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PRESS WATCH - Three Canadian dioceses have married eight same-sex couples since General Synod 2016

Eight same-sex couples have been married in three Anglican Church of Canada dioceses, ahead of General Synod 2019, when a resolution to allow same-sex marriages will be presented for final approval, Andre Forget writes in The Anglican Journal.

Since General Synod 2016 approved – on first reading – a proposed change in the marriage canon (church law) to allow same-sex marriages, four weddings of same-sex couples have taken place in the diocese of Niagara, three in the diocese of Toronto and one in the diocese of Ottawa, according to the offices of the respective diocesan bishops. Several other same-sex couples in the dioceses of Toronto and Ottawa are also preparing to walk down the aisle.

In the diocese of Montreal, Bishop Mary Irwin-Gibson said she is currently going through a discernment process with four same-sex couples considering marriage.

Bishop Logan McMenemy, of the diocese of British Columbia, announced at a diocesan synod in autumn 2016 that he will “move forward with the marriage of same-sex couples in the diocese” on a case-by-case basis. When the *Anglican Journal* contacted his office in March 2017, no same-sex couples had yet approached the diocese about the possibility of marriage.

Since changing the marriage canon is considered a matter of doctrine, the motion requires a two-thirds majority vote at two successive General Synods. The second and final vote will take place at General Synod 2019.

Following the first reading of the motion to change the marriage canon—which was initially, but incorrectly, declared as being defeated in a vote—several bishops publicly announced they would nonetheless marry same-sex couples.

Niagara Bishop Michael Bird, Ottawa Bishop John Chapman, Toronto Archbishop Colin Johnson, then Huron Bishop Bob Bennett and then coadjutor (now diocesan) Bishop Linda

Nicholls all stated that they would marry same-sex couples as a pastoral measure, citing an opinion by General Synod Chancellor David Jones, that the marriage canon as it stands does not actually bar same-sex marriage.

Following discovery of a voting error, which showed that the motion had actually passed its first reading, Bird, Chapman and Johnson said they would still go ahead with same-sex marriage. However, Bennett and Nicholls issued another statement, clarifying that their diocese was “committed to ongoing consultations” as required by the same-sex motion. At press time, no changes to diocesan policy regarding the marriage of same-sex couples had been made.

Irwin-Gibson, who did not release a statement following the miscounted vote, sent out a pastoral letter upon her return from synod saying she would consider marrying same-sex couples on a “case-by-case” basis.

Several other bishops, including McMenamie, said they would discuss with their clergy and synods whether or not to offer marriages to same-sex couples immediately.

While McMenamie opted to move forward, other bishops who underwent similar consultations,

such as Bishop Melissa Skelton, of the diocese of New Westminster, agreed to “abide by” the General Synod process.

In a November pastoral letter, Skelton—whose diocese was the first to offer same-sex blessings, in 2002—said New Westminster would “hold off” on letting clergy officiate the marriage of same-sex couples until the motion is approved.

However, she said she would convene a group to “create standards and develop or refine materials to assist all couples in preparing for their making monogamous, lifelong commitments of fidelity.”

Several other dioceses, including Huron, Ontario, Rupert’s Land and Edmonton, have said they will continue to offer same-sex blessings, but will wait until the motion passes its second reading before offering marriage to same-sex couples.

Bishop Ron Cutler, of the diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, said in a [pastoral letter](#) that the possibility of marrying same-sex couples before 2019 will be discussed at the diocesan synod in May 2017.

The announcement that some dioceses would marry same-sex couples despite the vote at synod was met with consternation from more conservative quarters of the church.

When William Anderson, then bishop of the diocese of Caledonia, was interviewed by the Journal following the announcement, he said offering marriage to same-sex couples before 2019 would cause a “period of chaos.”

However, the Anglican Church of Canada’s primate, Archbishop Fred Hiltz, maintained at the time that he has “no authority” to tell his fellow bishops what they can and cannot do in their own jurisdictions.

When contacted by the Journal about the marriages that have taken place and are being planned, several bishops pointed to statements they made following General Synod last year.

Bird said his thoughts on the matter have not changed since he told a reporter for the Niagara Anglican that he was committed to “continue[ing] to walk along the path of full inclusion and to immediately proceed with marriage equality” with LGBTQ2 [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Two-Spirited] Anglicans in his diocese.

But the process for marrying same-sex couples differs slightly among the dioceses that have agreed to do so.

While Bird simply requires priests marrying same-sex couples to inform him in advance, Irwin-Gibson told the Journal she has so far only permitted such weddings to happen in churches where the congregations and clergy are on board, and only for couples who are active in their congregations.

“This is meant to be a pastoral measure for members of the church where it is important to be done,” she said, adding that she has turned down some same-sex couples seeking to get married.

The diocese of Toronto requires parishes to receive authorization before marrying same-sex couples.

In November 2016, Johnson released a set of [guidelines](#) for how parishes can become eligible for authorization, and how same-sex couples in parishes that have not received authorization can pursue solemnization of their marriages.

Twelve parishes are now authorized to perform weddings of same-sex couples in the diocese of Toronto.

As the Canadian Anglican church has not yet authorized liturgies for marriages between members of the same sex, weddings that have taken place have adopted liturgy for celebrating and blessing as well as for witnessing same-sex marriages created by the U.S.-based Episcopal Church, which has allowed same-sex marriage since 2015.

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