bishops from around the world were present, most with their spouses, and a decision on same-sex relationships loomed large on the agenda. Early in the conference the gay and lesbian movement sponsored a ‘meet and chat’ evening in a Canterbury pub. I went down for what turned out to be an open and friendly discussion. The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, was also present.

But other voluntary evening events were rather sinister. One such was sponsored by a London parish that offered gays and lesbians an opportunity to become ‘straight’ by turning to Christ and ‘repenting of their sin’. The programme included biblical teaching, small group work, personal counselling and an act of repentance and re-commitment to ‘the Christian way of life’.

I was appalled. There may be some hovering on the cusp between gay and straight who might be tipped into a choice for straight by such a programme, but for many who are homosexual by nature, such programmes are an exercise in frustration, and far worse. They load participants, already suffering from the opprobrium of society, with a deep sense of guilt and sinfulness, and exclusion from the Church. In tragic cases this has led to suicide, all in the name of Christ.

Bishops at Lambeth took part in working groups of their choice, one of which discussed the ordination of those in same-sex relationships, and the blessing of same-sex unions. Groups worked up a report with recommendations to bring to the final plenary session for discussion and adoption. Resolution 1.10 was headed *Human Sexuality* with clause 1 affirming:

In view of the teaching of Scripture (this conference) upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union as following the teaching of scripture, and believes that abstinence is right for those not called to marriage.

Clause 2 recognised:

that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation….. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ.

Clause 3 stated:

While rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, (we) call on all people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals.

And clause 4:

(We) cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same-sex unions nor ordaining those in same gender unions.

The opening words of clause 3 ‘rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture’ were added in plenary session from the floor, something almost unheard of. With 800 bishops all used to airing their views on most topics, tight control from the Chair ensures there is little room for discussion or amendment of resolutions. Clearly, the amendment had been pre-arranged with the conference leadership.

Two thirds of the bishops supported the amendment, and the numbers are interesting. Of the 800 bishops half came from Western nations and half from the global South (Africa, Asia and South America). If one assumes the South mostly supported the amendment, and add one third from the West, a two thirds majority is achieved. But the majority of the West voted against the amendment, not, I believe, because they felt Scripture specifically supported homosexuality, but because they judged Scripture to be silent on the question of committed same-sex relationships.

When the motion was put as a whole, it was passed with an 83 per cent majority. I was one of 45 who abstained because of conflicting clauses which affirmed marriage in clause 1 but rejected homosexuality in clause 3.

Following the final vote large whoops of victory echoed around the plenary marquee, in marked contrast with the minority of us who stood silently on a grassy knoll outside in solidarity with gay and lesbian sisters and brothers. The motion showed a growing divide between West and South, as well as within the West. This divide widened in the following decade. Many churches in Africa are experiencing rapid growth whereas many Western churches are in decline. Many from Africa link church growth with faithfulness to the Gospel and say the decline in Western churches is a consequence of liberalism and watered-down belief.

The reality, I believe, is quite different. Faithfulness to the Gospel is central to any church, but we live in a world of major cultural and demographic diversity. Manhattan is quite different from Mombasa. Western churches today live and work in a post-modern and post-Christian milieu where the simple perpetuation of traditional expressions and practices fails to engage many younger people. Wrestling with issues such as homosexuality challenges traditional thinking, and requires openness in the light of contemporary insights and experience.

Dialogue at Lambeth was intense. An African bishop said there was nothing to dialogue about: ‘the Bible is clear. If you disagree you might as well start tearing pages out of the Bible’. Many African bishops saw a clear statement condemning homosexuality as essential to their pastoral and evangelistic task. But an American bishop said just as essential to her pastoral and evangelistic task was a statement of inclusiveness that committed the Church to dialogue.

Looking at Lambeth resolution 1.10 some 16 years later, I suspect the voting today might not be much different. I see a distinct parallel with the Church’s attitude to those who had remarried after divorce prior to 1970. On the one hand they were assured they were full members of the Church but in many places they were excluded from Holy Communion. Today we offer the same assurance to the gay and lesbian community but exclude them from the priesthood unless they are celibate.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Returning to Canberra post-Lambeth 1998 I wrote the editorial for the diocesan newspaper, expressing my own perspectives while affirming the need to dialogue respectfully with those who conscientiously hold other views. There was some predictable protest but at a Sunday service a month later a woman came up to me over morning tea and said: ‘I am 75 years old, Bishop, and have been an Anglican and a lesbian all my life. This is the first time I have felt welcome in my own church.’

Bishop Gene Robinson retired from his post in New Hampshire in 2013, but his election ten years earlier forced Anglicans globally to acknowledge and manage the growing division. Of same-sex relationships the General Convention of the Episcopal Church[[4]](#footnote-4) said in 2000: ‘We expect such relationships will be characterised by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.’ Electoral synod members in New Hampshire who chose Gene Robinson as their bishop in 2003 would have doubtless satisfied themselves fully on such points.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes of ‘the body’s grace’[[6]](#footnote-6):

For my body to be the cause of joy, the end of homecoming, for me, it must be there for someone else, be perceived, accepted, nurtured; and that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does it become unreservedly lovable.

In the same paper he suggests that sexual relationships cannot be limited to procreative heterosexuality:

…the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous texts, or on a problematic and non-scriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures.

For myself I have come to the view that bonding between two people, with its essential ingredients of love and fidelity, lies at the heart of any life-giving sexual relationship. A relationship should be measured not by its outward form, nor by the orientation of the partners, but by its inner essence, and hence faithful and committed same-sex relationships are also acceptable in the eyes of God.

Nonetheless, Gene Robinson’s election as bishop ran against the recommendations of Lambeth resolution 1.10, and deep-felt distress was expressed from many parts of the Anglican Communion. In response, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams convened the Lambeth Commission in 2003. Chaired by Robin Eames, then Archbishop of Armagh, the commission was mandated to recommend steps to ‘maintain the highest degree of communion possible’ among Anglicans globally in the circumstances.

In its Windsor Report, the commission acknowledged the right of the American Church to act according to its own constitution, but regretted that it had acted without due regard to Lambeth 1.10. By acting contrary to the firmly held views of other churches in the Anglican family, it had damaged the ‘bonds of affection’. Calling on all to seek ways to reconcile and heal the divisions, it proposed the establishment of an Anglican Covenant to strengthen unity within the Anglican family worldwide.

The Covenant went through three drafts from 2005-2009 and was then circulated within the Anglican Communion for discussion. Of its four principal sections, three set out the bonds which bind Anglicans together. These include the catholic and apostolic faith, the scriptures, the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, the creeds, shared Anglican history and tradition and unity in mission.

The Covenant affirmed the constitutional autonomy of all Anglican churches, or provinces, while calling on the churches to have regard for the common good of the Communion in exercising their autonomy, and to engage openly and patiently in biblical debate and reflection.

The first three sections were an admirable and sufficient basis for global Anglican relationships, but Section 4 proposed a new advisory body to address controversial issues such as the ordination of a gay bishop. If such a body advised that an action was unacceptable, the proposing Church might then decide whether to defer the action or to proceed with it. If it chose the latter it might then find itself relegated to a restricted status and suspended from the Lambeth Conference[[7]](#footnote-7), Anglican Consultative Council or the Primates’ Meeting.

Unfortunately, Archbishop Rowan Williams gave a hint as to which way a new advisory body might jump. With regard to same-sex unions, he wrote in July 2009[[8]](#footnote-8) that ‘the Church has consistently read the Bible for the last 2000 years’ in a way that does not support such unions, and that only ‘the most painstaking biblical exegesis’ leading to ‘a strong level of consensus and solid theological grounding’ could support any change. Since such consensus was unlikely any time soon, the door to any change was firmly closed.

As the Covenant went round the Communion for discussion and adoption, it found good support in traditional circles who felt confident that Archbishop Williams’ statement would preserve the traditional position. But elsewhere support lagged, the Covenant being rejected in New Zealand as well as in the Church of England and other Western churches. Maori opposed it, feeling that any decision made on the other side of the world smacked of neo-colonialism. No more has been heard about the Covenant.

Its real failure was that it was seen by many as a very un-Anglican way of going about things. Here was an issue which, like the ordination of women 30 years earlier, had created heated divisions. Lambeth 1978 did not take a definitive position on the ordination question, but agreed that different provinces might make their own decisions. Many have ordained women while others, sadly, still have not chosen to do so.

On the women’s ordination issue, Anglicans agreed to live with diversity. The Windsor Report also called for diversity and dialogue on the ordination of homosexuals. But when the heat in the kitchen of dialogue seemed too much to contain, the Covenant provided for a decision-making process that would choose one side over the other. Wisely the Communion as a whole rejected such an approach.

In September 2003 I was invited by the Bishop of Auckland, John Paterson, to preach at the annual diocesan synod. Addressing the current debate on homosexuality, I sought not to promote my own well-known viewpoint, but rather to talk about the process of change. One of the biblical readings was from *Acts 10* where Peter, firm in his conviction that Jews should not associate with Gentiles, came to accept via a vision from God that old boundaries had been transcended in favour of a new inclusiveness. I said:

This dynamic of relationship with God over-riding tradition was seen also in tonight’s reading from *Acts 10*. Peter had been requested by Cornelius, the Gentile centurion from Caesarea, to come to see him. Peter said to Cornelius that it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile, but he had come without objection because the vision of the great white sheet with all manner of creatures in it had taught him he should not regard as profane any creature that God had made.

Peter went on to say (*vv 34, 35*) that he now understood that God showed no partiality, but that in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. As Peter proclaimed the Gospel to Cornelius and his friends, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, and they were baptised.

James Alison, an English Roman Catholic priest and theologian, commented on the same text:

In a very short space of time in Luke’s story-telling we have gone from something rather like ‘You are no part of our narrative’ through ‘You can be part of our narrative, but only on our terms’ to ‘Heavens, we are part of the same narrative, which isn’t the one either of us thought it was and it isn’t on the terms set by either of us’[[9]](#footnote-9).

In November 2003 I was invited to be the guest on Kim Hill’s late night television show *Face to Face.* As we began a 25-minute conversation, Kim headed right into the gay debate. ‘How can you possibly support a gay bishop in the face of the vast weight of biblical evidence against it?’ she asked dramatically. I replied that the ‘vast weight of biblical evidence’ amounted to no more than a handful of texts, some more than 3000 years old, with quite unclear meaning, and coming from an age when there was no awareness of committed same-sex relationships, nor of contemporary scientific evidence about homosexuality as a natural condition for some.

I pointed out that St Paul’s injunction against women in church leadership roles was far more precise, yet there were many women church leaders today. The Church had recognised that Paul’s views were the product of the patriarchal ethos of his time. Paul had also laid down other principles about gender equality and the different gifts of different members of the Body of Christ, and the Church’s judgment today was that these latter principles had the greater weight.

Kim was undeterred. There had been rumours at the time that Prince Charles may have had a secret relationship with his butler. ‘Do you regard that as acceptable behaviour in someone who might one day be the head of the Church of England? What might we expect next?’ she asked; ‘today his butler, tomorrow his horse?’ I said I gave no credence to rumours promulgated in the media, nor to speculation about further liaisons.

The synod sermon and the Kim Hill interview sparked unrest in some quarters. In December 2003, 19 of the clergy wrote a letter of concern to the Bishop of Auckland about my views. They felt that in the absence of any clear and public statement from the bishop about the diocesan standpoint, people might think my views expressed the diocese’s attitudes to gay bishops and same-sex relationships, and that such a perception was damaging to the Church’s mission and ministry.

I could understand their concern. I do not know what response the bishop sent, but the only answer that could be given was that the diocese encompassed a variety of views and that dialogue was the only way ahead. The episode raised the question as to whether bishops should express their views openly on divisive issues. I believe it is a failure in leadership if they do not.

I have always said my views are personal. As a bishop of the Church I accept the policies and decisions of the Church, and live by them. It is in order for a bishop to have a view on controversial matters, although in the present climate there is pressure on bishops not to express a view in case it alienates one section of the Church or another. Much safer to talk about prayer, dialogue and study than to risk putting one’s head above the parapet and be shot at.

No one can expect a bishop to have the same view on every subject as every member of the diocese. What one can expect is that a bishop will respect the convictions of every person, and ensure that all are included. I do. I lament the immaturity in the Church, or in any institution, if the leadership is prevented from speaking openly lest it cause offence. Leaders are called to lead, not merely to manage warring factions. And clergy and church members need to be mature enough to live with diversity rather than to operate from a mindset that it’s ‘my way or the highway’.

While I have received messages of opposition to my views, I have at the same time been greatly moved by many letters of support, at times from clergy who have carried for years the burden of having to conceal their orientation lest they be drummed out of office. Most moving have been the responses of church-going parents of gay or lesbian offspring who have felt the pain of the Church’s implicit exclusion of their children, and a feeling of guilt by association.

A country vicar wrote:

I am a newly ordained priest and was recently asked if I would officiate at a civil union ceremony between a school friend of my daughter and her female partner of long standing. I had to say that I was unable to do this as an Anglican priest. I was deeply saddened as I have known this person for the last ten years and know this is not a request she has made lightly.

I live with my questions of ‘is this what Jesus would have said? Is this the Gospel of love I represent? What does this speak of the church to the secular world seeking answers to life’s questions?’ I personally support and relate to what you have said with regard to God, spirit, love. I pray that I will have the courage in my ministry to walk this path, the true Gospel of love and inclusiveness – sometimes not a comfortable place to be, but it wasn’t comfortable for Jesus either.

‘A WORLD WITHOUT GAYS’ trumpeted the banner headlines of the *Weekend Herald[[10]](#footnote-10)* at Queen’s Birthday weekend 2004. Newly installed as archbishop, the Most Rev’d Whakahuihui Vercoe, aged 75, stated this view as part of his vision of a new morality for a future society. Archbishop Vercoe had a long and distinguished ministry over 50 years, including as an army chaplain, and with commitments to indigenous rights, anti-apartheid, and issues of poverty and justice.

Known for conservative views in other areas, his words about homosexuality did not surprise, but nonetheless created much distress in both church and community. Radio NZ rang me mid-morning for a comment, putting me in the difficult situation of having to disagree with my own church leader. But it was important for something to be said to repair the damage done to the gay and lesbian community. I pointed out that there was a diversity of viewpoint among Anglicans and that the words of the archbishop, while carrying the weight of his office, were not those of the Anglican Church as a whole.

I added that the General Synod[[11]](#footnote-11) which elected the archbishop had passed a motion which ‘acknowledges and honours the contribution that gay and lesbian Anglicans make to the life and ministry of the Church’. Agreed to by a large majority, the motion went some way in expressing a more positive view but did not address the main issue of homosexuality.

The issues are not resolved. Liz Lightfoot, in her book *Outspoken[[12]](#footnote-12),* interviews a number of gay and lesbian Anglicans, some ordained, some lay, as to their experience of ‘coming out’ within the church. A lay-person, Liz had exercised a ministry in her own local church as a liturgist, leading the prayers and administering the chalice in Holy Communion. She asked what would be expected if she applied to be formally licensed for this role by the diocese:

Would I have to be either in a hetero-sexual marriage or celibate? If I were to enter into a same-sex relationship, would I have to relinquish my licence and my duties? The answer was that if I did enter a same-sex relationship, I would not be able to continue as a licensed liturgist. I could occasionally, at my vicar’s discretion, say some prayers or read a lesson, but I would not be able to administer the chalice *(p.7).*

In her interviews with other gay and lesbian Anglicans she found similar experiences. One person said she had been barred from administering the chalice but was still able to be on the morning tea roster. Not all Anglican parishes are like this. There are several, especially in the cities, which practise a policy of open inclusion and welcome. The Auckland Community Church is a worshipping community of gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgendered and straight people which meets every Sunday evening for Holy Communion in St Matthew-in-the-City Anglican church. Two of the women interviewed by Liz spoke of the friendship and support they received there:

They were just incredible. I don’t think we would have made it without them. I honestly don’t think we would have, because they were Jesus to us in those first few years. We experienced amazing love from them.

Marriage equality became a topic for national debate in 2012 when the Government introduced the *Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Bill.* The introduction to the Bill noted that while the Marriage Act 1955 does not define marriage, and makes no reference to marriage being between a man and a woman, nonetheless ‘couples, other than a man and a woman, have not been able to obtain marriage licences under the act. This Bill will make it clear that a marriage is a union of two people regardless of their sex, sexual orientation or gender identity.’

Human rights were seen as the essential rationale for the Bill, with the introduction noting that ‘marriage, as a social institution, is a fundamental human right...and that the Bill would ensure equality for people...in accordance with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 and the Human Rights Act 1993’.

I made a submission to the Select Committee stating that I believed the Bill was in line with Christian principle, and noting that the Anglican definition of marriage has changed over the years. In 1662, the Church of England Prayer Book said that marriage existed first, for the procreation of children; second, as a ‘remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication’; and third, ‘for the mutual society, help and comfort that one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity’. The woman had to promise to obey and serve her husband. The relationship was not one of equality, and the union of husband and wife was last of the three purposes.

Today, by contrast, the New Zealand Prayer Book states that marriage is a gift of God so that ‘husband and wife should be united in heart, body and soul…and in their union fulfil their love for one another’. And second, ‘marriage is given to provide the stability necessary for family life, so that children might be cared for lovingly and grow to full maturity’. The priority of purposes in marriage has been totally reordered, and the requirement that a woman obey her husband has disappeared.

I stated that just as the Church’s understanding of marriage has changed over the years, so I believed it could now be modified again to be inclusive of gay and lesbian couples, who may also be ‘united in heart, body and soul…and in their union fulfil their love for each other’. They may also ‘provide the stability necessary for family life, so that children might be cared for lovingly and grow to full maturity’. There are many same-sex couples in long-term committed relationships, and research shows children may be cared for equally well in same-sex families as in heterosexual ones.

I canvassed some of the biblical background, noting that while same-sex relationships appear to be condemned in passages such as *Romans 1.26,27*, the context is one of a variety of debauched behaviours that belong to people who ‘refuse to keep in mind the true knowledge about God’ (v.28)… ‘who have no conscience, and show no kindness or pity for others’ (*v.31*). Faithlessness, lack of kindness and debauchery are not the marks of many gay and lesbian couples.

I noted also that scripture needs to be interpreted in the light of current knowledge. Part of our current knowledge about sexual orientation is that homosexuality is not a sin or aberration, but is as natural for many as heterosexuality is for others. Study of contemporary biological, genetic, psychological and socio-cultural factors in sexual orientation is essential to biblical interpretation.

I appeared before the Select Committee on 14 November 2012. Members were concerned about statements from conservative clergy that they would choose to go to jail than marry a same-sex couple. I reassured committee members that in my view the marriage equality proposal could not coerce clergy to marry a same-gender couple against their conscience. Such statements, I believed, arose from a completely erroneous understanding of the requirements of the Marriage Act. The authority given to clergy and marriage celebrants is permissive rather than prescriptive.

On 13 March 2013 the Bill passed its second reading in Parliament by 77 votes to 44. National MP Chris Auchinvole, a Presbyterian, said older people had baggage to carry from the days when homosexuality was labelled illegal and immoral. He had been a member of the select committee and had learned from listening to the submissions that

each homosexual, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual person appearing before us was not just to be seen as an individual, not just to be identified by gender preference, but in fact as a mother’s son or daughter, and a father’s daughter or son, a sibling to their brothers and sisters, grandchildren to their grandparents, nephews and nieces to their uncles and aunts, and uncles and aunts to their nieces and nephews, cousins to their cousins. They are all family along with their heterosexual friends and relations and are all an integral part of New Zealand, all part in my mind, my heart and my conscience, of God’s family. I now realise that this bill seeks to put first something critics have accused it of undermining – and that is the family.

In 2012, the Anglican Church established a commission to explore options for the Church regarding same-sex relationships. Headed by former governor-general Sir Anand Satyanand, a Roman Catholic, the commission was charged to consult widely within the Church and bring a report to the 2014 General Synod. The Commission, known as Ma Whea? – Where to?, tabled ten options. These ranged from do nothing at one end of the spectrum to splitting the Church at the other. In the middle were several options that allowed for diversity of practice by different bishops or dioceses.

‘Permitted diversity’ was the option adopted by the bishops at the 1978 Lambeth Conference regarding the ordination of women, but many do not see this as an option for same-sex relationships. A significant section of the Church sees heterosexual marriage or celibacy as the only options, regarding this as a matter of core doctrine from which there can be no deviation. Dual-practice options would represent a departure from Christian truth and could drive individuals, parishes or dioceses from the Church. Equally ‘do nothing’ options could drive away those at the opposite end of the spectrum. Doubtless many in same-sex relationships, and those who identify with their cause, have already left, having no wish to be part of a Church with judgmental and exclusive policies.

The General Synod in Waitangi in May 2014, of which I was not a member, was thus presented with a very difficult situation. How could it preserve the unity of the Church in the face of deeply held doctrinal divisions? After three days of intense debate and work behind the scenes a proposal opening the way for diversity of practice was agreed to. The synod upheld the traditional doctrine of marriage but at the same time agreed to develop a structure allowing for the blessing of same-sex relationships. The position of those who could not in conscience engage in such a blessing would be protected. The proposal also called for the writing of an order of service for a same-sex blessing.

The decision was taken unanimously, showing that careful and prayerful dialogue had led to a consensus between deeply divided perspectives. The decision stated that ‘distinct identities were not collapsed, but rather surpassed and transformed by Jesus Christ’. It was also agreed to work on the questions of the theology of ordination and marriage.

The proposals will be presented at the 2016 General Synod before final agreement in 2018, with extensive consultation in between. There is no guarantee agreement will be reached: the next General Synod meetings could reject the plan. But the fact that the synod agreed to the proposal has opened the door for diversity of practice: it was a watershed moment.

General Synod also offered this apology:

Over many years our Church has become increasingly aware of the pain of the LGBT[[13]](#footnote-13) community. All too often our Church has been complicit in homophobic thinking and actions of society, and has failed to speak out against hatred and violence against those with same-gender attraction. We apologise unreservedly and commit ourselves to reconciliation and prophetic witness.

The struggle has been long with some distance still to run. Perhaps it was easier for Parliament, which did not need to consider the nature of marriage but could restrict itself to the issue of human rights. Nonetheless the thinking in the Anglican Church dates back at least to the 1979 Christchurch report, 35 years ago, and we have had more than enough time for progressive action. Change may mean some leave the Church, but in the end the values of justice, inclusiveness and truth outweigh a concern for unity at the price of silence.

In his 2003 book *The Dignity of Difference,* Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

The test of faith is whether I can make room for difference. Can I recognise God in someone who is not my image? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his.

Both church and society are at their best when they encompass difference and are enriched by it.

1. There had never been any criminal sanction applying to females. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Human Rights Amendment Bill, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are, of course, many gay and lesbian clergy operating under a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ ethos. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Resolution DO39. Known then as the Episcopal Church of the USA (ECUSA), the American Church today is simply known as The Episcopal Church (TEC). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In May 2003 an English priest, Canon Jeffrey John, was nominated to be Bishop of Reading in the Diocese of Oxford. Canon John had been in a same-sex partnership for 25 years with another Anglican priest, a partnership they each declared to be celibate. The announced appointment to Reading created such division within the Church of England that the Archbishop of Canterbury persuaded Canon John to withdraw from acceptance of the post. He is currently Dean of St Albans but is discussed from time to time as a future bishop. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Body’s Grace,* an address to members of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bishop Gene Robinson was excluded from the Lambeth Conference of 2008 in an attempt to avoid division. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Communion, Covenant and our Anglican Future.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *On Being Liked, p.ix,* 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 5-6 June. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Held in Rotorua the previous month. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Outspoken, Coming out in the Anglican Church of Aotearoa New Zealand,* 2011. Liz is a freelance editor and writer in Hamilton, NZ, and daughter of Anglican priest Keith Lightfoot and his wife Jenny. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)