

St Asaph Discernment Evenings

A Review

The Governing Body of the Church in Wales has asked all dioceses to discover their member's views on a way forward in consideration of the inclusion of gay and lesbian people and faithfulness to scripture, tradition and reason. The Governing body has offered three main options for the church and these are:

- Option 1: No change to the Church's current teaching and practice on marriage and partnerships;
- Option 2: To allow same sex unions to be blessed in the Church in Wales;
- Option 3: To enable same sex couples to marry in the Church in Wales.

The people of the Church in Wales have been asked to participate in conversations outlined in the paper [The Church in Wales and Same-Sex Partnerships: Suggestions for Undertaking the Consultation Process](#).

The Diocese of St Asaph sought guidance from the clergy and laity of the diocese on how to respond to the three possibilities through three open meetings. The primary aim of the evening meetings was to have a clear response from those attending.

The diocese needed some hard reliable data on the options so the representatives can speak with authority about the opinions held within the diocese. However, statistical analysis is always a problem.

The data that follows carries with it a warning that as attendance at the meetings was open and voluntary those with strong views were more likely to self-select. The best opinion polls are random in their selection and have within them a large number of people who are not campaigners. However, Area Deans encouraged wide attendance and the meetings were all full. In total 362 responses were received and this size allows for confidence that there is a sense of the mind of at least the committed heart of the Diocese of St Asaph.

The use of the six options for each option, rather than simply voting for which one of the three was preferred means that there is not the simple clarity that a 'first past the post' system might bring. However, I hope it does bring clarity to the complex mix of reasoning and emotions that lie behind the voting, and I hope it will be of help to the Bishop and Diocese.

Votes for and against each Option.

1. The voting pattern.

For each option the participants were given six options. These are the voting responses:

Option 1 - No change to the Church's current teaching and practice on marriage and partnerships

I strongly agree with this option	103
With hesitation, I can support this option	36
I have no strong view	20
I do not agree with this option, but I would accept it if it were the mind of the Church	82
I oppose this option, and continue to campaign for another option if it were the mind of the church	77
If this option were adopted I would find it hard to continue in the Church in Wales with integrity	29
Left Blank – but voted for another Option	15

Option 2 - To allow same sex unions to be blessed in the Church in Wales

I strongly agree with this option	82
With hesitation, I can support this option	83
I have no strong view	15
I do not agree with this option, but I would accept it if it were the mind of the Church	62
I oppose this option, and continue to campaign for another option if it were the mind of the church	52
If this option were adopted I would find it hard to continue in the Church in Wales with integrity	57
Left Blank – but voted for another Option	11

Option 3 - To enable same sex couples to marry in the Church in Wales

I strongly agree with this option	126
With hesitation, I can support this option	56
I have no strong view	9
I do not agree with this option, but I would accept it if it were the mind of the Church	48
I oppose this option, and continue to campaign for another option if it were the mind of the church	40
If this option were adopted I would find it hard to continue in the Church in Wales with integrity	75
Left Blank – but voted for another Option	8

The highest vote was for strong acceptance of Option 3, but more people said they would ‘find it hard to continue in the Church in Wales with integrity’ if Option 3 was chosen.

Option 2 could be a compromise, but it lacks strong support.

Option 1 could be a compromise with the highest vote for ‘I would accept it if it were the mind of the Church’.

2. For, against and ‘neutral’

- Marking 1 and 2 represented strong or hesitant support for the Option in question
- Marking 3 was neutral
- Marking 4 was to mildly oppose
- Marking 5 and 6 was to strongly oppose, with 6 being a very strong statement
- Blanks are not counted.

If we consider that indicating 1 and 2 is for, 3 and 4 is neutral, and 5 and 6 is opposed then:

Option 1		Option 2		Option 3	
• For	139	• For	165	• For	182
• Neutral	102	• Neutral	77	• Neutral	57
• Against	106	• Against	109	• Against	115

Option 1 had the lowest support, the highest neutral and the lowest against (although not by much).

Option 2 is popular, but still has 31% opposed.

Option 3 was approved of by the largest number, but it was also disapproved of by the largest number. There is a sense that this is the most divisive option.

Or,

If ‘I do not agree with this option, but I would accept it if it were the mind of the Church’ is taken literally as a vote against then the response is clearer.

Here ‘I have no strong view’ is taken as a positive vote for the option:

Option 1		Option 2		Option 3	
• For	159	• For	180	• For	191
• Against	188	• Against	171	• Against	163

Here it is excluding no strong opinion along with the blanks:

Option 1		Option 2		Option 3	
• For	139	• For	165	• For	182
• Against	188	• Against	171	• Against	163

To understand this further it is necessary to look more closely at the patterns of voting from a different perspective.

Voting patterns from respondents

When the perspective is changed and the responses are considered from the perspective of the respondents some very clear patterns emerge. This is still clearer when combined with the comments made on the forms.

The respondents were able to vote for each one and could if they so wish strongly support or entirely reject all three options. (Indeed a few did and these are in the section labelled miscellaneous). Most made a clear preference, but a number indicated equal preference for Options 1 and 2, and others for Options 2 and 3.

The following analysis is based upon the patterns of voting. Each respondent is in one of the six categories or counted in the Miscellaneous section.

The categories are:

- Option 1 – Strong (95) or hesitant (19) support and less or no support for the other Options.
- Option 1/2 – equal strong (7) or hesitant (9) support to both of these and less to Option 3.
- Option 2 – Strong (42) or hesitant (19) support and less or no support for the other Options.
- Option 2/3 – equal strong (33) or hesitant (12) support to both of these and less to Option 1.
- Option 3 – Strong (92) or hesitant (56) support and less or no support for the other Options.
- Miscellaneous – equal support for all three.

Within each there are subcategories.

For example, two respondents may have indicated strong support for Option 1 and hesitant support for Option 2, but one of them may have indicated that they would accept Option 3 while the indicated they would find it hard to remain in the Church in Wales with integrity if Option 3 was adopted. If a comment on the paper marked an objection to the use of the term 'marriage', then we have some idea to reasoning.

Looking through at the data in this way gives a deeper understanding of the reasoning and feeling of the respondents.

Support for Option 1

114 respondents chose Option 1 as a clear preference with 95 giving strong support and only 19 giving hesitant support.

66 indicated that if any other Option 3 were chosen they would either find it hard to continue in the Church in Wales (50) or would actively campaign for a reversal (16).

Comments from those who responded in this way focused on the clarity of Scripture, on their perception of the 'failure' of the Church in Wales to be under the authority of Scripture and on resisting cultural change. Others expressed fears that small congregations will close.

The Bible is perfectly clear on these matters

My study of Scriptures does not lead me to think of same sex marriage in church

[Other Options] will lead to a decline in congregations which are low in numbers

Option 3 will divide the church – churches will close

28 indicated that, while they would not agree to any change, either to blessing civil unions or marriage, they would accept the mind of the church if it chose Option 2, with 18 indicating they would find it hard to remain in the Church in Wales with integrity if it chose Option 3, but 10 indicating they would accept that decision.

Comments indicated awareness that the church needed to be inclusive and an awareness of discrimination towards gay and lesbian people, but a conviction that marriage was different. Some called for gay people to live together and be happy. There was concern that change is being rushed.

I struggle to support same sex marriage, but I support blessings of relationships

I strongly agree that gay and lesbian folk should not be discriminated against but feel uncomfortable with the word 'marriage'. I feel there may unintended consequences.

Things are moving too fast

19 respondents indicated hesitant support for the blessing of gay unions (Option 2) alongside strong support for Option 1. These were split between 8 who would reluctantly accept gay marriage and 11 who would find it hard to continue in the Church in Wales with integrity.

Comments focused on gay people being happy with the blessing of a union, but that marriage was a theological impossibility or unnecessary.

I have gay friends who are in civil partnerships and do love each other, I would hope that these people would be accepted into our church families without having to be married.

The Church does not have the authority to change a sacrament

Call same sex unions something other than marriage

Conclusions

There is a clear and distinct group who regard any change as unfaithfulness to Scripture. They believe adopting either Option 2 or 3 will split the church and result in decline. They express a desire for significant change in the leadership of the church to teach what they understand as the Biblical way.

Others broadly agree but recognise the potential compromise of some form of blessing as a way of inclusion.

However, most of these oppose the use of the term 'marriage' for anything other than a heterosexual union. This resonates with some respondents in the next two categories.

Support for Option 1/2

16 Respondents indicated equal strong support (7) or hesitant support (9) for both options 1 and 2.

8 registered their opposition to Option 3.

7 would be unhappy with Option 3 but would accept it.

1 expressed hesitant support.

Comments focused on the opposition to the use of the term marriage for same sex unions.

No objection to gay/lesbian relationship but the word 'marriage' should mean a hetero relationship

No one should be excluded, but marriage is only for heterosexuals

Conclusions

Half this group indicates communality with the last group in the section above. They are concerned for the pastoral care of gay and lesbian couples, but they are concerned to understand marriage as a union of a man and a woman. Some are less concerned and have communality with some of the group below.

Support for Option 2

61 Respondents indicated a clear preference for Option 2 with 42 registering strong support and 19 registering hesitant support.

6 indicated a secondary preference for Option 1 over Option 3. 1 of these respondents indicated that they would campaign against Option 3 if it were passed.

Comments indicated the problem was with the word 'marriage'.

31 respondents showed a clear preference for Option 2 by matching their responses to the other options. 15 of these indicated a strong preference and 15 indicated a hesitant preference.

Comments stressed the need to respect the conscience of the clergy and enable flexibility within the Anglican tradition. There was within some comments statement that marriage is only between men and women.

The church does not have to follow the world

I hope we can use the Anglican gift of liturgy to provide for diversity whilst remaining in unity

It is a pity civil unions of Christians has not been the norm

24 respondents indicated a secondary preference for Option 3 over Option 1. 11 of these indicated that they would actively oppose Option 1 even if it was the mind of the church and 2 of those said they would find it hard to remain within the church with integrity.

Comments indicate a wide range of reasons for similar responses. All spoke of the need for change, but some wanted to find different words instead of marriage, while others were calling for equality. Comments also concerned the need to protect the conscience of clergy.

It is time for change

No action is not an option

The need to care for both those who differ in their opinion

I feel that marriage is between a man and a woman could the service be called something different!

Jesus opens his arms to all and the doors of the church to be open to all

Conclusions

Those who positively responded to Option 2 believe there is a need to change.

However, even among those who indicated a secondary preference for Option 3 over Option 1, there were some who consider marriage to be between a man and a woman and prefer blessing over marriage.

Support for Option 2/3

45 respondents indicated an equal preference for Options 2 and 3. Of these 33 registered strong support and 12 registered hesitant support.

12 respondents registering hesitant support also indicated acceptance or no strong view if the mind of the church was for Option 1.

Comments stressed the faith of gay and lesbian people asking for blessing/marriage. One asked why a heterosexual couple with no faith could be married in church while a practicing Christian couple could not.

My hesitation is on the word marriage, though as one who will celebrate 50 years of marriage this year, I know that love, commitment, listening, and forgiveness are very important.

All persons are of equal value to Christ

33 respondents registered strong support for Options 2 and 3. Of those 20 indicated they would continue to campaign against Option 1 if it were understood as the mind of the church and 2 that they would find it hard to remain in the church with integrity. 11 indicated acceptance.

Comments focused on the faith of gay and lesbian people asking for blessings and marriage services. There is an emphasis on this being the right time and the inclusive nature of the love of God.

Treat me the same as everyone else!

I am 20 years old in a room full of people far older ... I believe acceptance and change must be made.

It is time for the Church in Wales to do what is right

We are all equal in the eyes of God, we must remember this and understand and help each other

Conclusions

Those who support Options 2 and 3 shift the tone to conviction of doing what is right. There is a sense of the time being now, or already too late. They emphasise that young people will reject the church if no change occurs.

There is a frustration with what is seen as a detail between calling it marriage as opposed to blessing.

There are those who express desire to follow the witness of Jesus in accepting all in his community.

Support for Option 3

106 respondents indicated their support for Option 3 over the other Options. Of these 90 indicated strong support and 16 hesitant support.

42 respondents indicated that Option 3 was the only option they could support. They indicate that they would continue to campaign against Options 1 and 2 if they were understood to be the mind of the church, or that they would find it hard to remain in the Church in Wales with integrity.

Comments focused on themes of love and acceptance in the Bible. There is a sense of urgency.

God is Love – if not now, when?

It is imperative that the church welcomes all people of faith in Jesus

John 13: 34-35. My hope is that the church is delivered through God's will – 'let your will be done'

In Jesus Christ all people are equal – be they men or women, straight or gay

46 respondents indicated a preference for Option 3, indicated they would accept another Option if it were the mind of the church. Of these 29 would accept Option 2, but either not agree with it or that they had no strong view. Of those 22 indicated they would accept, but not support, Option 2 and of those 17 indicated ongoing opposition to Option 1. 13 indicate acceptance but not agreement if Option 1 was adopted. 4 indicated acceptance but not agreement with Option 1, but objection to Option 2.

Comments focused on the welcome of God for all people, the faithfulness of Christian gay couples and the future of the church.

We cannot know the mind of God, we can only be guided by the principles of love and acceptance which Jesus demonstrated

Marriage should be available to all who demonstrate Christian love and Jesus as the cornerstone of their lives

God is Trinity – we are made in the image of God and so (binary) gender is irrelevant. Galatians 3v28

The Church should encourage fidelity and faithfulness in ALL relationships and marriage does this

18 respondents indicated strong support for Option 3 and support with hesitation for Option 2. Of these 5 would accept Option 1 and 13 would campaign against it.

Comments were similar to others in support of Option 3. They focus on reaching out to young people.

I hope this will happen quickly so that young people will no longer feel excluded and unloved by the church

The process of discernment has led me to move from Option 2 to Option 3. Option 2 I think is a compromise and I would rather be honest.

Conclusions

There is a clear core of people who do not accept anything but marriage and who regard blessings as inferior. The Bible is quoted by those supporting Option 3. They stress the primacy of love and significance of following Christ.

Some stress that the response is to gay and lesbian *Christians* wanting marriage and challenge the unquestioning marriage in church of straight people who are not practicing Christians.

They are also concerned for evangelism among young people.

Miscellaneous

There were 20 responses that did not fit the above structure.

The majority are respondents indicating equal support or opposition to all three options.

4 indicated support with hesitation for all three options – comments indicating ongoing internal conflict.

4 indicated no strong opinion with comment on wanting more time and another urging change.

3 indicated acceptance of the mind of the church.

6 indicated opposition to all three options.

3 indicated strong or hesitant support for Option 1 and Option 3 with less support for Option 2.

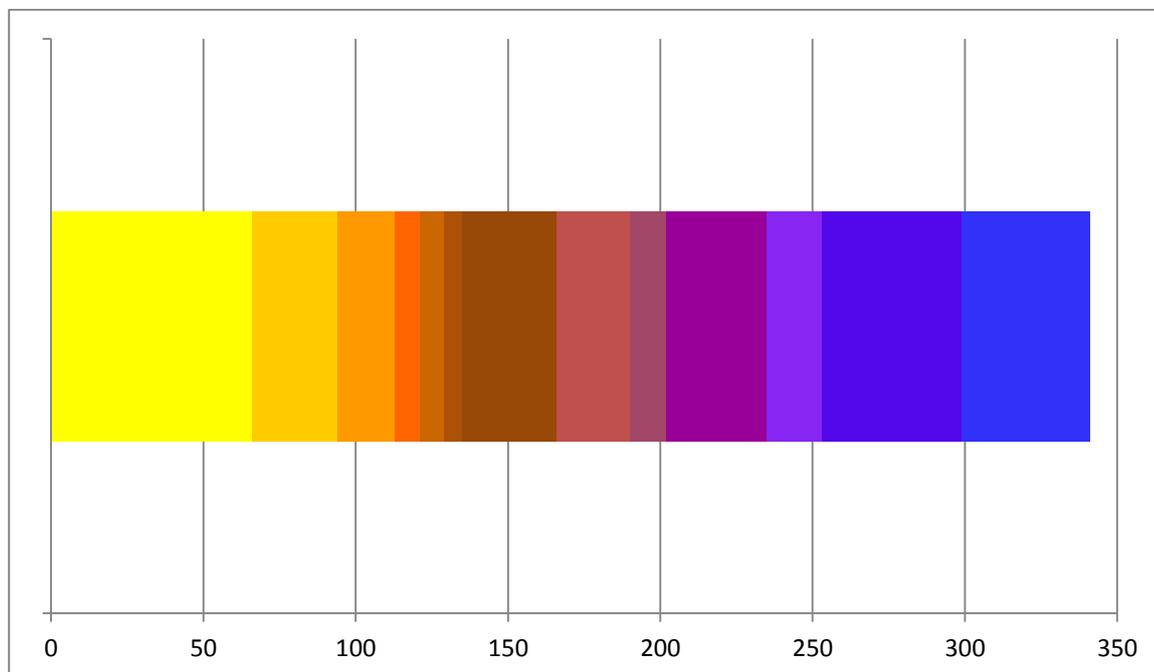
Diagrammatic

This may not help everyone, but the following offers a picture of the progression.

Yellow is Option 1.

Red is Option 2

Blue is Option 3



There is clear yellow and blue on either side, but no clear red. The Middle is brown and is to the left of the centre.

Conclusions

There does emerge a clear picture of the opinions held within the diocese. What to do is far less clear and it is not my place to give advice.

There are 5 distinct groups and my hope is that all who responded would find a resonance with one of these groups.

1. Clear support of traditional teaching

There is a clear group of about **19%** of the respondents¹ who **reject any change in marriage doctrine and not only oppose the blessing of same sex unions, object to the unions themselves**. Comments indicate that they do want change – but this is a significant change in the teaching and practice of the church to reinforce the traditional theology of marriage in preaching, teaching and pastoral practice. They state that the Bible is clear and so the church should be clear.

They fear that many will leave the church if any change in doctrine or practice is made.

In this reading Option 1 *is* a change option. Comments indicate a distrust of the leadership and membership of Church in Wales. They fear that society's values are already ruling over biblical values. The call in the comments is for commitment to this option from *all*, at every level of the church, but especially in leadership. Comments speak of the surprise they feel that the Bishops seek to even ask the question when the Bible is so clear. For them there are no Options, only one Option – to be faithful.

There are within the comments calls for celibacy of homosexual persons. One comment speaks the most loving response being to be firm and state that homosexuality is wrong. Comments suggest that Option 1 is the pastoral option. Comments said that blessing that which is condemned in the Bible is sinful and misleading.

2. Oppose gay marriage but accept blessings of same sex unions

There is a second group of about **20%** of the respondents. The unifying theme within the comments from this group was **the complete rejection of the word 'marriage' for any other union than that of a woman and a man**. They would not like to see any change in the doctrine of marriage, but would accept or like a pastoral response to committed gay and lesbian couples.

This group encompasses those who clearly supported Option 1, equally supported Option 1 and 2 and some of those who clearly supported Option 2. They differ from the first group in their acceptance of or desire for blessings of same sex unions as a pastoral response. What they have in common is a very strong opposition to Option 3. It is as vehement as the first group.

They are less likely to quote the bible than the previous group.

There were other themes within this group. Some express the fear of slippage, that is, if blessings are performed there will be an inevitable move to same sex 'marriage' in the future. They also express the fear that clergy will be forced to marry people by the secular law. They also quoted gay and lesbian friends who reported preferring the blessing of their civil union to marriage.

Some also complained that change was being rushed. They felt pressured into change.

There is communality between those who believe the most pastoral response is to be clear on the sinfulness of any homosexual relationship and those who would like to offer a blessing of the unions.

¹ The Miscellaneous Group is removed from the statistics – so 100% is 342.

3. The middle ground

The next group is a smaller group of about **9%** who see Option 2 as a positive pastoral response, and who are uncomfortable with either Option 1 or Option 3 because either might split the church. This is a group who are seeking compromise and hoping to hold the church together. However, all would be able to live in the church with integrity whatever the outcome.

There is a distinct desire for a centre position, but this suggests that Option 2 is a stopgap and that the fears expressed by those who oppose marriage of same sex couples and the hopes of those who support it could well be right.

4. Impatient for change

This group is about **28%** and they speak of the need to change quickly so as to reach out to younger people. Comments stress the need for love. There is impatience and a desire to make the change now because all people are loved by God. Some recognise that others will have an issue with the word marriage, but few think the difference is significant.

Some self-identified as gay or lesbian in the comments.

Those who support Option 2 and would prefer Option 3 to Option 1 have a lot in common with those who gave strong support for Option 2 and 3 and with those who support Option 3 but would hesitantly support Option 2.

5. Committed to same gender marriage

This leaves the last group of **24%** who are seeking to have same gender marriage. Comments stressed the witness of Jesus and the agenda of equality in the Bible. They stress the commitment of Christian gay and lesbian couples. They stress a traditional view of marriage as a support for faithfulness in the context while seeing a break in tradition in the gender boundaries.

This group is far more likely to quote the Bible and Christian tradition.

Some self-identified as gay and lesbian.

If Option 2 is adopted a significant part of this group will continue to campaign for marriage.

A diagram can illustrate the percentages and the diversity they represent.

