

# **FCANZ response to the Motion 29 Working Group Interim Report**

This is a draft and initial response to the interim report from the Motion 29 Working Group, addressing what we are thankful for, some of the major issues we have concerns about, and our suggestions as to a way forward.

## **THANKFULNESS**

There is much to be thankful for in the report. A serious failure of previous reports has been that the timing of their release has provided insufficient time for genuine discussion and debate prior to General Synod being required to make decisions based upon them. This Working Group is to be commended for producing a report that has met their deadlines and allowed space and time for prayer, consideration, and response prior to General Synod/Te Hinota Whanui (GSTHW) 2018. The report has a warm and positive tone, it is easy to read and understand, and its brevity is appreciated.

Notwithstanding our comments below, the report is a sincere attempt to safeguard the opposing theological convictions of those in our church, and expresses a genuine spirit of compromise. It provides an excellent platform upon which comment and engagement can occur, and we hope that our comments here will be received in a similar spirit.

We also acknowledge the considerable time given, and effort made, by the members of the Working Group, and indeed the personal cost paid by those participating members. Certainly, it appears those on the Group who hold particular views on this issue have not let those views colour the process, elements, or outcome of the interim report.

## **COMMENTS**

Before we address our concerns, there are a few things we think should be noted:

1. Whilst the Group have remained within its terms of reference (focusing only on ecclesial structures within our three Tikanga church), the report recommends the introduction of a practice prior to the church agreeing on a theological position. Specifically, it lays out a way for this church to bless same-sex marriages without debating and finally deciding whether to do so is consistent with God's Word, or permissible under our Constitution and Formularies. We are concerned that it is not good process to allow practice before agreeing on the principle, especially when many (ourselves included) believe the practice to be contrary to the gospel set forth in the Scriptures.
2. The current report is silent on rightly ordered relationships and ordination, this is different from previous reports.
3. The report states that implementation of its recommendations will allow 'ongoing debate to continue' around matters of human sexuality. However, because one of the recommendations is to allow a practice many feel is untenable, this may hinder further discussion rather than enhance it, or cause such discussion to occur in a more adversarial environment.

## **CONCERNS**

The nature of an interim report means that there are many issues which raise questions. Below are four of our major concerns.

### Safeguarding Theological Convictions

As noted above, we believe that the report represents a genuine attempt at compromise surrounding the *practice* of blessing same-sex relationships. The report provides protection from prosecution for undertaking, or refusing to undertake, this practice. But for many people their conviction doesn't simply end at undertaking blessings, or not being required to undertake them. There are those who want to see full inclusion and legitimization of those in same-sex relationships across our Province, not limited by the conviction of a particular Bishop or Priest. Equally there are those who do not believe that the church should move from its current position and allow any such blessings. Neither of these convictions are protected, and we remain unconvinced that they can both exist within the same ecclesial structure.

### Teaching vs Practice

The report focuses on the practice of blessing same-sex marriages, but is silent on what may be *taught* about such unions. Currently, our church holds that marriage between a man and a woman is the only place where sexual activity shall occur, and any sexual activity outside of such a marriage is to be repented of. Our Constitution declares that no person acknowledging the authority of GSTHW may "advocate or inculcate doctrines which are repugnant to the Doctrines and Sacraments of Christ."

Therefore, those who hold to the Doctrine of Christ can continue unchanged in their teaching and preaching without fear of breaching the requirements of the Constitution. There is no such confidence for those who will teach (either in the liturgies used for same-sex blessings, or in their general preaching and teaching) that same-sex marriages are now blessed by God.

In short, under the report, only the practice of blessing is allowable, not the teaching about the blessedness of the union between two people of the same gender. This problem is brought about by the choice to leave the definition of a marriage in the formularies undisturbed. For both convictions to be safeguarded it is reasonable to expect that both positions can be taught. This is not the case, and leads to our third concern.

### Inconsistency with our Constitution and Formularies

Title G, Canon XIV currently ensures that any services performed in Anglican churches must be consistent with the Constitution and Formularies of our church. The proposed change allows services to occur that are acknowledged to be inconsistent with our Constitution and Formularies. This is an admission that whilst the Constitution and Formularies have not been changed, they are simply being avoided for the purposes of this issue. A Canon is being amended in such a way so as to avoid the operation of a fundamental provision of the Constitution. We question whether this is legally possible. And even if it is, is it right to do so, is there integrity in it?

### Uncertainty of Episcopal Oversight

The report's most significant proposal is the creation of Christian Communities to provide protection for those of alternate conviction. These Communities are grounded within current structures, and come under the authority of a Visiting Bishop from within our Church. The legitimacy of any Christian Community is dependent on the House of Bishops recognising such a Community. However, it appears that if the House of Bishops were to decide the Community was no longer desirable (for whatever reason) it would cease to be recognised in our Province, and the protection it provided for its theological conviction would no longer be available. These Communities also don't provide any genuine protection when a diocesan Bishop allows (or

prohibits) practices within their Diocese/Hui Amorangi that members of the Community believe to be unconstitutional or inappropriate. Simply having an additional episcopal relationship with the Bishop of a Christian Community doesn't address the impaired relationships clergy and parishes would encounter in that situation.

### **A way forward?**

Having made some comments and raised some concerns we believe there is at least one substantial change which will be required to move forward. To be clear, even this change may be insufficient to address the cumulative effects of other issues (some of which are raised above), or the general principle of Anglicans recognising that their church has gone beyond the bounds of the faith in permitting the blessing of a sexual relationship which is not the marriage of a man and a woman. But we do consider that without the change below, the proposals simply cannot work for conservatives.

At the heart of the proposals is a move towards hui amorangi and dioceses being the unit where these issues are resolved. In the Report it is not Synods or the collective mind of these units (comprising clergy and lay people) where decision-making and responsibility lie, but rather individual Bishops are given increased prominence and responsibility on these matters. The decision to bless or not bless rests solely with them and therefore there is an increased need for members of their dioceses and hui amorangi to trust them. The recent actions of the Bishop of Waiapu (where a man in a same-sex civil marriage has been appointed as Dean of St John's Cathedral) have shown that this is not something we can take for granted.

If Bishops allow the blessing of same-sex marriages within their hui amorangi/dioceses there will be some who believe this is unconstitutional and against the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Their relationship with their Bishop will be impaired. Therefore, simply having an **additional** structure (such as a Christian Community) which exists alongside existing diocesan structures is insufficient. **Ministry units of a conviction different to their diocesan Bishop must be able to have alternative, rather than simply additional, episcopal oversight.** If such alternative episcopal oversight were to occur from a Christian Community, then the Bishop of that Community would need to have the same privileges and responsibilities as any other diocesan Bishop, and the Community have the same status as a Diocese.

We appreciate that this is a significant development of the suggestions provided in the report, but one which we feel is a minimum necessity to truly safeguard the convictions of those who wish to uphold a traditional position. We are thankful for the grace shown in the report to allow feedback, and encourage FCANZ supporters to continue to uphold the Working Group in prayer.