



# Anglican Church of Australia

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Primate: The Most Reverend Dr Philip L Freier

8 September 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters

## Letter to Australian Bishops re Plebiscite

The proposed plebiscite on same-sex marriage has been one of the more contentious topics in 2016. Individual Anglicans have adopted a variety of positions taken in good conscience based on their Christian understanding of the principles and issues, and this is right and proper.

Personally, I welcome the plebiscite, though with strong reservations that we must guard the tenor of the debate, and keep it positive. The Government promised a plebiscite in campaigning for the July election and, having been elected, they have the reasonable expectation of honouring this commitment. Further, those who oppose same-sex marriage will surely find it easier to accept it becoming approved in law if they have been given a vote. It is of course, far from certain at the present time that the measures will gain parliamentary approval.

If the plebiscite does happen it will be important that Christians – and others – vote according to their conscience and their view of what is best for society, and that the Government brings legislation to enact the will of the people. It is proper to expect that the Parliament should honour the results of the plebiscite.

Should the vote be in favour of same-sex marriage as suggested by the opinion polls, the Church must accept that this is now part of the landscape. We can still stand for and offer holy matrimony between a man and a woman as a sacred ordinance given by God, while accepting that the state has endorsed a wider view of marriage – as, indeed, the state has endorsed *de facto* relationships by legislating similar protections to those offered by marriage for people in such relationships.

The doctrine of the Book of Common Prayer remains unchanged, that marriage is between a man and a woman, under God, forsaking all others until death parts them. I do not believe that the Anglican Church in Australia is likely to revise its doctrine of marriage.

But that said, the Church also understands the desire of two people to express their commitment of love and self-sacrifice to each other, and that Christians have not always shown the respect or perspective they should. I am very concerned that the discussion does not become harsh or vilifying – on either side, for it is not only Christians who have sometimes failed on this score.

We understand that this is not a theoretical issue for many people, but one that directly impinges on their lives. We understand that sometimes gays, lesbians and others have felt judged and rejected, even ostracised, inside the Church and that we have to be much more pastorally sensitive in future.

Whether this is the threshold event that many in our church think or whether the widening of marriage happened many years ago and further widening is inevitable remains to be seen. What does matter is that we approach this question with prayer, confidence in the Church's teaching as well as kindness in our speech towards those with whom we disagree.

Grace and peace in Christ Jesus

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Philip Melbourne". The signature is written in a cursive style, with a large, stylized initial 'P' that loops around the first few letters of the name.

The Most Revd Dr Philip L Freier  
Archbishop of Melbourne & Primate Anglican Church of Australia