On the blessing of “same-sex” marriages in the Church of England

by Danil Arakelyan

The Church of England’s General Synod that completed its session on February 9, 2023, welcomed proposals which would enable “same-sex couples to come to church after a civil marriage or civil partnership to give thanks, dedicate their relationship to God and receive God’s blessing.”[1] This event has had a significant impact on the Anglican Community. According to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, “there are deep disagreements within the Church of England.”[2] Offering insights into this is the Statement of the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GFSA), which said: “the Church of England has departed from the historic faith and disqualified herself from leading the Communion as the historic ‘Mother’ Church.”[3]

An idea of blessing “same-sex’ unions has already caused division in many Protestant denominations.[4] Attempts have been made to advance this idea in the Catholic [5] and Orthodox milieu, for instance, in the Orthodox Church of Finland under the Patriarchate of Constantinople.[6] The Moscow Patriarchate has taken its stand in “The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,” saying the following: “The Orthodox Church proceeds from the invariable conviction that the divinely established marital union of man and woman cannot be compared to the perverted manifestation of sexuality. She believes homosexuality to be a sinful distortion of human nature, which is overcome by spiritual effort leading to the healing and personal growth of the individual.”[7] “The Canonical Aspects of Church Marriage” document adopted by the Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2017 says that the Church does not and will not recognize same-sex union as marriage irrespective of its recognition in civil legislation. [8] His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus’ noted: “The Orthodox Church does not agree and will never agree with the newfangled idea of marriage. We consider the cohabitation now practiced by people of the same sex a particular sin.”[9]

The “Living in Love and Faith” project has been running in the Church of England since 2017. It had to contribute to the discussion on “identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.”[10] At that time this topic has already been splitting the Anglican Communion. For instance, the U.S. Episcopal Church, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and the Church in Wales have introduced the practice of blessing ‘same-sex

unions.” But in the countries of the Global South conservative networks have been set up, such as the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) and the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GFSA). They have actively opposed such practice and even severed the Eucharistic communion with their opponents. There has been continuing discussion about that over many years.

In 2022, human sexuality was again discussed at the Lambeth Conference, which is one of the “Instruments of Communion” of the Anglican Communion. [11] Although the 1998 resolution known as Lambeth 1.10 to “reject homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture” [12] was affirmed, the situation of parallel existence of conservative and liberal churches which are in impaired communion has not been settled. [13]

Meanwhile, contradictions were running high within the Church of England. Therefore, in January 2022 the bishops accumulated the results of the “Living in Love and Faith” project and put forward the following proposals:

- repent of the failure of the Church to welcome LGBTQI+ people and for the harm that LGBTQI+ people have experienced – and continue to experience – in churches;

- recommit to our shared witness to God’s love for and acceptance of every person;

- continue the “Living in Love and Faith” process;

- prepare new pastoral guidance;

- welcome the further refining and issuing the “Prayers of Love and Faith” (a set of prayers for blessing);

- monitor the Church’s use of and response to the “Prayers of Love and Faith, “and to report back to Synod in five years’ time;

- not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and see that the final version of the” Prayers of Love and Faith” should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England.”

These proposals were accepted by the Church of England’s General Synod on February 9, 2023. Votes were recorded as follows: bishops 36 for, 4 against, 2 abstained; clergy 111 for, 85 against, 3 abstained; laity 103 for, 92 against, 5 abstained. [14]

As to the so called “Prayers of Love and Faith” that are to be used for blessing “same-sex” unions, the published draft, which mentions the “Prayer when Rings are Worn” and the “Prayer when Candles are Exchanged or Lit,” says that “the ministers must not involve the incorporation of the blessings contained in the Marriage Service.”[15] Also, an assertion is reiterated that “all forms of service shall be neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter, including the definition of Holy Matrimony.”[16]

According to the Canons of the Church of England, “marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”[17] Yet, we read in a Response from the Bishops of the Church of England: “We have not found sufficient consensus to propose a change in doctrine at the present time.”[18] These words, along with the recognition found in the Statement from the Church of England regarding GSFA Statement that “The 42 member Churches of the Anglican Communion are independent and autonomous and… doctrine is decided by provinces” [19], suggest that a possible change in the church doctrine of the Sacrament of Marriage depends upon an agreement of the faithful of a province. This assertion has come under criticism of Archbishop Justin Badi, the Primate of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan who believes that it “would show disregard for the wider Communion.”[20]

This is not the only problem caused by the Church of England’s decision. There are critics who have cast discredit on the statement that the church’s doctrine of marriage is not involved. For instance, the GFSA noted in its Initial Response that the decision to bless gay unions means that “the Church no longer sees the union of one man to one woman for life as the only way intended and blessed by God, for the flourishing of marriage, family, communities, and national life.”[21] It also says that since “the Anglican liturgy expresses its doctrine,” [22], an introduction of the blessing of “same-sex unions” speaks for a change in doctrine. The Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Stephen Kaziimba, believes that “the only significant difference between a wedding and a service of “blessing” is the terminology used” and “if it looks like a wedding, and sounds like a wedding… it is a wedding.”[23] Archbishop Henry Ndukuba, the Primate of the Church of Nigeria, also speaks of a departure from the truth, as “to bless gay marriage without changing the doctrine of marriage is to ‘speak from two sides of the mouth.’”[24]

Moreover, many people are against this decision and, like Archbishop Foley Beach, chair of the GAFCON Primates Council, believe that the decision to bless ‘same-sex unions” runs contrary “to the teaching of Scripture and the historical teaching of the Church.”[25]

To sum up, even though the decision to bless “same-sex unions” has been taken by the Church of

England's General Synod, it does reflect points of views of all members of this local church. Many voted against, and "prayers would be voluntary for clergy to use" [26] Besides, new pastoral guidance would be produced in the coming months to explain practical conclusions. [27] [28] The most important thing, however, is that the use of such blessings is still impossible because the exact text of prayers and their format are in preparation. [29]

Archbishop Justin Badi, the Primate of the Church of South Sudan and Chair of the GFSA, noted: "if any Communion province was considering changing its Doctrine on Marriage, and/or its Pastoral Guidance, then this should be first discussed and decided by the Primates' Meeting. [30] The Secretary General of the Anglican Communion, the Right Reverend Anthony Poggo, announced an idea of Archbishop Justin Welby to arrange a Primates' Meeting to be chaired by other primates. [31] This is a very important point, because a part of provinces are no longer able to recognize the present Archbishop of Canterbury as leader. [32] The development in the situation might be affected by the GAFCON conference that will be held in Kigali, Rwanda, on April 17-21, and address the restructuring of the Anglican Communion.

Whence, the issue of blessing "same-sex unions" has not been closed for Anglicans so far. Much depends on how it would be received in the Church of England and on its response to criticism that might be voiced by conservative churches. It is also important to know how far the churches wishing to distance themselves from the General Synod's decision are prepared to go. The Russian Orthodox Church will continue to monitor developments closely.

---

[1] Prayers for God's blessing for same-sex couples take step forward after Synod debate // UTL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/prayers-gods-blessing-same-sex-couples-take-step-forward-after-synod** (sourced on 22.02.2023)

[2] Archbishop of Canterbury meets with the President of Ghana // URL: **https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishop-canterbury-meets-president-ghana** (sourced on 16.02.2023)

[3] The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GFSA), Statement of GSFA Primates on the Church of England's decision regarding the blessing of same sex unions, Press Statement 20 February 2023.

[4] Evert's comment: This is why churches usually split on same-sex marriage // URL: **https://cne.news/article/2656-everts-comment-this-is-why-churches-usually-split-on-same-sex-marriage** (sourced on 03.03.2023)

[5] Archbishop Aquila: German synodal path repudiates the deposit of faith // URL: **https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251134/archbishop-aquila-german-synodal-path-repudiates-the-deposit-of-faith** (sourced on 16.02.2023)

[6] The Orthodox Church of Finland under the Patriarchate of Constantinople does not consider the practice of blessing same-sex unions an impediment to contacts with the Church of Sweden (in Russian) // URL: **http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/129282.html** (sourced on 16.02.2023)

[7] The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church XII.9. (In Russian)

[8] The Canonical Aspects of Church Marriage (in Russian) // URL: **http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5075384.html** (sourced on 16.02.2023)

[9] Patriarch Kirill rules out recognition of same-sex marriages (in Russian) // URL: **https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/6198c93b9a7947033ccddbdc** sourced on 03.03.2023)

[10] Living in Love and Faith // URL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith** (sourced on 2102.2023)

[11] The Instruments of Communion of the Anglican Communion promote unity within the Communion, resting solely on their moral authority as they do not have any levers of influence over the member churches. The Instruments include the Lambeth Conference, the Primates' Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Committee, and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

[12] Lambeth Conference 1998, Resolution 1.10 – Human Sexuality, d.

[13] Justin Welby 'affirms validity' of 1998 gay sex is sin declaration, Guardian // URL: **https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/aug/02/justin-welby-affirms-validity-of-1998-declaration-that-gay-sex-is-a-sin** (sourced on 21.02.2023)

[14] Prayers for God's blessing for same-sex couples take step forward after Synod debate // UTL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/prayers-gods-blessing-same-sex-couples-take-step-forward-after-synod** (sourced on 22.02.2023)

[15] The Church of England, Prayers of Love and Faith (Draft), P. 21.

[16] Ibid., P.2.

[17] Canons of the Church of England, B30.1.

[18] Living in Love and Faith: A response from the Bishops of the Church of England about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage // URL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/FINAL%20Bishops%27%20Response%20to%20LLF%2020%20Jan%2023_0.pdf** (sourced on 22.02.2023)

[19] Statement from the Church of England regarding GSFA statement// URL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/statement-church-england-regarding-gsfa-statement** (sourced on 22.02.2023)

[20] The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA), Church of England 'blessing' gay unions would violate biblical teaching & jeopardise Archbishop of Canterbury's continuing role in the Anglican Communion, Press Release, 24 January 2023.

[21] The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches, Initial response from the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA) to the Church of England 'blessing' of gay unions. Press Statement, 09 February 2023.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Church of Uganda responds to Church of England's decision to bless same-sex unions // URL: **https://churchofuganda.org/blog/2023/02/10/response-to-church-of-englands-decision-to-bless-same-sex-unions/** (sourced on 27.02.2023)

[24] Response of the Church of Nigeria to the decision of the Church of England to authorize the blessing of same-sex marriage// URL: **https://anglican-nig.org/response-of-the-church-of-nigeria-to-the-decision-of-the-church-of-england-to-authorize-the-blessing-of-same-sex-marriage/** (sourced on 28.02.2023)

[25] Gafcon Response to CofE General Synod // URL: **https://www.gafcon.org/news/gafcon-response-to-cofe-general-synod** (sourced on 27.02.2023)

[26] Bishops propose prayers of thanksgiving, dedication and for God's blessing for same-sex couples // URL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/bishops-propose-prayers-thanksgiving-dedication-and-gods-blessing** (sourced on 27.02.2023)

[27] Bishops propose prayers of thanksgiving, dedication and for God's blessing for same-sex couples

// URL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/bishops-propose-prayers-thanksgiving-dedication-and-gods-blessing** (sourced on 27.02.2023)

[28] Prayers for God's blessing for same-sex couples take step forward after Synod debate // URL: **https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/prayers-gods-blessing-same-sex-couples-take-step-forward-after-synod** sourced on 27.02.2023)

[29] Ibid.

[30] The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA), Church of England 'blessing' gay unions would violate biblical teaching & jeopardise Archbishop of Canterbury's continuing role in the Anglican Communion, Press Release, 24 January 2023.

[31] Statement by the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion // URL: **https://www.anglicancommunion.org/communications/press-and-media/press-releases/statement-by-the-secretary-general-of-the-anglican-communion.aspx** (sourced on 28.02.2023)

[32] The Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GFSA), Statement of GSFA Primates on the Church of England's decision regarding the blessing of same sex unions, Press Statement 20 February 2023.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/authors-analytics/90103/