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Why our church is facing the challenge of same-sex marriage

The Most Rev David Chillingworth writing in The Herald (Friday June, 12) before the Scottish Episcopal Church's discussion of whether or not to make provision for same-sex marriage in the life of the church.

Today the General Synod, the annual meeting, of the Scottish Episcopal Church considers whether we wish to make provision for same-sex marriage in our life.

Subject to conscience, our clergy would be able to conduct same-sex marriages. They would also be able to enter into such marriages themselves. This is a long journey. The earliest such a change could happen will be 2017.

We are living through a period of extraordinarily rapid social change. I was in Dublin two weeks ago. It is the city of my birth. It was a remarkable experience to be there in the immediate aftermath of the Constitutional Referendum on same-sex marriage. One of the most conservative and Catholic countries in Europe voted decisively in favour of this change. No wonder the

Catholic Archbishop of Dublin reflected that this called for a "reality check" among the churches.

A number of factors have brought that change about. Ireland's young population certainly made its presence felt. It is clear that people's views are being changed by their life experience. Irish Times journalist Fintan O'Toole referred to the "riveting eloquence" of the passionate advocacy of many. But he also described another kind of articulacy and said this: "What actually changed Ireland over the last two decades is hundreds of thousands of painful, stammered conversations that began with the dreaded words, 'I have something to tell you.' It's all those moments of coming out around kitchen tables, tentative words punctuated by sobs and sighs, by cold silences and fearful hesitations."

So people have been changed by the way in which gay relationships have begun to be in the best sense ordinary. They find it hard to do other than accept those relationships among people whom they love and care deeply about.

In the first day of our meeting of General Synod yesterday, I said: "Our society has changed. But that does not mean that the church has to change."

Churches find this difficult. Readers can be forgiven for finding tiresome the difficulties churches and faith communities have about human sexuality issues. But that impatience fails to see that churches are the bearers of a historic tradition of faith and life - and we bear that tradition on behalf of the society in which we live. We have a diversity of views within our membership. To be

honest, many of us have a diversity of view within ourselves. We are to some extent "work in progress".

Resolving those issues is far from easy. Views on each side are held with a passion and intensity which mean that votes won or lost do not always resolve the matter. But we are learning how to listen creatively to our diversity, to realise that all of us have some of the truth which we need.

This afternoon we are discussing a paper on the Doctrine of Marriage. The paper sets out the traditional understanding of marriage. It then asks whether we can recognise changes in the nature of marriage that will enable us to move towards accommodation of same-sex marriage. It is clear, for example, that many people enter into marriages where there is no expectation - or possibility - that there will be children of the marriage.

In that sense, the procreative character of marriage has become less central to its nature. Our marriage services have recognised that change, stressing first the companionship and relational aspect of marriage and then the aspiration to the upbringing of children. It then becomes possible to ask whether a marriage between two people of the same gender can express the fullness of what we mean by marriage

Churches do not quickly change deeply rooted patterns of thought and belief. That is partly because we believe that the authority for those beliefs lies outside ourselves - in the Bible and in the historic tradition of faith. It is also because we believe that our commitment to the historic

institution of marriage is part of what gives stability to our society.

But there is a widespread view that this is a question which we need to face. I am glad that the Scottish Episcopal Church faces it today with integrity while honouring its diversity of view.

The Most Rev David Chillingworth is Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.