



CNI

News Focus -

C of I bishops send pastoral letter to clergy on same-sex marriage

A text has been circulated on the internet on the issue of C of I clergy and same-sex marriage. It has been alleged that this is the text of a letter sent by each bishop to his/her diocesan clergy, following discussions within the House of Bishops. In mid-January the C of I is to issue a discussion document and resources on this area, the products of a working party chaired by the Dean of Belfast, Very Rev. John Mann.

The text purporting to have been sent by bishops to their clergy is as follows:

The following are some frequently asked questions and responses concerning same-sex marriage

I am writing to you in the light of the Marriage Equality Referendum in the Republic of Ireland and the subsequent legislation. It is recognised that in the Church of Ireland there are differing opinions and responses to the outcome of the referendum itself. Together with my episcopal colleagues, I seek to encourage a spirit of mutual respect and attentiveness to one another as we move forward together in a context of new civic realities and possibilities in the Republic of Ireland. There will be many new situations of pastoral sensitivity arising.

Hitherto the Church and the State in both jurisdictions have substantially overlapped in their definition of marriage. This is no longer the case in the Republic of Ireland.

We also need to understand that under current legislation, involvement of a member of the clergy of the Church of Ireland as a solemniser (Republic of Ireland) or an officiant (Northern Ireland) in a wedding is an expressly legal function.

The following are some questions that have already been raised:

Q. Will a member of the clergy who is on the Register of Solemnisers (Republic of Ireland) now be able to conduct a same-sex marriage?

A. This will not be possible while the Canons of the Church of Ireland stand as they are. The powers of conducting a marriage as delegated to an ordained minister in the Church of Ireland require that the marriage be conducted according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of Ireland, and therefore the doctrine as reflected in those rites and ceremonies. The Church of Ireland does not have a liturgy of same-sex marriage.

Q. Are clergy permitted to conduct a blessing of a same-sex marriage?

A. There is no provision in the Book of Common Prayer or other authorized liturgies of the church for the blessing of a same sex marriage. In addition the service known as A Form of Prayer and Dedication after a Civil Marriage (pages 431 ff) presupposes the civil marriage of a man and a woman as husband and wife and cannot be used in this context.

Q. If two people who enter a same-sex civil marriage ask a member of the clergy to say prayers with them, how am I to reply and what am I to do?

A. It is not possible to proscribe the saying of prayers in personal and pastoral situations, nor would one wish to do so. In fact, in situations of rejoicing and crisis, such prayers often are at the heart of ministry. Any such prayers should remain consonant with the spirit and teaching of the Church of Ireland.

Q. If I am asked to attend a same-sex marriage, should I go?

A. The decision lies with the individual who will bring to this decision criteria of friendship and conscience, following personal prayer and reflection.

Q. What is the situation if I, as a member of the clergy serving in the Church of Ireland decide to enter a same-sex marriage?

A. All are free to exercise their democratic entitlements once they are enshrined in legislation. However, members of the clergy, are further bound by the Ordinal and by the authority

of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland. It is essential that any member of the clergy seeking to explore entering into a same sex marriage should think carefully about the response of others, not only in the immediate locality. This is an extension of the reflection, often requiring restraint in a range of matters, expected of clergy who are both public and private people at the same time.

The bishops of the Church of Ireland, acting corporately and individually, are well aware that, in the eyes of many, for an ordained member of the clergy to enter publicly into a civil marriage would be regarded as divisive. The backdrop to this is that such a situation is contrary to what the Church of Ireland currently practices within its own framework of regulation. The situation is that State provision in the Republic of Ireland now differs significantly from that in the Church of Ireland. It is for this reason that we encourage a restraint for the sake of unity that is respectful of the principles of others in the mixed flock to whom clergy offer service and leadership in the things of God.