

'THE WAY'



In Christ | With Christ | For Christ

Conversations

What do we need to talk about?

Welcome to the 8th edition of The Way. It's been a while! There has been a lot going on.

Firstly, I have an update from the last edition. We now have a team to proceed with the 'One Parish, One Prisoner' project that I wrote about last time. The creation of the OPOP project was formally approved by the vestry on February 15. This is very exciting and we are looking to have a commissioning of the team in a Sunday morning service very soon.

Secondly, I write about the Diocesan Synod resolutions that were passed in October 2022. If you are unaware of the synod's resolutions, you can read all the resolutions on the [diocesan website](#). For some, these synod resolutions are controversial. For others, they are a matter of joy.

The resolution that has prompted the most discussion so far here at St John's is resolution R4. In short, R4 directs the Bishop to ensure that, throughout the Diocese of Edmonton, members of an Anglican parish who are in a same-sex relationship and wish to be married in their home parish will be granted access to that service in their home parish.

One of the reasons that I am writing to you on this (beyond sharing the resolutions with you) is that I have noticed that there are a few misunderstandings that seem to exist at St John's in terms of what this resolution does and doesn't do. So, I offer you these clarifications:

Some have expressed concern that clergy of the Diocese would have their freedom of conscience, as stipulated by our prior Bishop Jane Alexander, stripped by this resolution. This isn't the case. All clergy would continue to have freedom of conscience in whether to officiate at a service, or not.

Some have been worrying that this resolution means that St. John's will marry "anyone who walks in the door." That is not what the resolution does. It is a resolution that has to do with members of a given parish. And, in fact, marrying "anyone who walks in the door" is something that we've never been about, here at St John's.

For example, St. John's has long used a form called the "Application to be Married at St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church." The application assumes that those seeking marriage here already have a connection to St. John's. It asks about their faith in Jesus and whether they have taken a Christian basics course. The form asks why they want to be married at St. John's and outlines requirements for preparation. This is a thoughtful approach that I find helpful.

Some have expressed concern that this resolution puts matters in the hands of the Bishop. And it is true that resolution opens the door to the Bishop potentially sending in a priest who would officiate where the incumbent of a parish would not. That's partly why Bishop Steve came and visited our vestry last December, sharing his thoughts about the resolution and its working out. Part of what Bishop Steve shared with the vestry was his assurance that he could envisage no circumstances in which he would do this. Beyond that, he expressed that his intent would be to work things out with the parish leadership, when and if the need arose. And finally, the Bishop shared his willingness to continue conversation and meeting with our parish leadership, and the parish at large.

Beyond these misunderstandings, I've also noticed that a number of people have been rather surprised to find that others in the church family think very differently than they do on the matter! Indeed, I have identified at least six different viewpoints at St. John's on a spectrum from those completely against same-sex marriage to those completely in favour. In between are degrees of incredulity at the synod vote, some indifference, and exasperation that the Church is once again at risk of tearing itself apart.

So, given the resolution, and the various ideas about it at St John's, it seems good that we ought to discuss and discern how the Lord would have us respond to these issues, which haven't been discussed for years. If, indeed, ever.

But, how should we proceed? Well, rather than rushing into things, I have been intentional in listening, reflecting and praying these past months. We've been discussing the matter amongst the staff and our corporation. We've discussed it at vestry. And there has been personal conversation. In fact, a number of individual members of St. John's have spoken to me directly.

Some have asked my own position on this. I am orthodox on this issue, but that's not the point. Above all my priority as rector at St. John's is what it has always been: that we should continue to grow as a happy, healthy, and authentic church family, knowing ourselves to be loved by God, sharing that love and living out God's purpose for us as His missional agents in the world. That will always be my goal.

To that end, I believe we need to have some honest discussion around issues regarding sexuality, gender, and faith. These are issues that are having a strong impact on all, and especially the younger generations. As the Lord's people, we should be able to have honest, respectful conversations together, on any topic.

Now, to the practicalities. How are we going to give the space for the Holy Spirit to lead us?

1. First, pray. Prayer is essential. We started Lent with a prayer week. More are coming.
2. We saw a model of 'conversational gatherings' work for us last Fall, as we worked at discerning how best to structure our Sunday worship pattern. I think everyone who attended these consultations found them to be really helpful, healthy, and productive.

That's why we are planning to hold a series of conversations in which we can listen to each other and have an opportunity to be heard on these important issues. We will hold these conversations on a variety of different days and times of day, as we did in the worship consultations. We will also ensure that we include a Zoom option, too.

This is going to require that we act with consideration and care for one another. For those of you who are joyful about the resolution, I encourage you to see and treat with compassion those others who are in pain, doubt, and confusion about what all this means. For those of you who are sad or let down about the resolution, I encourage you to consider that others are joyful because they believe the Church is finally doing something to show love toward people who have been hurt by the Church. And the point is this: wherever we are in our opinion or concerns, we must work to open our hearts to each other, even to those with a different viewpoint than our own, for such is the family of God.

So, this is not about people bringing their entrenched positions, intent on convincing all others that they are right. We've all been in those kinds of discussion, and they tend to accomplish little beyond creating further hurt or division. Rather, I invite you to step back and see that there is a wider and deeper reflection for us, beyond just on the subject of marriage. For, at the heart of all of this are even more questions: how does the Church connect meaningfully and honestly with a world that has seen much social change? How do we participate in God's transformational work in our varied communities and in relationship with those who live in them? How do we live out Jesus' command to "be one" while we figure out all of this? This is why I would like to hold out a vision before you: I want to call on our church family to pray together, converse, and seek patiently to hear what the Lord is saying.

When will all this begin, you ask? We will start the week after Easter so we can ensure our focus in the next six weeks will be the practice and discipline of a Holy Lent. So, I encourage you to spend these weeks intentionally preparing for these conversations by ensuring we are abiding in the Lord and receiving from Him all we need.

Finally, let's remember we are in the Lord's grace and grip. The Lord is Sovereign and preserves those who seek to be obedient and faithful to God's will and purpose. Let us recall and be faithful to our purpose: to make our Saviour's redeeming Name known in word and action.

With love, prayers and gratitude for you all.

Richard