

Bishops responded to the General Synod: The resolution to the marriage debate must build on an acceptance of differing views

In May 2018, the General Synod requested that the Bishops' Conference promote respectful discussion and look for alternatives in solving the prevailing conflict over the concept of marriage. In its meeting on 6 August 2020, the Bishops' Conference approved the bishops' response and forwarded it to the General Synod, which met the following week.

In their work, the bishops have sought to find a solution to how we could achieve unity and live as one church of Christ despite differences of opinion. Their ten-page response highlights the close connection between the unity of the church, respectful discussion and the marriage issue.

As a solution to the conflict over the concept of marriage, the bishops put forward a scenario in which church members find a way to live side by side amicably despite their differing opinions – regardless of the prevailing concept of marriage and the practices related to the marriage ceremony. Reaching this state will require openness and communication, i.e. respectful discussion.

In their response, the bishops offer alternative solutions to marrying. The Bishops' Conference is divided on the best solution. For some bishops, the current model observed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is the only possibility: marriage is a union between man and woman, they argue, and the religious needs of same-sex couples can be catered for through a different ceremony. For other bishops, marrying same-sex couples is an acceptable option: they either advocate having two parallel notions of marriage, the traditional and the gender neutral, or they argue for making the notion of marriage entirely gender neutral and changing marriage practices accordingly.

When the bishops were asked which model they would choose if their preferred model was not an option, most bishops said that second best would be marriage considered as a union between man and woman and the marriage ceremony organised accordingly, but with same-sex couples also being allowed a church wedding.

In its response, the Bishops' Conference also outlined the characteristics of respectful and disrespectful discussion and prompted the General Synod, the Bishops' Conference and the Church Council to commit to respectful discussion and to promoting respectful discussion. The Bishops' Conference also hopes that the principles of respectful discussion are discussed in training organised for church employees and representatives and that all parish activities encourage the adoption of these principles.

The bishops point out that differing interpretations and practical applications of faith have tested Christian unity throughout history. According to the bishops, unity does not call for a perfect consensus: instead, the bedrock of unity is a shared faith and the baptism that joins Christians to Christ and his church.