

**The Same-Sex Marriage Debate in the Church of England, Peter Wilson, Lancaster University BA Hons student, 2015**

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*WARNING: In preparing for the role play scenario, students must only research the conflict using reputable mainstream media sources, such as The BBC, CNN, ITN, The Guardian, The Times, The Independent, The Telegraph, etc. Briefing papers are provided to explain the broader context of the conflict.*

### **Background and Context**

Same-sex marriage (marriage between two partners who are the same gender; or ‘gay marriage’) has at once political, religious and cultural aspects. It is a recent phenomenon, having gained widespread recognition within only the past two decades. Some academics argue that there are rare examples of same-sex marriage in the ancient past, but this is debatable. Within the United Kingdom, marriage has been tied to religious institutions since the medieval period; prior to the modern era, this was traditionally understood to be a union between two partners of opposite genders recognised exclusively via a Christian ceremony. Marriage has thus historically been both a religious and a civil institution.

In a contemporary context, the Church of England (or ‘Anglican Church’) retains the privileged position of solemnising and creating marriages *alongside* the state. This is in contrast to other religious groups in the UK which can only perform marriage ceremonies in conjunction *with* the state. This privileged role of the Church of England results from its function as the state or established church (the ‘official religion’ of the UK). The state also recognises marriage outside of a religious context.

Since May 2014 England and Wales have recognised same-sex marriages,<sup>1</sup> while the Church of England has not done so. In fact, the Church of England is explicitly forbidden from performing same-sex marriage ceremonies by the same legislation which legalised them. The ban has effectively created two types of marriage from a legal point of view. Supporters of same-sex marriage frame it as an issue of equality, arguing that denying same-sex partners the right to marry is a form of discrimination.

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<sup>1</sup> The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013

The Church of England is currently debating whether it should allow same-sex marriage within its churches. If it did change its understanding of marriage then this would require a change in British law. The supreme decision making body, the General Synod, must debate this issue.

The General Synod functions as a scrutinising and debating chamber; it debates issues that come to its attention and make a final decision in a joint sitting of the three separate ‘chambers’. It must then pass on its decision to the UK Parliament which can amend the law.

The debate surrounding same-sex marriage in the Church of England closely parallels that in a secular (non-religious) context. Conservative clergy (priests and bishops) and laity (non-clergy) generally oppose same-sex marriage while liberal (or ‘affirming’, in the language of Church) Anglicans accept it. However, the debate is further complicated by tensions between different theological traditions within the Church: Evangelicals, Liberals and Anglo-Catholics generally align with different positions with regard to same-sex marriage.

External pressures include politicians, LGBT groups such as Stonewall, and the wider, global Christian community. Other factors that must be considered include the future of the Church of England as a state religion, the definition and role of marriage and the split between clergy and laity over the issue.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this role play is for students to develop a deeper knowledge of the arguments used in debating same-sex marriage, as well as the tactics of proponents and opponents as they seek to pursue their aims within the context of a debate of the Church of England’s General Synod, by:

- a) enabling an understanding of the various attitudes regarding same-sex marriage, facilitating a debate,
- b) considering events and developments which cause them to empathise with the roles they are performing,
- c) using the media tool to link groups together, exposing the parallels with the debate over same-sex marriage in Parliament,
- d) considering the role that the Church of England plays as a ‘state religion’,
- e) reflecting and analysing the strengths and weaknesses of arguments for and against same-sex marriage, by enabling the students to engage with an otherwise detached context for the debate – the General Synod of the Church of England.

### **Preparation Guide to Roles**

The participants in the role play will prepare for a debate within the Church of England’s General Synod. Limited instruction will be provided as to the nature of the groups, with the onus lying on participants to develop their own understandings as they approach the event. Facilitators will discuss and help clarify these understandings during the research and preparation period in the role play as well as throughout the rest of the day. Participants will:

**in advance of the event,**

- a) conduct preliminary research into the positions and arguments of each position and examine secondary interests they might possibly pursue
- b) allocate character roles for individuals within the group (e.g. a leader (the character roles for two are already specified), a primary negotiator, secondary negotiators, an interviewer, and a scribe, etc). The groups will be assessed on how cohesively the roles work together

#### **at the event,**

- a) co-ordinate within groups in developing a strategy to pursue those objectives
- b) negotiate and attempt to come to compromises by engaging with other groups, particularly between different groups sharing the same primary aim. Some groups may choose to act as facilitators of negotiations, making deals with multiple groups, and/or lobbying
- c) identify their group's purpose within the General Synod debate and develop strategies; establish where they are willing to compromise
- d) respond to developments as they happen and constantly reassess negotiation tactics
- e) identify implications with regard to the Church of England's role as the state church. This will differ depending on the outcome of the debate
- f) empathise with the roles and try, if needs be, to play 'devil's advocate'
- g) meet together to come to a resolution: reject or accept – with possible preconditions
- h) make a record of developments along the way and prepare a summary of events identify the interests, aims and objectives of their roles and the roles of others

#### **after the event,**

- i) reflect upon the dynamics of the debate
- j) debrief and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches
- k) assess whether the negotiations were poorly planned as well as the strengths of tactics and arguments

### **Key Actors**

There are ten groups within this role play, each performing different roles in order to facilitate a debate. Ideally, each group should contain 5 students, making a total of 50 participants, but group sizes can vary according to the number of participating students.

It is possible for groups to operate with three or four members, but no fewer, as there will be insufficient numbers to sustain group activities, while it is difficult for all members of a group to participate fully if there are more than six in each group.

If there are too few students to allocate optimal numbers of students to each group, it is wise to reduce the number of groups. Start by withdrawing groups which are likely to have very similar interests to other groups.

Some differences between roles will be very subtle, with the differences being found in the status of the group within the Church of England. Some groups have very clear roles, such as the Media, while others are divergent positions within a broader theological grouping of the church, for example, the Anglo-Catholics.

### **Conservative Evangelicals**

- led by former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey
- will oppose moves to introduce same-sex marriage in the church
- this group may have to put aside differences with the Traditionalist Catholics

### **Traditionalist Catholics**

- represent one half of the Anglo-Catholic camp
- consider marriage between one man and one woman to be a sacrament
- will argue that same-sex marriage threatens religious freedom as a sacrament is considered to be an unchangeable ceremony
- some Traditionalists may seek to change the Church's status as a state religion (see below)

### **Open Evangelicals**

- politically progressive wing of the Evangelical camp
- will promote social-liberal arguments in favour of same-sex marriage
- may also question the role that the state Church takes in performing marriages on behalf of the state

### **Affirming Catholics**

- led by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams
- counter the arguments of the Traditionalists, arguing that the purpose of marriage – to promote a monogamous and loving relationship blessed by God – does not preclude same-sex spouses

### **Stonewall**

- an LGBT rights organisation which will perform a somewhat distant role
- will promote secular arguments in favour of same-sex marriage and attempt to influence the more affirming camps
- focuses on combating discrimination

### **The Media**

- will record the developments and compare the General Synod debate with the similar debate in Parliament two years ago

### **House of Clergy**

- distinct from the House of Bishops and represents ordinary priests from each diocese
- may argue that bishops are not representing the rest of the clergy

### **Leaders of the House of Bishops**

- must mediate between the Conservative Evangelicals, Open Evangelicals, Traditionalist Catholics and Affirming Catholics

- also reach out to the external organisations
- must consider the positions of the first four groups

### House of Laity

- represents the interests of the majority of lay members (non-clergy) in the Church, who support same-sex marriage
- will argue that clergy should listen to the views of members, but will come up against theological arguments from the ‘experts’ such as Bishops

### Politicians from the major political parties

- will try to influence the outcome of the debate by promoting their own views
- some politicians may argue that the Church of England should be ‘disestablished’ – to remove its status as a state religion (this is important to consider)
- some argue that if the state church is in conflict with secular state laws then it should no longer play an important function in the state

It is hoped that students will take on nuanced approaches within these groups. They should also develop roles as they see fit. Research will certainly be needed to expand the arguments of each group. The consolatory nature of debating in the General Synod should be given consideration: the various factions are not directly *opposed* to one another (as in Parliament), so they should seek to *understand* one another.

### Resources

In advance of the event, you are asked briefly to look through relevant news sources to conduct some preliminary research on the topic. Enclosed below are some links to news stories on the topic. It is very important that you only read news from credible news agencies, such as the BBC, Guardian, Telegraph, Times, Independent, etc.

At the event, please bring with you your laptops for the purposes of research and communication.

You will be able to follow updates from the Media team through the main projector.

### Overview of key issues of the debate:

- ‘Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act: A factsheet’, *Gov.uk*: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/306000/140423\\_M\\_SSC\\_Act\\_factsheet\\_\\_web\\_version\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/306000/140423_M_SSC_Act_factsheet__web_version_.pdf)
- An overview of the Church of England’s debate on same-sex marriage: <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/marriage,-family-and-sexuality-issues/same-sex-marriage.aspx>
- The Parliamentary Select Committee on Civil Partnerships requested a consultation from the Church of England - this document is the closest to a collective position

from the Church:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1970756/civilpartnershipreviewconsultation14.pdf>

- ‘Homosexuality and the Anglican Communion’:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality\\_and\\_the\\_Anglican\\_Communion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality_and_the_Anglican_Communion)
- ‘The Church of England and LGBT topics’, *ReligiousTolerance.com*  
[http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_coe.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_coe.htm)
- The ‘prospect of disestablishment’ posed by same-sex marriage, video, *The Telegraph*: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9325171/Gay-marriage-raises-prospect-of-disestablishment-says-Church-of-England.html>
- Wyatt Caroline (15 June 2015), ‘Will the Church ever accept same-sex marriage?’ *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-33109170>

### Conservative Evangelicals

- Briefing for churches, produced by The *Evangelical Alliance*:  
<http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/politics/upload/The-redefinition-of-marriage-Church-briefing.pdf>
- Article by the leader of the Conservative Evangelicals: Carey, George (12 June 2012), ‘Gay marriage is a threat to the bonds of Church and state’, *The Telegraph*:  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9326688/Gay-marriage-is-a-threat-to-the-bonds-of-Church-and-state.html>

### Affirming Catholics

- List of goals: <http://www.affirmingcatholicism.org.uk/goals.html>

### Stonewall

- Source which briefly addresses the Church of England:  
<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/partnership-rights/same-sex-marriage-and-civil-partnership>

### Important considerations

Injunctions or interventions will be made by the role play facilitators throughout the scenario. These will ensure that groups will have to think on their feet and respond to changing circumstances. The facilitators must decide if and when to use the injunctions.

Groups can make injunctions or interventions themselves, where realistic. All injunctions and interventions must be approved by the role play facilitators.

All injunctions or interventions intended for general consumption will be released by the Media team, but the actors making injunctions or interventions can make them in secret to specific groups. It is up to the recipients of those secret injunctions or interventions as to whether they wish to reveal them to the Media, but the Media is entitled to try to uncover secrets.

The Media team will release information through printed sheets of paper that will be disseminated physically to the groups.

## Interventions

Negotiations and lobbying may stall at several points as students fail to engage with the arcane subject of church politics. Hopefully they should develop a greater understanding throughout the role play. In several places interventions or ‘plot twists’ can be deployed which should facilitate a change in direction.

- a) A **Conservative Evangelical cleric will sensationally come-out of the closet**, abandoning their opposition to the motion.
  - i) This will ‘shock’ the groups and cause a media frenzy.
  - ii) It is envisioned that Stonewall, the media, and politicians will use this development to exert influence on the groups of laity and clergy.
  - iii) The two Evangelical teams will have to consider their best cause of action – should the cleric join the opposing team?
- b) It is strongly recommended that groups arguing against same-sex marriage should moderate their position and negotiate terms in which they merely **‘opt-out’ of performing the marriages themselves**.
  - i) A parallel with the ordination of women bishops is suggested.
- c) Traditionalist Catholics should pull a ‘Rome card’ and **threaten to leave for the Roman Catholic Church**.
  - i) This could destabilise negotiations.
- d) Sometime after 12:30 the facilitator should suggest that groups consider the possibility of **‘disestablishment’**, which groups should have researched.

## Information for Facilitators:

### Practical resources:

- Ideally be one large hall and five smaller rooms which groups can be based in after the students split up. The rooms should contain the following groups:
  - Conservative Evangelicals and Affirming Catholics
  - Traditional Catholics and Open Evangelicals
  - Stonewall and the Media
  - The House of Clergy, the leaders of the House of Bishops and the House of Laity
  - Politicians isolated a separate room
- A television to display video clips and interviews produced by the media team
  - Alternatively, a projector and screen should be used
- The media should have access to a camera, electronics and recording devices
- All groups should have access to laptops or PCs
  - Ideally one laptop per team - these should be utilised to research online articles and access resources
- The facilitator will provide ‘runners’ who can take information to each room; interventions should happen fairly frequently during the negotiation/lobbying period and groups will need to react to developments in a timely manner

### **Instructions:**

- Assign students to groups prior to arriving
- Assign groups to rooms/ spaces
- Distribute timetable, instructions and group briefing to students as they arrive
- Distribute interventions at the appropriate moments to the appropriate groups
- Encourage students to interact between groups
- Direct students to resources list when they need direction

### **Timeline:**

**This timeline is indicative. It can be amended according to needs and resources available.**

**1 week in advance of event:** List of participants finalised by schools and groups allocated so as to enable participants to prepare for their allocated role and conduct basic research into the conflict.

A five hour timeframe enables adequate examination of the topic. A particular emphasis is placed on research, which is why a large time period is allocated to this stage.

**9:30:** Arrive at venue

**9:45:** Brief explanation of the background to the debate and the purpose of the activity.

**10:05:** Separation into groups, with multiple in the same room

**10:15:** Research and preparation period in groups

**11:15:** Break

**11:30:** Putting research into practice; developing a strategy and identifying partners and foes

**~11:45:** Lobbying and negotiating begin; the media report major developments (including interventions) and produce interviews.

**13:00:** Break

**13.15:** Form agreements with other groups and work together in larger groups

**13:30:** All groups meet together in a unified meeting of the General Synod (all three Houses) and lay out their final proposals.

Groups which have formed agreements may summarise together.

A decision is reached.

**14:20:** Debrief

Students should objectively critique their performances.

**14:30:** Conclusion

*The timeline is flexible. If the facilitators believe that the role play has reached a conclusion (such as a general agreement between major parties) in advance of the scheduled end, they can call an end to proceedings.*

