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EXPLORING THE NEW CREATION: ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX UNIONS

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The liturgies for same-sex marriages authorised by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church last summer were the result of a 6-year process whose first stage was the production of theological and liturgical resources which did not label same-sex relationships as marriages. The liturgy authorised in 2012 was tellingly entitled “The Witness and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant.” As I shall make clear, the definition of lifelong covenant was in no way inferior to that of marriage since marriage itself was defined as a lifelong covenant. Talking about covenanted relationships placed both same-sex and different-sex couples within a larger frame of reference in which commitments that did not center on a couple were equally honoured, such as vows binding a monastic community. The breadth of this frame of reference could accommodate the various ways in which monogamous gay and lesbian relationships had been thought of in queer religious discourse since the 1990s. Marriage had certainly been an important template, which had been given prominence in much of the Western World by the secular campaign for marriage equality, but another script had also been put forward, that of covenanted friendship, favoured by people who felt uncomfortable with the idea of marriage. Having said this, the fact remains that the use of the word marriage in the 2012 liturgy was avoided for political reasons. The Standing Committee on Liturgy and Music (SCLM), who had been commissioned by the 2009 General Convention to develop resources for the blessing of same-sex unions, had not been given any mandate to apply the word marriage to these unions. Given the apprehension and misgivings that this move gave rise to within sections of the Church, the Commission’s chair, Ruth Meyers, felt it very important not to overstep the bounds of their mandate. But the positive consequence of the prohibition on the word marriage was an openness in the liturgical and theological resources to the way in which committed gay and lesbian relationships should be labelled and imagined.

At least this was how I felt the prohibition could be received in the European context of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe whose Bishop sent me as a delegate to the Consultation on same-sex blessings in June 2014 in Kansas City. This paper comes out of my initial, probably naïve surprise at how much of an issue the absence of the word marriage was for many American delegates. Although the American context provided an explanation for this, I could not help wondering whether the Episcopal Church was not becoming obsessed with the very family values that queer theology had been encouraging the Church to move away from: how were the queer resources authorised in 2012 being received by people who campaigned for the blessing of same-sex relationships in the Church? In Kansas City, in-depth discussions took place in small groups. In my own small group, there seemed to be an agreement that the Commission had produced a very valuable theological document. At the same time the question of how much it related to the way in which ordinary church members actually viewed marriage or any of the covenanted relationships mentioned in the document was asked. Episcopalians still have some way to go before they conceive of the union of a couple as a covenant. In this context of Episcopal groping for a covenantal understanding of committed relationships in general, what, we ask, is the meaning of the inclusion of same-sex unions in Christian marriage that the last General Convention officially validated?

In fact the strong eschatological underpinning of the various queer ways of describing and labelling gay and lesbian relationships in SCLM's work means that choosing the word marriage to name same-sex unions does not necessarily exclude the theological insights behind the choice of other images. Using the examples of Michael Vasey and Eugene Rogers' writings, I will show how much same-sex unions viewed in terms of friendship or of marriage have in common when they are both viewed eschatologically. In that perspective, the significance of the choice of one label over another is very relative. The resources produced by SCLM are very much inscribed in this eschatological perspective. Given the American legal, historical and political context, the choice of the word marriage in 2015 makes perfect sense without necessarily compromising the queer renewal of the Christian imagination that SCLM is inviting the Church to enter into. What seems clear, however, is that the Episcopal Church still has some way to go before this renewal actually happens. The revision of the marriage canons and the authorisation of inclusive marriage rites are hardly the end of the road but merely a station on the journey — albeit a significant one.

Naming gay and lesbian relationships eschatologically

The new marriage liturgy authorised by the Episcopal Church is heavily indebted to the recovery of an eschatological view of the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly feast and as the Kingdom of God breaking into the here and now. In Anglicanism worship plays a central role in articulating doctrine (*lex credendi, lex orandi*). In doing so it also plays a central role in forming the Christian imagination. It provides images and words that form and reform the *sensus fidelium*. There is a continuum between eucharistic eschatology and a renewed way of thinking about Christian morals.¹ The natural paradigm which has dominated Western thinking since at least Thomas Aquinas has been increasingly challenged by an eschatological paradigm. What I call the natural paradigm is that way of thinking by which moral rules are derived from the natural order which, in spite of sin, still bears witness to the perfection of God's Creation in the beginning, to the Creator's intention for his Creation. Classically in the natural paradigm, salvation goes hand in hand with conformity to the order of Creation.² The natural paradigm has tended to look to what was in the beginning to find the moral truth of humankind: true morality is found in Adam and Eve's innocency before the Fall and the quest for holiness is about finding one's way back to that original truth and purity, with the assistance of grace.

A stronger eschatological awareness in the Western Church has meant that the quest for the natural order in the beginning has no longer been as obviously necessary to the moral quest and indeed to salvation. One emphasizes the new reality of the New Creation which surpasses rather than restores the perfection of the old. Therefore morality can be defined in terms that need not refer to the law of Nature and salvation is rediscovered, as James Alison puts it, as being led to inhabiting a space of

¹ See my own papers "Homosexualité, loi naturelle et rapport à l'accomplissement eschatologique de l'humain: Réflexions sur un aspect négligé du débat anglican sur l'homosexualité", *Istina* vol. LVIII no. 2 (April-June 2013) and "The Difficult Attempt to Separate Reproduction from Sexuality in Anglican Moral Theology", *Reproduktionen*, Salecina-Beiträge zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturkritik, ed. Gisela Engel and Nicole C. Karafyllis (Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 2005), 103-14.

² "Creation-as-moral-package" as James Alison calls it (*Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001], 98-99).

“serenity about nothing human being simply ‘natural’, but everything being part of a human social construct, to the extent where we can begin to imagine God quite removed from any justification of the present order, and yet ever palpitating beneath the vertiginous possibilities of the bringing of a divine order into being.”³

Queer theology in its fresh approach to homosexuality has made great use of what I call the eschatological paradigm, along the line of a great deal of patristic theology, by which the truth of humankind is defined by the endtimes, before being defined by what God created in the beginning. Negotiating the shift to the eschatological paradigm has been anything but straightforward, however. The eschatological paradigm enables one to recast one’s discourse on homosexuality away from its naturalness or unnaturalness, towards the way in which gay and lesbian relationships relate to the realities of the New Creation. But traditionally, while eschatological thinking (in the patristic Church notably) allowed for a positive assessment of affectionate relationships that were not procreative, it tended to view the sexual dimension of any relationship in a negative light.⁴ The ideal marriage for the Patristic Church is a spiritual marriage, devoid of sex.⁵ Relating gay and lesbian relationships to eschatological imagination has meant rethinking theological tradition and experimenting with a variety of images to describe the truth of gay and lesbian relationships in the light of the New Creation.

In the early years of queer theology⁶ friendship seemed to be as readily invoked as marriage as a template for gay and lesbian relationships. Michael Vasey, in *Strangers and Friends* (1995), saw gay relationships as a gift to Western Church and society, which had lost any sense of intimacy between males out of idolatrous conformity to the capitalist order. Capitalism turned men into competitors in the public sphere, leaving the married domestic sphere as the only space for emotional fulfilment and intimacy.⁷ The ‘family values’ which the church identified with, said Vasey, would have been hardly comprehensible to the Primitive Church for which family was very much part of the order of this fallen world. Family values for early Christians would have embodied all those things belonging to natural man that one should die to: preference given to your own clan over universal fraternity with all those who had been baptised into the Church. Gay people, said Vasey, could help the Church reconnect with the breadth of covenanted relationships that Scripture and Tradition commended. While Vasey was by no means censorious of gay people adapting to themselves the marriage script to order their lives, his preference seemed to lie with the script of affectionate, covenanted friendships such as can be found in the monastic tradition represented by Aelred of Rievaulx. More than marriage, the script of intimate friendship would make more significant the gay contribution to the critique of an idolatrous capitalist order the Church had bought into.

For Vasey the classic Christian understanding of romantic love is not found in its relatively recent restriction to heterosexual marriage but in “an intuition of beauty, a moment of revelation both about God and about creation.” (236) This revelatory quality of the erotic is linked to eschatology: it is a revelation of the Kingdom of God and a foretaste of heaven. It is not incidentally that Vasey ends his book with a section about heaven or “gay paradise” as

³ James Alison, op. cit., p. 103.

⁴ See St Augustine’s view of intercourse within marriage that is not exclusively for the sake of procreation in *The Good of Marriage*, X. 10-11.

⁵ See John Boswell, *The Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (London : Fontana Press, 1995), 119-120.

⁶ As distinct from gay theology, following the distinction made by Elizabeth Stuart in *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁷ Vasey followed David Greenberg’s analysis in *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988).

he entitles it: “The classic Christian imagination saw the awakening of love, the sweetness of sexual pleasure, and the fruitfulness of the sexual act as real but partial anticipations of the true locus of human longings for joy and immortality. The true and lasting fulfilment of these hopes lay in heaven” (245). And Vasey laments the “loss of heaven from the modern imagination” (245), something he thinks gay people could help the Church recover: “The biblical and traditional images of heaven are so preoccupied with style and public celebration as to be almost camp. While relentlessly political, they have more in common with a Gay Pride event than with the sobriety of English political life or the leisurewear informality of evangelical Christian life. ... The hope of heaven does not rest on fitting in with the way of the world but on the Lion and the Lamb — on the beauty of a king who strives for justice and the love of a gentle friend who takes to himself our pain and failure.” (248)

The broadening of the Western imagination about affectionate relationships which gay people can contribute to, more easily perhaps than straight people, is closely linked to a renewed, enhanced eschatological imagination. Vasey strived to present gays and lesbians, indeed the gay culture, which was universally reviled by Evangelicals in his days, as a gift to the Church. His concern was to underline the differences between gay and straight people, rather than what they had in common, to show that the straight Church needed their gay brothers (and probably their lesbian sisters, too, although Vasey hardly ever mentions them). On one count at least, it seems that Vasey was right: the constancy with which eschatological reflections have underpinned queer theology has meant that gays and lesbians have helped the Church to recover the “hope of heaven” by relating moral thinking to the New Creation. An eschatological approach has characterised a number of queer theologians who have come to favour the template of marriage for gay and lesbian relationships.

Eugene Rogers is one such queer scholar. Steering away from the image of friendship, Rogers decidedly turned to marriage as the better image for same-sex unions. This made him a supporter of the civil campaign for marriage equality, but his queer theology of marriage is not formulated in terms of rights. Rather it moves away from considerations of individual rights to emphasize what a gay and lesbian partaking of marriage can offer the Church and the world, how it can further God’s kingdom. In that sense, it is quite remote from the idolatrous attachment to bourgeois marriage and family values that Vasey writes against. Rogers’ theology insists on relating gay and lesbian relationships to the hope of heaven, bringing it much closer to Vasey’s than one might at first think.

Eugene Rogers defines marriage as having an “eschatological end in the grace and gratitude of the trinitarian life, apart from childbearing.”⁸ When desire is deepened in marriage, it may “trick lovers” into “acts of faith, hope and charity,” it stretches forward “into things that are more desirable.”⁹ Gay and lesbian relationships can equally partake of a vision of marriage as “bodily means that God can use to catch human beings up into less and less conditioned acts of self-donation, finally into that unconditional response to God’s self-donation that God’s self gives in the Trinity.”¹⁰ Situating marriage eschatologically makes it the twin brother of celibacy¹¹ (as indeed ‘spiritual marriages’ did in patristic times) and makes its meaning independent from procreation. The fruitfulness of the marriage is situated in its straining forward into the life of mutual self-offering in the New Creation. In this sense, procreation

⁸ Eugene F. Rogers, “Sanctification, Homosexuality and God’s Triune Life”, *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 221.

⁹ Eugene F. Rogers, op. cit., 223.

¹⁰ Eugene F. Rogers, op. cit., 224.

¹¹ Rogers makes great use of Rowan Williams’s famous essay “The Body’s Grace”.

links up with the Christian meaning of marriage only if the couple with their children form a community that seeks to partake of the life of the Trinity. Procreation in other words is merely one possible channel by which the eschatological fruitfulness of a marriage may bloom.

Vasey and Rogers use very different images for committed same-sex relationships but they both approach them eschatologically, thereby providing a critique, explicit or implicit, of the late 20th- and early 21st-century Church's obsession with bourgeois family values. The right ordering of relationships should certainly be of concern to the Church, but it should view this ordering in the light of the New Creation which God is bringing about. In this light, bourgeois family values do not *mean* enough.

This kind of eschatological thinking has been fundamental in the development of the recent liturgy for the blessing of same-sex unions in the Episcopal Church and for the even more recent revision of this liturgy, adapting it for marriage for both same-sex and different-sex couples.

The Episcopal theology of same-sex marriage

Last July, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church authorized for trial use a gender-neutral version of the 1979 marriage rite, which paralleled the gender-neutral revision of the marriage canons. More interestingly, it seems to me, Convention also authorised *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage* which has come out of the work of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM) on the blessing of same-sex couples. This liturgy, based on the 2012 *Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, constitutes a thorough rewriting of the marriage rite, taking up the definition of marriage as covenant, found in several recent Anglican liturgies, and using the notion of covenant to shift the definition of marriage from *taking* another to *giving* oneself to another.¹² This is powerfully conveyed in the vows the two spouses make, especially in the 2015 version, prior to the relatively minor revisions made by the competent legislative committee of the 2015 General Convention:

In the name of God,
I, N., give myself to you, N.
I will support and care for you [by the grace of God]¹³:
in times of sickness, in times of health.
I will hold and cherish you [in the love of Christ]:
in times of plenty, in times of want.
I will honor and keep you [with the Spirit's help]:
in times of anguish, in times of joy,
forsaking all others, as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.

Legislative committee changed the first sentence of the vow to "In the Name of God, I, N., give myself to you, N, *and take you to myself*". This was done at the instigation of a priest

¹² This giving of oneself could already be found in the vows of the two liturgies designed for same-sex couples by the Anglican diocese of New Westminster in Canada in 2000 and 2003.

¹³ The brackets refers to an alternative text for the vows which deletes the references to the grace of God, the love of Christ and the Spirit's help to make it easier for couples in which one of the partners is not a Christian to use the liturgy.

who insisted that the taking importantly signified the total acceptance of one's partner.¹⁴ Giving, he said, should be complemented by receiving. The rite was authorized by Convention with this revision. Although the authorized version of the vows objectively moves the rite closer to traditional liturgies where the two spouses "take" each other, it does not ultimately change the focus of the liturgy on the self-offering of the partners. In particular, the celebrant's first question to each partner still reads: "N., do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to N.," a striking rewriting of the traditional question asking whether each partner will "have" or "take" the other.¹⁵

Marriage as self-offering is reminiscent of Rogers' theology. And indeed, Rogers sat on the SCLM sub-committee responsible for drafting the theological document accompanying the 2012 liturgy. But the work of SCLM was thoroughly collective and the liturgy and theological resources that the Commission produced cannot be traced back to one scholarly influence.

The central notion of the theological document, "Faith, Hope and Love: Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships" is that of Covenanted households, something, as it appears, borrowed from Bishop Thomas Breidenthal.¹⁶ Tellingly, although the document was produced at a time when SCLM had not been authorised to use the word marriage for same-sex relationships, it was the same document that was again submitted to the 2015 General Convention, together with the request that equal marriages rites be authorised. The Commission only added responses to the theological document by people representing various backgrounds and shades of opinion in the Episcopal Church. This sufficiently shows that the Commission saw their theological work of the 2009-2012 trienium as a sufficient theological rationale for same-sex *marriage* rites: whether one calls same-sex unions marriage or not does not change the meaning of the blessing imparted by the church on the couple. We must note that the SCLM material was complemented by the work of the task force on marriage which strived to show that same-sex covenanted relationships were the same thing as marriage. But the fact remains that the SCLM theological document was seen as equally valid to accompany marriage rites in 2015 as they had been to accompany a liturgy which eschewed the word marriage in 2012.

It seems to me that this was made possible by the focus on the notion of covenanted households. It enabled the Commission to write about same-sex unions in the wider context of covenanted relationships of which marriage is but one example, next to monastic communities. What these various households have in common is their eschatological vocation: they are all called to "contribute to the Church's witness to the new life God offers in Christ and through the Spirit, which the Church celebrates in the 'sacraments of the new creation.'"¹⁷ The term "household," like "covenant," has a sacramental resonance for Episcopalians. In the 1979 baptismal liturgy, celebrant and people together declare to the newly baptized: "We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood". And of course the 1979 Prayer Book puts the baptismal covenant at the heart of the baptismal rite and, one should say, at the heart of contemporary Episcopalian theology. A covenanted household is therefore an expression of what it is to be Church, caught up in the dynamic of

¹⁴ This detail was reported to me by Ruth Meyers, chair of SCLM.

¹⁵ This is the case in all versions of the English and American Books of Common Prayer.

¹⁶ Thomas E. Breidenthal, *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* (Eugene, Oregon : Wipf and Stock, 2004).

¹⁷ "Faith, Hope and Love: Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships", *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing: Resources for the Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant in a Same-Sex Relationship* (New York: Church Publishing, 2012), 48.

sacramental life. “In these covenants, two people vow to give themselves bodily and wholeheartedly to each other. They do this, in part, to live out the promises of baptism while also living into the self-offering of Christ, as expressed in the eucharistic table: ‘This is my body, given for you’”.¹⁸ Strikingly, next to the Prayer Book marriage service, the 1979 baptismal liturgy was an important source for the 2012 liturgy of blessing which became the 2015 inclusive marriage liturgy. The possibility for the couple to be presented to the celebrant is a fascinating rewriting of the question found in many traditional Anglican liturgies “Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?” It has followed the 1979 baptismal practice of sponsors presenting the person to be baptized,¹⁹ the understanding being that the sponsor is someone who will support the newly baptized in their life of faith. The patriarchal giving away of the bride has been rewritten as a presentation by members of the Christian community who promise to “love, respect, and pray for N. and N., and do all in [their] power to stand with them in the life they will share.”²⁰ The covenantal vows here are subsumed in the baptismal vows in which the whole Church share and the covenantal relationship becomes a commitment to ministry and mission.

Following Rowan Williams in his 1989 paper “The Body’s Grace” and Thomas Breidenthal’s reflections about sanctifying nearness, the theological document affirms the vocation of sex as fruitfulness quite independently from procreation. Rather, the vocation of sex is about radical availability and vulnerability to another, leading to a giving of oneself that mirrors Christ’s own self-offering.

The movement of sexual desire toward intimacy and into commitment begins as we give ourselves over to another in faithful relation and continues toward the final moment of committal, surrendering our lives to God. This movement describes a lifelong, deliberate process that, with obedience and faithfulness, produces visible holiness and the fruits of the Spirit. Both for the good of the couple and for the good of the Church, God blesses this loving, intimate commitment. This blessing, in turn, empowers the couple for their ministry in the world and energizes the Church for mission.²¹

Covenantal language enables the Commission to relate all committed relationships to the eschatological meaning of the sacramental life of the Church. While the focus was initially on the blessing of same-sex unions, many in the Commission, right from the start, felt that they were engaged in the sort of work that may lay the foundation for a renewed way of looking at different-sex marriage:

Some will find this kind of theological reflection on same-sex relationships unfamiliar and perhaps unwarranted. Many opposite-sex couples would likewise find this to be a new way of thinking about their own marital vows. Thus, General Convention Resolution 2009-C056, which called for these theological resources, becomes an

¹⁸ “Faith, Hope and Love”, 48.

¹⁹ The chair of SCLM explained that initially the Commission had even kept the term ‘sponsors’ and only replaced it by ‘presenters’ when they realised that it was misunderstood as patronizing by some same-sex couples who were given one first draft of the text for feedback. (Interview with Ruth Meyers, 7th September 2015).

²⁰ The 1979 Book of Common Prayer provides for the possibility of a presentation, but the parallel with Baptism is tenuous, especially because the presenters do not make any vows (distinct from the general affirmation of support given by the assembly) to love and support the couple.

²¹ “Faith, Hope and Love”, 49.

opportunity for reflecting more broadly on the role of covenantal relationship in the life of the Church.²²

As the chair of SCLM indicated to me, for many Commission members, the production of the resources for same-sex blessings was seen as preparatory work in view of recasting the marriage liturgy of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer at a time when a comprehensive revision of the BCP was looming.²³ The revision of the marriage canons and the authorisation of marriage rites for both same-sex and different-sex couples in 2015 can therefore be understood as a declaration about both kinds of couples sharing in the same eschatological hope and renewal.

An incomplete process complicated by the superposition of a political and of a theological logic

In a sense, Michael Vasey's hope that gays and lesbians might help the Church recover its sense of heaven may be becoming reality in the Episcopal Church. However, the process of rethinking marriage in the light of the New Creation is far from complete. Some eschatological images around marriage still sit uncomfortably with the inclusion of same-sex relationships in holy matrimony and take us back to the lexical instability of queer religious discourse since the early 1990s to name same-sex unions. It is striking, for example, that the image of the wedding feast, a central eschatological motive which Eugene Rogers uses extensively in his writings, was completely left out of the liturgy. When I asked Ruth Meyers, the chair of SCLM, for a reason, she answered that the Commission felt the gendered language around Christ and his bride was "complicated" to deal with. A church in which women priests and bishops represent Christ at the altar can only agree with Rogers that "religious discourse works in a much richer and subtler fashion than by supposing that one has to instantiate physically what one ... represents figurally."²⁴ But the liturgical translation of this statement is everything but easy, as the variety of attempts to name the persons of Trinity in non-patriarchal ways sufficiently indicates.²⁵ Eschatological bridal imagery is also traditionally steeped in a hierarchical worldview. The bride in Ephesians 5:21-33 is submitted to Christ as the woman is submitted to her husband. And in spite of the egalitarian way in which this passage is analysed by SCLM in the theological document,²⁶ bridal imagery was not given liturgical expression. This imagery, however, is now offered to same-sex couples thanks the gender-neutral version of the 1979 marriage rite whose introduction states that the "joining of two people in a life of mutual fidelity signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church." But the adaptation of the 1979 rite came out of the request for equal rites, that the Prayer Book liturgies be made available to gay and lesbian couples and that the new 2012 liturgy be made accessible to straight couples. The adaptation of the Prayer Book liturgy did not go much beyond using inclusive language. The only other change

²² "Faith, Hope and Love", 34.

²³ Interview with Ruth Meyers, 7th September 2015. The 2015 General Convention has set the process of liturgical revision into motion by requesting the SCLM to present "a plan for the comprehensive revision of the current Book of Common Prayer" to the 2018 General Convention (Resolution A169).

²⁴ Eugene Rogers, op. cit., 235.

²⁵ See Esther McIntosh, "The Possibility of a Gender-Transcendent God: Taking Macmurray Forward", *Feminist Theology* 15.2 (January 2007): 236-255. McIntosh's failure to identify or indeed put forward herself non-patriarchal ways of naming God in the liturgy that are at once poetic, recognisably Christian and fully satisfactory from a feminist point of view is telling.

²⁶ "Faith, Hope and Love", 48.

is the deletion of the reference to Cana in the introduction.²⁷ Given the theological work of SCLM and of the more recent task force on marriage, it would be very surprising if this adaptation (and indeed the 1979 rite) was not revised before long.

The present state of things reflects the superimposition of two different logics, one theological and one political, in the work that has brought the Episcopal Church to bless same-sex marriages. The secular campaign for marriage equality was paralleled in the Church by demands formulated in the language of rights, which was markedly different from the theological language of the material produced by SCLM. Two distinct things in fact happened: the Episcopal Church increasingly positioned itself politically on the side of marriage equality in the US debate and it increasingly positioned itself theologically in favour of a profound rethinking of the significance, place and role in the Church of covenanted relationships.

The consultation on same-sex blessings that took place in June 2014 in Kansas City was organised by SCLM in preparation for the General Convention of 2015. The forceful demand by many participants for applying the term marriage to same-sex unions was part of an equality agenda; separate liturgies for gay and straight couples could never be equal. The reference to African American history of “separate but equal” education which turned out not to be equal was the explicit reference. The changing context of the legalization of same-sex marriage in an increasing number of states also provided for a practical objection to the continued avoidance of the term marriage. In these states, priests would marry same-sex couples on behalf of the state in the context of a liturgy which never used the word marriage: from a civil point of view, a marriage was being contracted, while from a religious point of view, something not called a marriage was celebrated simultaneously. The legalisation of same-sex marriage in all states following the decision of the Supreme Court, which was reached during General Convention in June 2015 provided an additional boost.

Discussions at the Kansas City consultation in 2014 and the in-depth conversations that I conducted with three members of my small group²⁸ one year later suggest that the demand for equal rites reflected a political necessity whose theological grounding was the respect for the dignity of all human beings created in the image of God. But my small group did not explicitly relate this to the theological and liturgical reflections of SCLM on the blessing of same-sex unions.

Two middle-aged gay and lesbian participants strikingly refer to the superimposition of the demand for equality and the theological work on same-sex relationships. Rev Tom expresses his personal preference for the term holy union (or holy covenant, as in the 2012 liturgy). “It was the secular LGBT community that decided that marriage was going to be the vehicle to get to more equity. Just like they chose the military service as the vehicle to get equity. Would I have chosen the military service as the vehicle? No. Would I have chosen marriage as the vehicle? No. But they did and here we are.”²⁹ For Rev Tom, a staff consultant of SCLM, the marriage model is problematic because it is still loaded with patriarchal baggage which has traditionally made this institution something about property. He echoes many gays and lesbians who have been hesitant or have simply refused to call their unions marriages because

²⁷ Ruth Meyers indicated that the Commission did not feel that the Gospel passage about Cana is really about Jesus adorning marriage by his presence, as the introduction to the 1979 rite puts it, and there was a desire in the Commission to move away from this when drafting the 2012 liturgy. Presumably, this explains the deletion in the gender-neutral adaptation of the 1979 liturgy.

²⁸ The Consultation was structured in plenary meetings alternating with small group discussions.

²⁹ Interview, 30th June 2015.

they did not want to buy into bourgeois values and its patriarchal, property-based order. At the same time, Tom did not hesitate to get married when he was told by the Church Pension Fund that because he lived in a state which had legalised same-sex marriage, his male partner could only claim various spousal benefits if he was *married* to Tom. A civil union was no longer enough. Tom is now a married man who remains uneasy about the institution of marriage.

Joy shares some of Rev Tom's concerns. Unlike him, she has always thought of her union with her female partner as a marriage, but marriage defined as covenant and not as a patriarchal institution. "I want to see marriage transformed," she says.³⁰ Like Tom, she cannot be satisfied with the mere legal fact of marriage equality if it means gays and lesbians simply conforming to the traditional institution of marriage (which Joy describes as transactional rather than covenantal). However, she realises that her and her partner's view of marriage as a school of faith and a vocation is something that they do not share with a great number of people. She sees the theological work of the Church as essential to point the way towards a more profound view of marriage that liberates and encourages people to build a community of love that reaches beyond the couple's home. This work (which the SCLM understood as one of its most important tasks)³¹ has started but it is still in its infancy and needs to be received widely. The theological document, she says, "may look alien to many people in our culture. Even as a Church, as a whole, we're not there. I'd like us to move towards that. With baptism we've moved in a little time from a private ceremony celebrating the birth of a child to covenantal vows. I hope the same thing will happen with marriage." Marriage equality should not lead to gay and lesbian conformity to the bourgeois family model but should renew the meaning of marriage for all. And this means learning to be Church as a covenanted community, within which all types of covenanted commitments have their unique role to play.

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Will the blessing of same-sex marriages as marriages in the Episcopal Church facilitate the process of renewing the meaning of marriage for all? This has undoubtedly been the hope of SCLM and of others in the leadership of the Episcopal Church. One must note, however, that this attempt at renewal is entering a new operating mode. Up to the last General Convention, reflection was conducted largely without the language of marriage. The prohibition had positive sides in that it forced groping for some other language that has proved fruitful. I am not only talking of the work of SCLM but of the work accomplished beforehand by various rank and file gay and lesbian Episcopalians. SCLM's work was collective in more ways than one. One of the Commission's starting points was reviewing the many liturgies that had been created unofficially by or for same-sex couples, for unofficial use in local parish contexts, often with the approval of the bishop. Joy and her partner wrote their own commitment ceremony in 1999, when using the word marriage was not an option in their diocese. Parts of this liturgy inspired the rite produced by SCLM. Joy's words provide some food for thought as to how some gays and lesbians have been forced to reimagine marriage in a very deep way.

[Marriage] was always the word that meant something to us because it had a lot of resonance in a lot of ways. When we had our wedding (in 1999) we were forbidden from using that word so we had to think again and then the biblical language of covenant became meaningful. ... I now refer to us as married but when I use that word, it has covenant very much embedded in it, in a way that it might not have if we

³⁰ Interview, 29th June 2015.

³¹ Interview with Ruth Meyers, 7th September 2015.

had simply been able to use the word marriage and not have to think more deeply. So in some ways the Church saying ‘you can’t use that word’ was a benefit to us. It required us to reflect and think more deeply. I won’t say it was a good thing the Church did that, but as our President said last week,³² ‘God works in mysterious ways.’

The transformation of the meaning of marriage for Episcopalians will now have to take place in the open, calling a spade a spade, in a new post-2015 political situation. The dynamics of this transformative process will probably be different and should be watched with renewed interest by all participants in the sexuality debate in the Anglican Communion and beyond.

³² After the Charleston Church shooting on 17th June 2015, Barack Obama referred to the failure of the killer to deepen racial divisions in the United States. Instead, some national coming together had taken place, showing the power of God’s grace to bring about good out of evil.