

COMMUNIQUE
CHURCHES IN THE PORVOO COMMUNION

CONSULTATION ON CHURCHES TEACHING ON MARRIAGE – CHALLENGES IN
APPLYING THE TEACHING AND THEOLOGY

The Context in which we live is a rapidly changing one. State legislation on marriage is changing, drawing response from the churches of the Porvoo Communion.

Central to the task of the Porvoo churches is to witness together for Christ to the needs of a rapidly changing and confusing Europe. Traditionally marriage has offered just such an opportunity. Throughout its history the Christian Church has had to face the challenges of the changing nature of the societal context in which she ministers and in which the people live. The church in every age is called to serve the people of her society. The church is in but not wholly of the world as she seeks to live and proclaim the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ afresh in each generation.

Although the church seeks to provide teaching on marriage, frames an explicitly Christian understanding of a natural order and seeks to celebrate the union of hearts and minds, it is endeavouring to respond to trends in wider society. Such an endeavour involves tension and struggle. This struggle is not new. It has been the case in every generation.

In the light of this ever changing context and new challenges, the Porvoo Communion of Churches decided to hold this consultation on marriage. All the churches in the communion benefits by sharing their official teaching on marriage.

The Opening Eucharist was held at Turku Cathedral. The Revd Sari Lehti from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland presided and the Presiding Bishop of Norway, Helga Haugland Byfuglien preached. She reflected on the text 'overcome evil with good' (Rom.12.21) setting the spiritual context for the consultation and connected it to the local experiences in her Norwegian context during the summer months. The Closing Eucharist was held at St Mary's Church near the consultation centre. Bishop Martin Wharton (Co-Chair of the Porvoo Contact Group) presided and Bishop Stephen Platten (Church of England) preached, reflecting on the tensions which issue from the Gospel's engagement with wider culture in every age. Marriage and committed human relationships are subject to these same theological cultural tensions.

During the Opening Session Bishop Martin Wharton welcomed all participants. Bishop Hans-Erik Nordin of Sweden was welcomed as the Lutheran Co-Chair for this consultation.

Bishop Martin Wharton then pointed to the aim of this Consultation on Marriage as an opportunity in a changing context to listen, share, understand and learn from each other's histories, experiences, pastoral contexts as well as to deepen our knowledge of our churches' current teaching and practice regarding marriage. He also explained how the Porvoo consultation on 'Churches Responding to Conflict' (Feb. 2011) provides a framework for discussing and responding to controversial issues.

The challenges are many. However, the churches present agreed that:

- they can continue to address critical issues resulting from differing theological positions and pastoral practices;

- they are called to a sense of mutual responsibility as churches in communion
- they work towards wider consensus through prayer and engagement as well as with time, patience and a commitment to Spirit led discernment.

Reflection on scripture took a central role in the consultation. Participants also focussed on the many significant changes in State law and in society have already happened and how our churches' are seeking to respond to them in faithfulness to the Gospel. This led to an exploration of the evolving theological understanding of marriage implicit in our liturgies, doctrinal statements and pastoral practices, and their relevance in our diverse contexts. The Bible Studies throughout the consultation addressed aspects of theological substratum of marriage, beginning with creation and the texts in Genesis 1 and 2 relevant to the creation of humankind.

Presentations

The presentations brought a variety of thoughts to the consultation and fed the work of the groups and workshops.

Prof Dr Antti Laato presented the first paper of the consultation on an 'Interpretation of biblical passages related to marriage in the Old and in the New Testaments'. *Prof Carl Reinhold Braakenhielm* explored the question of what might count as 'theological justification' for same-sex marriage.

Responding, *Professor Oliver O'Donovan* considered the circumstances under which doctrine might be understood to develop and evolve within the Church.

Bishop Jana Jeruma-Grinberga brought the perspectives of human genetics to the consultation. By explaining the complexities of human genetics, she pointed out why there are individuals who do not fall neatly into the binary categories of 'male' and 'female'.

Small Groups and Workshops

In Small Groups participants were able to share and discuss material relating to marriage submitted in advance by their churches. The workshop sessions were thematic, addressing three key areas: Theological and Liturgical; Context, Society and Witness; Relationships – Ecumenical, Communion and Internal.

Reflecting Process

Central to the process of reflection were the Keynote Listeners. At the end of each day they engaged in a kind of public conversation. They were asked several questions in an interview format to draw out themes which had emerged in the intense discussions in small groups and workshops.

Findings and Texts of Presentations

The consultation made clear that differences over the introduction of same-sex marriage remain unresolved. It is clear that there are a variety of views and pastoral practices along a theological spectrum. Some believe same sex marriage to be a legitimate development in the Christian tradition, whilst others see the potential for a serious departure from the received tradition. Nevertheless the the consultation affirmed the benefits of 'belonging to one another'. The value of honest encounter and strengthened friendship provides a platform of sustained communication in the face of issues which raise such difficulties for us.

The findings of the consultation are available in an interim report. The core-group will, however, complete a report for further discussion in the Porvoo Contact Group. The texts of presentations will be made available to participants in due course.