

Archbishop of Wales says Gay Marriage Deserves Welcome Of Church

Barry Morgan

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The Archbishop of Wales has lent his support to gay marriage today, saying: "All life-long committed relationships deserved the welcome, pastoral care and support of the Church."

In his presidential address to members of the Church in Wales' Governing Body in Llandudno, Dr Barry Morgan said Christians "need to show how the Gospel of Jesus is good news for gay people".

He said the church had to ask itself whether it would "protect and support pastorally, faithful, stable, lifelong relationships of whatever kind in order to encourage human values such as love and fidelity and recognise the need in Christian people for some public religious support for these".

He said he was concerned about the welfare of gay people whom he feared could feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in churches over the coming months as Government proposals for same-sex marriage are debated nationally.

The Archbishop said the issue of same-sex relationships was a moral issue facing the Church and the world, on which there was no single Christian opinion. But he said the Church should offer gay people pastoral care and support.

Dr Morgan said: "The Government's consultation on civil marriage raises a whole host of theological questions for the church.

"My concern at the moment is that in any discussion which might ensue on this, gay people may once more gain the impression that the church is uncaring and unsympathetic.

"Things could be said in the coming months which I think could seriously damage people pastorally so it is that pastoral issue that I want to address."

The Archbishop said that while the Bishops of the Church in Wales abided by the Christian doctrine of marriage as the union of one man with one woman freely entered into for life, they agreed that "all life-long committed

relationships deserved the welcome, pastoral care and support of the Church and they were committed to further listening, prayerful reflection and discernment regarding same-sex relationships”.

But he warned: “Gays and lesbians claim they are still treated as second-class citizens, tolerated at best and vilified at worst. Very often homosexuality is talked about as if real people were not involved and gays and lesbians complain of being talked about rather than talked to in Church.”

He added: “The real question is, how do we hold together faithfulness to scripture and tradition with the wider New Testament call to love our neighbour?”

“If the moral aim of the gospel is to encourage love of neighbours, how can that happen when people are made to feel unwanted, unloved, and sinful? How is the gospel good news for homosexuals?”

Dr Morgan said the Church would not be able to ignore the new legislation on civil marriage proposed by the Government, despite the fact that the legislation would not allow gay couples to marry in church. He called on the Church to discuss how it would respond.

Some very senior figures in Christian churches have made no secret of their objection to gay marriage. Last month, in a letter to Catholics in England and Wales, the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, detailed his opposition.

Co-signed by the former Archbishop of Cardiff and now Archbishop of Southwark, the Most Rev Peter Smith, the letter claimed gay marriage would strip marriage of its “distinctive nature” and fail to recognise crucial elements like having and educating children.

It argued that the roots of marriage lie in human nature and said the complementarity and fertility pattern between “male and female” in the union is affirmed by many other religious traditions.

The Archdeacon of Cardigan, Dr William Strange, echoed its sentiments at the time, saying gay marriage would “alter the definition” of matrimony”.

Dr Strange, 58, a member of the Anglo-Catholic conservative alliance Anglican Mainstream, said: “[Marriage] has several important dimensions, including that it’s between one man and one woman for life.

“So if we change the man and woman requirement, we might just as well also change the 'for life' requirement.

“An arrangement which is temporary is not really marriage and similarly if we say it’s not between a man and a woman, then that’s not really marriage either.”

Today, Archbishop Barry Morgan, who has called for “full acceptance of gay and lesbian people” previously, said: “If the legislation to allow civil marriage is passed, I cannot see how we as a church, will be able to ignore the legality of the status of such partnerships and we ought not to want to do so.

“The question then, as now, is: will the church protect and support pastorally, faithful, stable, lifelong relationships of whatever kind in order to encourage human values such as love and fidelity and recognise the need in Christian people for some public religious support for these?

"As Helen says in the novel *Nightwatch* by Sarah Walters, a novel written in 1947, ‘What could she do to say to the world that Julia was hers?’

"She could have gone on to ask ‘What can the church do to show that this relationship is not simply something between my partner and I but that somehow God is in our midst as well and longs for our wellbeing?’ It is a discussion we need to have.”

The archbishop’s speech was welcomed by the Rev Andrew Morton, vicar of Llangybi, Monmouthshire, who recently announced his intention to resign in an effort to move forward efforts to secure the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church.

He said: “He’s always been a brave man. He’s never been someone who shied away from grasping difficult issues in the church.”

Mr Morton said it was clear there were same-sex unions that were “as full of grace as many heterosexual relationships”.

Predicting some disquiet in the denomination as a result of the speech, he said: “I don’t think he will gain universal approval and I think there are some people who will be aghast [who] will think he’s sold out to political correctness which is a nonsense. Anybody who knows Barry knows he couldn’t give a monkey’s about political correctness.”

Instead, Mr Morton said, the archbishop’s priority was identifying “truth”.

The Rev Alan Rabjohns, chairman of the traditionalist Forward in Faith Wales group, said that the archbishop’s views were so well known that his speech was unlikely to cause panic.

Commenting on the state of the church, he said: “It’s becoming more liberal day by day, almost, but there’s still a core of people who hold to traditional beliefs.”

He was not alarmed by the bench of bishops’ statement that people living in “other life-long committed relationships” deserve the “welcome, pastoral care and support of the Church”.

Mr Rabjohns said: "Clearly, everybody in our parishes deserves out pastoral care and support, whatever they are doing. Nobody is cut off from God's grace by anything."

The Rev Martin Reynolds, a retired priest who performs services in the dioceses of Llandaff and Monmouth and is a former spokesman for the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement praised the archbishop but doubted whether liberals and traditionalists will be able to remain members of the same church.

"I suspect while the patience and tolerance we have shown will continue those who [are] not happy with us will find another home. Although we are a small church and the archbishop and bishops are struggling to maintain us in one family those of who are oppressed in a sense are the only ones who show tolerance," he said.

Dr Strange said he was reassured by Dr Morgan's comments on marriage.

He said: "I think it's good that he and the bishops affirmed the traditional view of marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman."

Describing his hope that a split can be avoided, he said: "There is as broad a view of opinions in the Church in Wales as anywhere else but we are quite a small community and I think that's a strength because we talk to each other."

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