

## Proposed plebiscite on same-sex marriage

(A report from the Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force.)

### Key Points

- This report informs the Synod about the work being undertaken by the Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force to prepare and equip Sydney Anglicans for a proposed plebiscite to determine whether the legal definition of marriage should be changed to include same-sex relationships
- A motion will be debated to allow the Synod to express its endorsement and support for the Diocese of Sydney to take a public position on the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the event that there is a national plebiscite on this issue

### Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Synod about the work of the Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force.

### Recommendations

2. That Synod receive this report.
3. That Synod consider the following motion to be moved by request of the Standing Committee –  
Synod, in light of a proposed national plebiscite to determine whether the legal definition of marriage should be changed to include same-sex relationships and consistent with its long-standing and previously expressed position in relation to marriage and human sexuality –
  - (a) continues to affirm that marriage, as a gift from God who made us male and female, is the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life,
  - (b) notes that the inclusion of same-sex relationships within the legal definition of marriage would lead to a deeply regrettable divergence between the inherent meaning of marriage and its legal definition,
  - (c) asks the Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force to continue to help Sydney Anglicans to prepare for and engage in public debate on this issue,
  - (d) calls on Senior Ministers in the Diocese to incorporate teaching on marriage and human sexuality in the teaching programme of their parish prior to the plebiscite,
  - (e) encourages all Christians to participate fully in the democratic processes open to us in this country to seek to persuade our nation of the goodness and wisdom of ensuring the legal definition of marriage in the Marriage Act 1961 remains aligned with its inherent meaning,
  - (f) urges all Christians to engage lovingly and respectfully in the debate about marriage, and condemns any vilification, bigotry or other expressions of hate or fear directed against our neighbours who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI).

### Background

4. On 7 April 2016, the Archbishop convened meeting with twenty four representatives from key diocesan organisations and committees. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss issues relating to the proposed plebiscite on same-sex marriage (SSM) and related human sexuality issues. The meeting recognised that changing the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex relationships was a very significant departure from the Bible's teaching, which would have profound long-term consequences for the fabric of our society as a whole, by undermining the place of marriage and the family as the basic societal unit. Because it is likely that legislation to implement same-sex marriage will not contain sufficient protections for those who continue to believe and teach that marriage is only between a man and a woman, our ongoing ability to exercise biblical, gospel ministry through our schools, aged care facilities, caring organisations and even our local churches could be severely constrained. For these reasons, the meeting concluded that the Diocese should ensure that Sydney Anglicans were made aware of the wider implications and consequences of the legal redefinition of marriage, and proposed that a task force be established to co-ordinate the Diocesan response to the plebiscite and related issues.

5. In response, the Archbishop established a Plebiscite Task Force (PTF) chaired by Bishop Michael Stead, with the following terms of reference –

- Represent Sydney Diocese in the public 'no' case for the plebiscite

- Develop and implement a communications strategy in relation to this for Sydney Anglicans
- Develop print and digital resources for this purpose.
- Develop and implement a Diocesan public strategy (in conjunction with wider 'no' case)
- Contribute to the debate in the national church on this issue

6. The purpose of this report is to inform the Synod about the work of the Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force, and to seek its endorsement and support for the Diocese of Sydney to take a public position on the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the event that there is a national plebiscite on this issue. Synod will be provided with an opportunity to indicate this endorsement and support through a motion to be debated at Synod. This motion is outlined at point 14 below.

### Resources

7. A key resource is the report of the Sydney Doctrine Commission, entitled 'Human Sexuality and the "Same Sex Marriage" Debate'. This report is available in print from CEP, and online at [http://www.sds.asn.au/assets/Documents/reports/D/DoctrineCommission\\_HumanSexuality\\_SameSexMarriageDebate\\_Oct2014.pdf](http://www.sds.asn.au/assets/Documents/reports/D/DoctrineCommission_HumanSexuality_SameSexMarriageDebate_Oct2014.pdf).

8. However, based on anecdotal evidence, it seems that this excellent report has not been widely read by members of our congregations. For this purpose, the PTF has undertaken to summarise the key argument from the report into a short booklet intended for wide distribution in our churches and other Anglican institutions. The aims of the booklet include –

- teaching Sydney Anglicans about God's good plan for marriage
- explaining why God's plan for marriage is good for all society
- explaining the consequences of legally redefining marriage for children and family
- explaining the consequences of legally redefining marriage for religious freedom
- encouraging Christians to take a stand on this issue, including political action
- providing answers to frequently asked questions

9. In addition to print distribution, it is also anticipated that resource material will be freely available from a Diocesan website to be developed for this purpose. This website will also contain links to other recommended resources.

### Public Square Engagement

10. Christians in Australia are privileged to live in a liberal democracy where we have a right to vote, express our views and contribute to public debate. The PTF encourages Christians to be equipped to be able to persuade others that God's pattern for marriage is demonstrably best for society, and that our society should follow this pattern not merely because it is God's, but because it is good for human flourishing.

11. In the event that there is a same-sex marriage plebiscite, we seek Synod's endorsement for the Diocese to take a public stance on this issue and speak against the legal redefinition of marriage.

### Recent resolutions of the Synod

12. Synod passed resolution as follows –

#### Upholding the classical definition of marriage

Synod –

- (a) regrets and opposes any misuse of the Bible to justify a lack of love towards members of the gay community, and
- (b) noting the millions of Australians who want to uphold the classical definition of marriage, as reflected in the *Marriage Act 1961*, commends the Federal Government on its decision to challenge the Australian Capital Territory's proposed "same sex marriage" legislation, should such legislation be passed, and
- (c) urges the Federal Government to take whatever action may be necessary to preserve the God-given institution of marriage, desiring our society to avoid the significant ramifications of a breakdown in or dilution of the most basic family unit.

13. Synod passed resolution 31/15 as follows –

#### Affirmation of marriage as between a man and a woman

Synod –

- (a) affirms once again that marriage, as a gift from God who made us male and female, is the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life,
- (b) recalls that marriage is the symbol of God's unending love for his people, and of the union between Christ and his Church,
- (c) recognises that marriage is a bedrock institution of society, designed for its good order and the secure and loving care of children by their own mother and father,
- (d) notes, nonetheless, that many children are lovingly cared for in other contexts, and affirms that the welfare of such children must be paramount, along with support for their parents and other carers,
- (e) condemns any violence against or mistreatment of our neighbours who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI),
- (f) calls on all Australian Christians to engage respectfully in the debate over marriage and to pray for the members of the Federal Parliament in their consideration of this matter,
- (g) insists that, should the Federal Parliament decide to change the legal definition of marriage, robust provisions for freedom of speech and religion are included in relevant legislation, to protect those whose conscientious beliefs mean they cannot celebrate such a redefinition; and nevertheless,
- (h) urges the Federal Parliament to uphold the classical understanding of marriage as being between a man and a woman, in accordance with current provisions of the Marriage Act 1961.

#### **Proposed motion for Synod in 2016**

14. Resolution 31/15 continues to be the stated position of this Synod. However, in light of the proposed plebiscite, the following motion is to be debated at Synod this year at the request of Standing Committee –

Synod, in light of a proposed national plebiscite to determine whether the legal definition of marriage should be changed to include same-sex relationships and consistent with its long-standing and previously expressed position in relation to marriage and human sexuality –

- (a) continues to affirm that marriage, as a gift from God who made us male and female, is the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life,
- (b) notes that the inclusion of same-sex relationships within the legal definition of marriage would lead to a deeply regrettable divergence between the inherent meaning of marriage and its legal definition,
- (c) asks the Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force to continue to help Sydney Anglicans to prepare for and engage in public debate on this issue,
- (d) calls on Senior Ministers in the Diocese to incorporate teaching on marriage and human sexuality in the teaching programme of their parish prior to the plebiscite,
- (e) encourages all Christians to participate fully in the democratic processes open to us in this country to seek to persuade our nation of the goodness and wisdom of ensuring the legal definition of marriage in the Marriage Act 1961 remains aligned with its inherent meaning,
- (f) urges all Christians to engage lovingly and respectfully in the debate about marriage, and condemns any vilification, bigotry or other expressions of hate or fear directed against our neighbours who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI).

15. The purpose of debating this motion is to allow the Synod to express its endorsement and support for the Diocese of Sydney to take a public position on the proposed legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the event that there is a national plebiscite on this issue.

For and on behalf of the Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force

BISHOP MICHAEL STEAD  
*Chair, Archbishop's Plebiscite Task Force*

20 September 2016