

General Synod Report

Chris Ambidge, at Church of the Redeemer 2019.07.21

I've been away for a couple of weeks, at General Synod 2019 in Vancouver. I'm a member of General Synod from Toronto, and I'm here this morning to talk about what happened. The first thing to say is that all of us knew that you, in the pews, were holding us in prayer, and that knowledge was tremendously supportive. Thank you.

Synod was six days long and they worked us hard. There was a lot done, and I'll try and touch on what happened now, from the headline events, to others that are less obvious, but also important. Synod has representation from 32 different dioceses and jurisdictions. There are lay and clergy and youth and bishops in the membership, which totals about 230. Larger dioceses have more people – Toronto's biggest at 22 altogether [Lyds Keesmaat-Walsh and I are among that number], no diocese has fewer than six. And when you get that many Anglicans in the same place, there WILL be worship and singing – both in the Synod hall, and at the Cathedral, a ten-minute walk away. The United Church moderator goes to a lot of such meetings, and says the Anglicans sing the best. Not surprising.

One of the things that we did at the Cathedral was elect a new Primate. Archbishop Fred Hiltz retired at the end of Synod after 12 years, and he has done so much. As our next Primate, the 14th, we elected Linda Nicholls, the first woman to hold that position; this is very good news. You may know her as the Bishop of Huron, or you may remember her as the Bishop of Trent-Durham here in Toronto before that. She is very experienced, both in Canada and internationally. We will be well led as we move forward.

Archbishop Linda will need to do some healing, especially in the wake of the marriage canon vote – I'll come to that later. She will also preside over an expanded church: Synod voted overwhelmingly to establish a self-determining Indigenous church, which will function somewhat like another province of the national church. The details of membership and function and decision-making are left to the Indigenous people. The National Indigenous Anglican Bishop is now an Archbishop, and presides over that part of the Anglican Church of Canada. Members of Sacred Circle and Council Fire will now sit as of right in General Synod – previously they have been observers.

Speaking of healing: you may well have heard of Primate Michael Peers apologising in the 1990s to Indigenous people for the Anglican part in the disastrous phase that was the Indian Residential Schools. But we settlers did more damage than that: we assumed that the natives were ignorant savages and needed to be civilised and brought to faith by us – when in fact they'd been managing just fine, with a clear connection to our Creator, long before the Europeans arrived. That steam-roller attitude, that spiritual arrogance – that we had all the answers and they didn't, so we needed to fix it – did tremendous damage to our Indigenous folk. Archbishop Fred made an extended and heart-felt apology for our spiritual arrogance toward the Indigenous church. That was a healing time.

Synod also condemned human trafficking, improved interfaith relations with Jewish and Muslim faith communities, and increased our relationships with Lutherans and Mennonites and the United Church of Canada. Synod adopted the UN Sustainable Development Goals, added supplementary material to the Book of Alternative Services, and adopted observation of the Season of Creation every autumn.

Council of General Synod asked the Synod to endorse five affirmations, designed to facilitate our deliberations, and living together as a church after the marriage canon vote (however it went). This was "A Word to the Church", five points that are duplicated and available here this morning. *[The text of the five affirmations in the longer Word to the Church document were available in hard-copy at church, and are Appendix A of this document].* They recognise Indigenous self-determination, that diverse understandings and teachings exist within the church, and commitments to presume good faith, and to stand together. These were passed by a huge majority – 85% as I recall. The first two – indigenous self-determination,

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and acknowledgement that some parts of the church believe that the existing canon does not prohibit same-sex marriage – were also incorporated into the motion to amend Canon XXI, the marriage canon.

That was of course the third major agenda item – along with the Indigenous Church, and electing a new Primate. This was coming back for second reading of changes which would have explicitly allowed for equal marriage, in dioceses where the bishop assents. After 2½ hours of debate, the motion failed on second reading, by two votes in the order of bishops. There were large majorities in the two other houses (taken as a whole, Synod was in favour by 75%). While we tried to receive the vote in silence, there were some suppressed wails of distress. It was a very difficult evening – both the debating process, and of course the vote count.

“Anglicans turn down same-sex marriage”, not surprisingly, was the headline in the secular media (sex, religion AND politics, this story has it all), and that did huge and immediate damage, damage that will take time to repair. People next day at Synod were receiving texts and email from friends and family members, “that’s it, I’m done with church”. One bishop received email from a couple he was to marry in August, saying they were taking the wedding to another church. Pride Day happened to be the next Sunday in St John’s NF, and the clergy in the Proud Anglicans section of the parade were yelled at, “take off your collars” – and that’s by the hugely secular crowd, who don’t normally “get” the finer points of churchland. I know that it caused significant hurt in THIS parish, with people wondering if they should stay or go: those people may even have left already and are not hearing this. And for all of that hurt I am profoundly sorry. That damage will not be un-done soon.

However, we are a resurrection people, and I am a LOT more optimistic now than I was on Friday evening. Synod protocols require that the House of Bishops withdraw during a primatial election and sit apart: they’re sequestered so they don’t know how the election is proceeding, but they may be needed to provide another nomination. So, on Saturday morning, while the vote, (and the very apparent distress with the result) was still fresh in everyone’s mind, the bishops were locked in a room together. I understand that “full and frank” discussions ensued, then and in three later meetings of the house, for ten hours total. After that, the bishops issued a message of apology for the hurt that had been caused, the message included the phrase “local option”. *[the text of that message is Appendix B, below]*

Synodical acknowledgement that the canon (as UN-amended) does not prohibit same-gender marriage, and acknowledgement of local option – these are acts of Synod – opened the gates. Before General Synod, there were four dioceses offering equal marriage in churches: Niagara, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. After the vote, Nova Scotia PEI was the first to say they were moving, and since then they have followed thick and fast. As of today (I think), there are now 14 jurisdictions for equal marriage: BC, New West, Territory of the People, Kootenay, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Rupert’s Land, Huron, Nova Scotia PEI, and the Military Ordinariate, on top of the previous four. Other dioceses – Brandon, Algoma, Ontario, Quebec, Eastern NF, are bringing it to their next synods. You have to be nimble to stay out of the way of falling dominoes here.

By my estimation, more than 75% of the population of Canada now live in dioceses that offer equal marriages. The only major urban centre not in the group is Calgary. I really believe a tipping point has been passed. What we were hoping for before Synod has come to pass.

Some are saying what we have is better than had the amendment passed: first, the marriages can start now, not 1 January 2020; second and more importantly, the diocesan bishop would have been able to veto the process had the amendment passed, but it didn’t. So, the diocesan bishop can’t veto the process, bishops don’t appear in the UN-amended canon. They voted down all the concessions made to the conservatives.

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It's not neat or tidy (and I *much* prefer neat and tidy); as someone said "we saw the sausages being made, and it wasn't pretty". The damage done by the failing vote will take a lot to repair. We also need to be careful not to blame this on Indigenous bishops – I've done the arithmetic: most of those voting "no" were European-origin conservatives, and the conservatives as a whole get the responsibility for the pastoral and evangelical mess created by the negative vote.

Nevertheless, the church has moved, and we have gained most of what *this* gay Anglican could have wanted. Equal marriage is here in Toronto, and across the country, and will only increase.

We also have a new Primate. We have a renewed and improved relationship with Indigenous Anglicans. Thanks be to God.

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Appendix A:

Affirmations in *A Word to the Church*, passed by General Synod vote 85% or so

AFFIRMATIONS

Council of General Synod asks General Synod and the whole church to make the following affirmations

Affirmation #1

Indigenous Spiritual Self-determination

Whatever the action of the church at this General Synod, we affirm the right of Indigenous persons and communities to spiritual self-determination in their discernment and decisions regarding same-sex marriage.

Affirmation #2

Diverse Understandings of the Existing Canon

We affirm that, while there are different understandings of the existing Marriage Canon, those bishops and synods who have authorized liturgies for the celebration and blessing of a marriage between two people of the same sex understand that the existing Canon does not prohibit same-sex marriage.

Affirmation #3

Diverse Understandings and Teachings

We acknowledge the ongoing reality that there is a diversity of understandings and teachings about marriage in the Anglican Church of Canada, and we affirm the prayerful integrity with which those understandings and teachings are held.

Affirmation #4

Our Commitment to Presume Good Faith

We affirm our commitment to presume good faith among those who hold diverse understandings and teachings, and hold dear their continued presence in this church.

Affirmation #5

Our Commitment to Stand Together

We affirm our commitment to walk together and to preserve communion, one with another, in Christ, within this church, within our Anglican Communion, and with our ecumenical partners.

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Appendix B: Message From the House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada to General Synod 2019

We, members of the House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada, see the pain and anguish inflicted on LGBTQ2S+ people, on members of the General Synod, across the Church, and in the world, as a result of the work and the vote on the matter of Canon 21, concerning marriage. We see your tears, we hear your cries, and we weep with you. We have caused deep hurt. We are profoundly sorry.

Although the bishops are not of one mind, we look with hope to the “[Word to the Church](#)” and its affirmations which General Synod 2019 overwhelmingly approved on Friday, July 12.

We are walking together in a way which leaves room for individual dioceses and jurisdictions of our church to proceed with same-sex marriage according to their contexts and convictions, sometimes described as “local option.”

Together, we affirm the inherent right of Indigenous peoples and communities to spiritual self-determination in their discernment and decisions in all matters.

Although we as bishops are not able to agree, in the name of Jesus Christ, we commit to conduct ourselves “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3).