



ARCHBISHOPS' COUNCIL

The Council for Christian Unity
The Faith and Order Advisory
Group

The Most Reverend the Archbishop of Uppsala
S-751 70
Uppsala
Sweden

26th June 2009

Dear Archbishop Anders,

Your letter concerning the questions facing the Church of Sweden in the matter of same-sex relationships and the law of marriage has been received and discussed by the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England. As chairmen of the Council for Christian Unity and the Faith and Order advisory Group we are writing with some initial reflections in response to your courtesy in informing us of the situation.

We are very conscious of the limitations of our knowledge of your situation and we hope that in coming months there may be close contact between the officers of our respective churches to enable us to understand more clearly the proposals themselves and their theological and ecumenical implications.

We must however say that already, from the viewpoint of the Church of England, the existing practice in the Church of Sweden of blessing same-sex relationships was problematic, not least because the same practice in one or two member churches of the Anglican Communion has led to divisions within our Communion. Although there is a continuing debate among Anglicans about human sexuality, the teaching and discipline of the Church of England, like that of the Anglican Communion as a whole as expressed in the Lambeth Conference of 1998, is that it is not right either to bless same-sex sexual relationships or to ordain those who are involved in them.

If we understand the situation in the Church of Sweden correctly, what is now proposed appears to be a fundamental re-definition of the Christian doctrine of marriage and of basic Christian anthropology. This development might be seen as part of a wider shift within Western culture and theology to a position in which the idea of a fundamental distinction between the genders is seen as irrelevant and in which marriage is therefore seen as something that can and should be gender neutral. This position would be at odds with the biblical teaching about the significance of God's creation of human beings as male and female as this has been received by the Church of England and by the Catholic tradition in general.

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FOAG also felt that the proposal, relating as it does to the wider cultural, political and social situation, raises important ecclesiological questions about the relationship of Church and society and the essential freedom that the Church possesses to order its life according to the Gospel. From a Church of England perspective it is vital for the Church to maintain a critical distance from the state and to resist what the state is doing if this is at odds with Scripture and the Catholic tradition. We recognise of course that it is easier to state this principle than to be clear how in any given situation particular churches make decisions in communion with the Church down the ages and across the world after prayer, under the guidance of the Spirit and on the basis of the study of Scripture.

This is one of the reasons why we had hoped that the Porvoo agreement would enable participating churches to assist each other in living the Catholic spirit as they face the pressures of changing social values in their own societies. In other words, international and inter-confessional church fellowship could be a means of helping us all to be both universal and local. We fear that the present developments may indicate a real weakness in the Porvoo agreement as it did not involve binding mutual consultation and joint-decision making.

FOAG is acutely conscious of the immediate and negative ecumenical consequences of moves within any of the Porvoo churches to revise traditional Christian teaching and practice in matters of human sexuality. As is well known, such developments within the Anglican Communion have not only led to severe tensions within the Communion, but have also seriously damaged existing ecumenical relations and dialogues. Changes in the understanding of human sexuality and marriage in one member church of the Porvoo fellowship would lead to an impairment of the relationships between the churches, with particular implications for the limitation of the inter-changeability of ordained ministry. Because of the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury within the Anglican Communion they could also further undermine the fragile unity of the Anglican Communion.

FOAG was interested to learn of a suggestion that possibly a majority of the Swedish bishops were in favour of ceasing to solemnise marriages in church, with blessings after civil marriage taking place instead. While attractive to some, this solution would still indicate a significant difference between the teaching and practice of the Church of Sweden and that of the Church of England in a matter where many consider the unity of the Church requires a common mind.

As we have already said, FOAG is very conscious that all churches are faced with similar issues about changes in Western culture. The issues facing you are our issues too and we hope that the difficulties of the present situation will enable us to be much more purposeful in our standing alongside each other. So both for this reason and because there is so much we do not understand about your situation, we hope for continuing and deepening contact and dialogue on the issues raised by recent developments.

With all best wishes



Bishop Christopher Hill
(Chairman,
Council for Christian Unity of the
Church of England)



Bishop John Hind
(Chairman,
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