

Wednesday July 13, 2016.

Bishop's Initial Statement on General Synod resolution (A 051) regarding the Marriage Canon (21)

The 2016 General Synod, meeting in Richmond Hill (Toronto), ON, from July 7 – 12, held several structured conversations in mixed groups on the Marriage Canon resolution – spread over Friday, Saturday and Monday morning. On Monday afternoon and evening, the formal debate on resolution A 051 took place – which included adopting two amendments. Other than altering references to man/woman or husband/wife in the current Canon, the only other significant change that the revised A 051 would make to the existing Canon 21 was the addition of this statement (which replaced the original “opt-out” phrasing in the conscience clause of the original motion):

e) A minister may only solemnize a marriage between persons of the same sex if authorized by the diocesan bishop. This amendment effectively changed the “opt-out” approach in the proposed canon to an “opt-in” approach. (meaning only bishops and the clergy they authorize would be able to officiate at same-sex marriages.)

The resolution required a 2/3 majority in each of the orders of laity, clergy and bishops. It received 72% of lay and 68% of bishops' votes, but only 66.2% of clergy votes. (It effectively failed to pass by 1 clergy vote.) This result was both surprising and very disappointing to many of us.

However, on Tuesday afternoon the General Synod members passed a motion requesting that the “recorded vote” (how each member voted) requested on Monday evening be published immediately, rather than simply being included in the Meeting Minutes available in a few months. The main purpose of this was to allow each member to check if his/her vote had been recorded correctly. This action produced a startling result. The vote of the General Secretary (Archdeacon Michael Thompson) had been incorrectly recorded as a lay vote. When his affirmative vote on the motion was transferred to the clergy total, it increased the affirmative clergy vote to exactly 2/3 – the number required for the resolution to pass. Therefore, later on Tuesday afternoon, the Primate declared that resolution A 051 had indeed been passed. However, a change to a General Synod Canon requires a 2/3 majority vote (in all 3 orders) *at two successive General Synod sessions*. Therefore, resolution A 051 has passed “first reading” and will now be sent to Provincial and Diocesan Synods for consultation. (The Synods are not requested to vote on the motion itself, but rather to offer feedback prior to the next General Synod.) The resolution must come back to General Synod 2019 and be passed again before it comes into effect.

Prior to our General Synod meeting, the General Synod Chancellor provided written documentation which pointed out that:

Although General Synod has enacted Canon XXI, it does not contain either a definition of “marriage”, or a specific prohibition against solemnizing same-sex marriages. It does refer to the “requirements of civil law”, and to persons “duly qualified” to enter into marriage.

In 2005, Parliament enacted the Civil Marriage Act which permits marriage between “any two persons” (thereby making it clear that persons of the same sex are “duly qualified” to enter into marriage). This is the civil law throughout Canada.

Therefore, as we approach our Diocesan Synod in October, 2016, I am suggesting that we work on discerning an appropriate pastoral response concerning same-sex marriages in our Diocese.

I want to call attention (and prayer!) to the fact that both Monday evening's preliminary result and Tuesday afternoon's final result were "razor-thin" and have left both our General Synod, and likely our Church across Canada, divided and suffering from some degree of alienation and dissatisfaction.

Therefore, I ask your prayers for all members of our Diocese, regardless of the outcome they were hoping for on the proposed amendment to the Marriage Canon, and for our Church across Canada, as we continue to work for ways in which we can walk together in God's mission across our country – mindful of the many different local contexts and cultures.

Yours in Christ,

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Bishop of Rupert's Land