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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A survey of provinces in the Anglican Communion that have allowed same-sex blessings or same-sex marriages in church

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Abstract

In October 2022, the Church of England commissioned a study of the likely impacts of allowing the blessing or marriage of same-sex couples in church. This paper reports on a survey of key informers (bishops or chief executive officers) in dioceses in the seven provinces of the Anglican Communion that had at that time allowed either same-sex blessings (SSB) or same-sex marriages (SSM). Of 183 provinces or dioceses contacted, 62 (31%) replied to an online survey of which 74% had decided to allow SSB and 55% to allow SSM. While all provinces reported some losses of clergy or congregations, these were not as great as some had expected. Smaller provinces that had made spaces and time for those of differing opinions to meet together tended to report more positive outcomes than those where processes were dominated by synodical debates.

Quantitative analysis using two scales of internal (church-facing) and external (society-facing) impact showed that dioceses that allowed SSM rather than just SSB reported more positive external impact. Those that had allowed SSM reported better internal and external impact compared with those who allowed only SSB or neither. Open answers offered critical reflections highlighting important lessons learnt in the process of making decisions.

Keywords: Anglican; Church of England; homosexuality; same-sex blessing; same-sex marriage

Introduction

Attitudes towards homosexuality have changed in many countries in the last half-century. In the United Kingdom, for example, homosexual acts between men (but not women) were illegal prior to 1967, and there were several high-profile prosecutions in the 1950s. The Wolfenden report in 1957 reflected the growing concern over the victimization of homosexuals, and homosexual acts were eventually decriminalized in England and Wales in 1967 and in Scotland in 1980.

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The homosexual age of consent was reduced from 21 to 18 years in 1994 and eventually reached parity with heterosexual sex in 2001, when it was reduced to 16 years. Drawing on the European Convention of Human Rights, the Blair government moved a programme of legislation at the start of the century to remove discrimination against homosexuals: gay couples were allowed to adopt children in 2002, civil partnerships were created in 2004, and it became illegal to deny goods and services to gay people in 2007. It was left to a David Cameron's Conservative government to finally pass the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act in 2013, which allowed gay people to marry in civil ceremonies.

The progress of UK legislation has followed (and sometime led) public opinion. The National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) have reported attitudes in the British population since the early 1990s (Mercer et al., 2013). At that time about 23% of men and 28% of women agreed there was nothing wrong with same-sex partnerships, figures that rose to 39% and 52% in 2000–01 and 50% and 66% in 2010–12. The liberalization of attitudes has continued, and in the latest British Social Attitudes report, just under 70% of the sample agreed that same-sex relationships are not wrong at all (Frankenburg et al., 2023). These changes in attitudes are mirrored in many other countries in the West, but not in many parts of Africa or Asia (Poushter & Kent, 2020).

Christian churches have often struggled to cope with the relatively rapid pace of liberalization in areas of same-sex morality. The sharp divisions between liberals and conservatives in the Anglican Church have been widely reported, and they remain deeply contentious. Attitudes in the Church of England have been shifting for some years, even though some would claim it has always been, and remains, essentially hostile to gay people. It is worth remembering, however, that the Wolfenden report was influenced by an earlier report from Church of England Moral Welfare Council in 1954 which had also recommended the decriminalization of homosexuality. The Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church had long provided a space for homosexual men to find a niche (Hilliard, 1982). Probably the best information of attitudes in the Church of England comes from the two *Church Times* surveys in 2001 (Francis et al., 2005) and 2013 (Village, 2018). In 2001, 62% agreed it was wrong for people of the same gender to have sex, but this had fallen to 30% by 2013. Even so, there remained considerable variations across Church. Analysis of both sets of data shows that, while opinions liberalized across all age cohorts among Anglo-Catholics and in the Broad Church, this was less so for Evangelicals, and over 90% of younger Evangelicals in 2013 agreed that homosexuality was wrong (Village, 2018, p. 128).

These sharp divisions of opinion explain why the Church of England has moved slowly in accommodating gay people who wish to marry in church. Such divisions have also been manifested across the wider Anglican Communion (Bates, 2004). The tensions at the 1998 Lambeth Conference were triggered in part by those in some provinces, especially in the USA and Canada, who wanted to liberalize practice in the face of deep misgivings within and beyond their jurisdiction. Despite attempts to maintain unity, notably the Windsor Report (Eames, 2004), different provinces (and sometimes dioceses within provinces) have moved at different speeds, meaning that some now allow the blessing of same-sex couples in church, some allow same-sex couples to marry in church and some allow neither.

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Following the Pilling Report (House of Bishops, 2013), the Church of England continued a process of encouraging people across the Church to listen and learn from one another. This culminated in the Living in Love & Faith (LLF) project (Church of England, n.d.), initiated in 2017, which involved a period of study, courses (Church of England, 2020), conversations, a survey (LLF, 2022) and the publication of a book by the House of Bishops (House of Bishops, 2020). Following the production of this material, the LLF set up the Next Steps Group (NSG), chaired by the Bishop of London Sarah Mullally, who were tasked with moving the debate forward by making recommendations to the General Synod due to meet in February 2023.

One of the questions raised in this group was whether there was any information on the likely impact of allowing same-sex blessings (SSB) or same-sex marriage (SSM) in the Church of England. The group commissioned research on this question in July 2022, initially intended as a purely desk-based project. The dearth of evidence on the likely impact of such moves prompted the researchers to undertake a survey of the seven provinces of the Anglican Communion who, at that time, were the only ones to have approved either SSB or SSM in some or all dioceses. This paper reports the results of this survey of key informers (bishops or senior diocesan executives) who were invited to complete an online questionnaire in October 2022. The aim of the survey was to listen to the experiences of people in places where practice has changed, using both quantitative and qualitative data. The report (Village et al., 2022) was submitted to the NSG on 1 December 2022 and in February the General Synod voted to approve SSB, but not SSM in the Church of England (Church of England, 2023).

Research questions

The survey collected data on what had been decided and when changes were made in particular dioceses, whether there was any numerical evidence about people or churches leaving or arriving as a result of decisions made, how the respondents themselves felt their churches had been impacted and their own thoughts about their experiences of the processes. Material is selected here to answer two main questions:

1. What have been the perceived impacts of making the decision to allow (or not allow) SSB or SSM in Anglican churches in particular provinces or dioceses?
2. What lessons have key informers learnt from the process of decision-making and the outcomes of decisions made?

Method

Procedure

From 10 to 12 October 2022, emails were sent directly to both bishops and 'executive officers'[1] in each of the dioceses in the seven countries where the Anglican Church had allowed SSB and/or SSM: New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Scotland, USA and Wales. Archbishops/Primates and provincial secretaries were

[1]This term is used to refer to a wide range of roles that are roughly equivalent to diocesan secretaries in the Church of England.

included if these were not also in diocesan posts. The invitation stressed that, although it had been sent to two people in each diocese, only one response was required. For the Episcopal Church in the USA (TEC), most diocesan contact routes were via webpage forms, making it hard to target the right people. The TEC national provincial office was asked to send out requests using their emailing list, and they kindly obliged. These emails may not have gone directly to both executive officers and bishops. Emails were accompanied by a letter from the Rt Revd Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London, who headed the NSG of bishops, requesting dioceses and provinces to take part in the survey. The tight timescale of the project meant that replies were requested by 31 October 2022, just three weeks from distribution. In the event, a few were returned up to a week later.

Contents of the survey

Responses were collected using an online questionnaire survey delivered by the Qualtrics XM platform. The survey was developed in dialogue with the LLF team and included the following components.

Location

Respondents were required to select one of the seven provinces in the survey and then indicate if they were answering at a provincial or diocesan level. Those answering at diocesan level were then asked for the name of the diocese, which was optional, but none refused to give it. An open answer then asked for their role, which was also optional and all but two responded.

Decisions

The next section included a series of questions about what decisions had been made about SSB or SSM. These were asked separately for each, and in each case it was necessary to ask about provincial-level decisions and diocesan-level decisions.

Whatever the decisions, there were follow-up questions to determine either why no decision had been made or what the decision had been. Although the wider study included a picture from a web-based survey, the complexity of the decision-making process, and the possibility of some dioceses acting with or without a provincial decision, made it important to determine the exact status in each case in the survey sample if possible.

Impact

The next section asked about impacts of decisions on SSB and SSM. The introduction to questions explained that they were being asked repeat questions for SSB and SSM because places that allow SSM may have experienced impacts when they first allowed SSB. All respondents were asked to complete both sections, pointing out that where decisions had *not* been made there may have been some impact. The two blocks each has seven items asking for the approximate numbers, or a response indicating that the respondent had no information. The end of the

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section had a text box that allowed a free text response to the question 'Is there anything you need to add to qualify your responses on impacts of decisions?'

Overall *assessment*

This section asked respondents for their overall impression of the impacts of decisions made (or not made) using 14 Likert-style items (Likert, 1932). These were statements that had a five-point response scale ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. Likert scales are widely used in social science to assess attitudes and opinions. Most of the items referred to internal church impacts, but three referred to external relationships (e.g. 'Improved our standing in society'). Items were couched in positive or negative impact terms.

In your own words

The final section of the survey asked respondents for their personal reflections on matters related to how decisions were made, communicated and implemented, along with what might have been done differently in the light of experience. There were six boxes headed 'Preparing for decisions', 'Making decisions', 'Communicating decisions', 'Implementing decisions', 'Lessons learnt' and 'Anything else?'. The responses from the last two boxes were used to garner an overall sense of how respondents from different provinces viewed the processes and impacts. They were introduced by:

Lessons learnt: Given your experiences in these matters, are there things you would do differently with the benefit of hindsight? What worked well and what was less successful?

Anything else? Is there anything else you wish to add about the impacts of the decisions on your Church?

These two boxes allowed respondents a final chance to reflect on how the issues of SSB and SSM had impacted them and their Church and have been combined for reporting and analysis. A number of respondents from each province offered thoughtful and in-depth responses. To report them with research integrity, they have largely been reproduced in full. While this makes for some lengthy quotes, they provide useful insights from those whose experience sheds light on the particular issues faced by different provinces. The data were not subject to a thorough thematic analysis, but some key points are noted and critically examined in the discussion section of this paper.

The sample

In all, there were 72 respondents to the survey, but 10 of these had started but not completed sufficient items to be included in the final sample. We estimated that there were 183 dioceses (and provincial offices) contacted, so the final sample of 62 represented a return rate of just under a third (Table 1). Of these, 5 were answered at provincial level and 57 at diocesan level. We had returns from all seven provinces, with the highest return rates coming from the smaller provinces. The Episcopal Church (TEC) was the largest province, with 100 dioceses in the USA, but returned

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Table 1. Return rates by province

	Number of dioceses	Provincial level returns	Diocesan level returns	Return rate
New Zealand	7	0	6	86%
Australia	27	0	13	48%
Brazil	9	0	5	56%
Canada	28	3	14	50%
Scotland	6	1	5	83%
USA	100	0	12	12%
Wales	6	1	2	33%
Total	183	5	57	31%

Table 2. Role categories of respondents by province

	Unknown	Archbishop	Bishop	Executive Officer	%EOs
New Zealand	0	0	3	3	50%
Australia	0	1	10	2	15%
Brazil	0	0	5	0	0%
Canada	2	1	5	9	60%
Scotland	0	0	3	3	50%
USA	0	0	12	0	0%
Wales	0	1	2	0	0%
	2	3	40	17	28%

only 12 responses. This may have been related to the indirect means of distribution, but possibly also because this is no longer a current issue for many in the province.

Provinces varied in the extent to which bishops rather than executive officers made the return (Table 2). In a few cases, we had both episcopal and executive returns from the same location. Although these generally matched, it is worth bearing in mind the source when reviewing the open-text answers, so I have indicated the role of the source in each case.

Results

Decisions

The responses to the questions on decisions were complicated by the fact that some provinces had moved directly to allowing SSM and had not made formal decisions on SSB. In addition, some dioceses had decided before any provincial decisions, and some had taken provincial decisions as operating at diocesan level without local ratification. For this reason, open-text responses were used to adjust data if necessary to ensure the best estimate of the current situation in each context. Those

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Table 3. Current state of permission in the survey sample for SSB and SSM by province

	SSB		SSM	
	Not allowed	Allowed by decision	Not allowed	Allowed by decision
New Zealand	1	5	6	0
Australia	8	5	13	0
Brazil	0	5	0	5
Canada	7	10	6	11
Scotland	0	6	0	6
USA	0	12	0	12
Wales	0	3	3	0
Total	16	46	28	34
	26%	74%	45%	55%

categorized as 'Not allowed' included places where a definite decision had been made at diocesan level to not allow and places where no decision had been made and the practice had not changed. Of the 62 responses, nearly three-quarters were from places where SSB was allowed, and just over half were places where SSM was allowed. This may not necessarily reflect the proportions across all dioceses in the seven provinces but are presented here in order to clarify the nature of the survey sample (Table 3).

Impact

The figures on impacts (see Table 4 for the full results) need cautious interpretation: they are from a sample of respondents from different provinces. In the case of some provinces, such as New Zealand and Scotland, nearly all dioceses had responded but for provinces such as Canada or the USA many did not. The accuracy of the figures is unknown, and some may be more informed respondents than others, especially in places like the USA when impacts may have happened before respondents were in post.

In ***New Zealand***, where six of seven dioceses responded, four dioceses reported clergy had resigned, in two cases this was more than ten in each diocese. Two dioceses reported congregations had left the diocese, in one case more than ten may have done so.

In ***Australia***, where 13 of 27 dioceses responded, four reported that 1–5 clergy had resigned and three reported that congregations had joined a breakaway network or left the denomination altogether. One reported that over 10 may have reduced their parish share, but none had any that had ceased altogether. Reasons for reducing share may be complex and hard to relate directly to decisions on SSB. The narrative responses suggested that, in general, a few congregations and their clergy left because of national debate and decision on SSB. One response was based on a reflection across the province and the diocese:

Table 4. Estimates of impacts from responding dioceses by province

		SSB					SSM			
New Zealand ($n = 6$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Clergy resigning	2	2	0	2	0					
Licensed lay workers resigning	0	4	0	0	2					
Cong. reduced share	5	0	0	0	1					
Cong. ceased to pay share	5	0	0	1	0					
Cong. refused oversight	5	0	0	0	1					
Cong. breakaway network	5	0	0	0	1					
Cong. left denomination	4	0	1	1	0					
Australia ($n = 13$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Clergy resigning	9	4	0	0	0					
Licensed lay workers resigning	10	1	0	0	2					
Cong. reduced share	9	1	0	1	2					
Cong. ceased to pay share	10	0	0	0	3					
Cong. refused oversight	10	2	0	0	1					
Cong. breakaway network	11	1	0	0	1					
Cong. left denomination	11	2	0	0	0					
Brazil ($n = 5$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Clergy resigning	1	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	0
Licensed lay workers resigning	0	2	1	0	1	0	3	0	1	0
Cong. reduced share	2	1	0	0	1	3	1	0	0	0
Cong. ceased to pay share	3	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0
Cong. refused oversight	3	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0
Cong. breakaway network	1	2	0	0	1	2	1	1	0	0
Cong. left denomination	1	2	0	0	1	2	1	1	0	0
Canada ($n = 14$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Clergy resigning	5	6	1	1	0	6	6	0	0	0
Licensed lay workers resigning	10	1	0	1	1	11	1	0	0	0
Cong. reduced share	10	2	0	0	1	10	2	0	0	0
Cong. ceased to pay share	11	1	0	0	1	12	0	0	0	0
Cong. refused oversight	10	3	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	0
Cong. breakaway network	9	4	0	0	0	11	1	0	0	0
Cong. left denomination	9	4	0	0	0	11	1	0	0	0
Scotland ($n = 5$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Clergy resigning						2	2	0	0	1
Licensed lay workers resigning						4	0	0	0	1

(*Continued*)

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Table 4. (*Continued*)

Scotland ($n = 5$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Cong. reduced share						3	1	0	0	1
Cong. ceased to pay share						2	2	0	0	1
Cong. refused oversight						2	2	0	0	1
Cong. breakaway network						3	1	0	0	1
Cong. left denomination						1	4	0	0	0
USA ($n = 12$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Clergy resigning	3	6	0	1	2	5	4	0	1	2
Licensed lay workers resigning	3	2	1	1	4	4	1	1	1	4
Cong. reduced share	6	6	0	0	0	6	6	0	0	0
Cong. ceased to pay share	9	3	0	0	0	9	3	0	0	0
Cong. refused oversight	9	3	0	0	0	8	3	0	1	0
Cong. breakaway network	7	5	0	0	0	7	5	0	0	0
Cong. left denomination	8	3	1	0	0	7	4	1	0	0
Wales ($n = 2$)	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?	0	1-5	6-10	>10	?
Clergy resigning	2	0	0	0	0					
Licensed lay workers resigning	2	0	0	0	0					
Cong. reduced share	2	0	0	0	0					
Cong. ceased to pay share	2	0	0	0	0					
Cong. refused oversight	2	0	0	0	0					
Cong. breakaway network	2	0	0	0	0					
Cong. left denomination	2	0	0	0	0					

Note. n = number of diocesan-level responses; Cong. = congregation or parish; ? = no information. Respondents were asked to indicate approximate numbers in each category. Where there was no specific decision on SSB, or not decision yet on SSM, the table is left blank.

> We are in a very fluid situation in Australia and in [our diocese] at present. Nationally 2 clergy have joined a new entity begun by GAFCON Australia called the Diocese of the Southern Cross. Neither is from [our diocese].
>
> Following a recent Diocesan Synod it is possible that a few clergy may decide to leave, however it seems more likely that some will align more closely with GAFCON Australia. No services of blessing of marriages of same sex couples have taken place [in our diocese], however some people (lay and ordained) have taken exception to the appointment and ordaining of two men in civil partnerships. It is also the case that some faithful Anglicans have felt the debates here abusive to them as members of the LGBTQIA+ community and have distanced themselves from the Church as a result. (Diocesan bishop)

In ***Brazil,*** where five of nine dioceses responded, two dioceses reported 1–5 clergy resigning and one reported 6–10 resigning as a result of the decision to allow SSM. Four dioceses reported that congregations had joined a breakaway network or left the denomination altogether. One narrative response suggested some reversal of initial impact:

> Due to approval, 8 clerics and 4 communities, including the cathedral, left the diocese. Today, only 1 works independently. The other communities continued normally and today, all clergy and communities approve of same-sex marriage. (Diocesan bishop)

Another suggested little overall impact:

> Within the diocese, only a group from one parish followed their priest to join another continuing Anglican church. In terms of lay leaders, only 1 left the church and 1 postulant did the same. (Diocesan bishop)

In ***Canada***, where 14 of 28 dioceses responded, eight dioceses reported clergy resignations as a result of SSB and six as a result of SSM. Eight reported that congregations had joined a breakaway network or left the denomination altogether as a result of SSB decisions, but the figure was only two for SSM decisions. Open answers suggested that the SSB decisions were when most impacts were apparent.

> Most clergy and lay people who left did so over the blessings of same sex relationships and prior to the votes on the marriage canon and decisions by bishops to individually authorise marriages. (Executive officer)

> The great tension in our diocese came after the decision to bless same sex couples and not with the marriage of same sex couples. There were law suits and attempts to take control of some buildings (which were unsuccessful). (Diocesan bishop)

> Most of the discord was felt in the early days of our discernment related to the blessing of civil unions (2005–2010), when same-sex marriage was still highly controversial within society at large, having been made legal in Canada in 2005. (Executive officer)

Although there has been some threat to reduce shares, this was not generally a widespread problem. One open answer suggested that clergy that leave might occasionally return:

> Interestingly, one of the clerics who resigned over the Blessing of Same-Sex Marriages (in 2017) recently returned (2022) because the expansiveness of our new Marriage Policy (2020) allows for a theological breadth of position on marriage, without prejudice. (Executive officer)

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In ***Scotland***, where five of seven dioceses responded, two reported 1–5 clergy resigning after the SSM decision, and five reported 1–5 congregations had joined a breakaway network or left the denomination altogether. One open response noted that the national impact may have been the loss of some of the larger congregations:

> Churches leaving the denomination is the issue above – of 150 clergy in the whole country, maybe 5 left (bigger churches, though). In my own diocese, zero impact. (Diocesan bishop)

When whole congregations left, some found homes in other SEC congregations nearby, so calculating net numbers of people leaving may be very difficult:

> One congregation [named] left the SEC/ [our diocese] however many members of that congregation have since joined other SEC congregations in [our diocese]. (Diocesan bishop)

One respondent was expecting a stronger reaction:

> We had one evangelical congregation leave the Diocese and Province because of Canonical revision to allow same-sex marriage. The reaction was not as great as I expected. (Diocesan bishop)

In the ***USA,*** where 12 of 100 dioceses responded, seven reported clergy resignations as a result of SSB decisions and five reported clergy resignations as a result of SSM decisions. Nine reported congregations had joined a breakaway network or left the denomination altogether as a result of SSB decisions and ten for SSM decisions.

Several narrative responses gave more details, but they all referred to past losses.

> I became the bishop in 2019, so this all pre-dates my episcopate. We had one congregation close because so many people left; and one congregation split. I believe there were a few priests who also departed. (Diocesan bishop)

> In [our diocese], one congregation parted ways with the diocese many years ago, before same-sex marriage was legal in the USA. Since that time, and since same-sex marriage became legal, I'm not aware of any congregations having left the diocese or the church. (Diocesan bishop)

> Parts of 9 congregations (including clergy) left to join ACNA or other churches. They sued to retain property, but lost those suits in court, and the buildings and portions of all the congregations remain within TEC. (Diocesan bishop)

> In [our diocese], 2 congregations sought supplemental episcopal oversight as a result of the General Convention decisions. One chose to leave and join the Anglican Church of North America. (Diocesan bishop)

In ***Wales***, where two of six dioceses responded, neither reported any impacts, though the provincial response suggest 1–5 congregations had left the

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denomination. The two narratives highlight the difficulty of assessing the impacts, especially impacts of not making decisions:

> I'm not sure if you will ask about the positive impacts but these were far greater than any resistance to change. Indeed, it could be argued that our greatest resistance/impact was from those who wished we had gone straight to equal marriage and saw blessing of same sex couples as an unwelcome compromise. (Diocesan bishop)

> ... While no cleric has resigned specifically on this matter, one who had reservations has sought and found a post in England, but this was one among a number of personal issues. A couple of individual congregation members have withdrawn their financial support, or indicated that they intend to move churches, but no congregation as a whole has moved in that direction. (Diocesan bishop)

Although these data probably do not add much to what we already know about what has happened in these seven provinces where SSB and/or SSM has been allowed, they do give some insight into how impacts are perceived by those in senior diocesan or provincial roles. What seemed universally true is that no dioceses seemed to have collected or retained clear records of the impacts of clergy or congregations leaving. When the Church of England wanted to know what the impacts might be, the full record from those who had made these decisions before them was not available.

Overall opinions about impact

This section was intended to assess respondents' general impression of the effects of the process and decisions in their context. The 14 statements were shaped into either positive or negative directions. Most of the statements referred to internal impacts on the life of the Church, but a few referred to external impacts on the relationship between church and wider society. To assess overall attitudes towards internal and external impact, responses to 11 items were used to create summated rating scales (Spector, 1992). Factor analysis (using principle components extraction and varimax rotation) identified an eight-item scale measuring internal impact and a three-item scale measuring external impact. Responses were recoded and scored such that a high scored indicated a positive attitude and a low score a negative attitude, and both scales had acceptable internal consistency reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951): internal impact $\alpha = .91$; external impact $\alpha = .87$ (Table 5).

In general, most respondents reported positive internal impacts in their contexts, though this was not unanimously so. Thus, 75% agreed that making decisions had allowed the Church to move on to more important issues, only 14% agreed it had increased divisions and only 9% felt it had increased despair. In terms of unifying dioceses, there was less certainty, with 54% agreeing it reduced tensions and conflict and 57% agreeing that it brought people together. External impacts showed the same patterns, with 74% agreeing that decisions kept them in touch with ordinary people, 63% agreeing it improved the Church's standing in society and only 10%

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Table 5. Items in the internal and external impact scales

Internal impact (alpha = .91)	AG %	NC %	DA %
Reduced tensions and conflict	54	17	29
Increased divisions*	14	14	73
Increased despair*	9	21	70
Allowed us to move on	74	16	10
Left us in limbo*	12	7	81
Allowed us to focus on more important issues	75	17	8
Brought us together	57	19	24
Split us apart*	19	12	69
External impact (alpha = .82)	**AG %**	**NC %**	**DA %**
Improved our standing in society	61	19	21
Damaged our public image*	10	9	81
Kept us in touch with ordinary people	74	19	7

Note. Based on 58 responses. The responses have been collapsed to save space: DA = Disagree and Strongly Disagree; NC = Not certain; AG = Agree and Strongly Agree. α = Cronbach's alpha, a measure of the internal reliability of scales: values about .65 indicate acceptable reliability. * These items were reverse-coded to create the scale but not the percentages.

believing it damaged their public image. While responses were generally positive, there was a range of scores between respondents on both scales, so it was worth comparing scores of people from different contexts.

The first comparison was between respondents in provinces or dioceses that have permitted only SSB (New Zealand, Australia and Wales) and those who have also permitted SSM (Brazil, Scotland and the USA).[2] The second was between those dioceses that allowed SSB (or SSM) and those that did not. Comparing 'SSB' provinces with 'SSM' provinces, both internal impact scores and external impact scores were higher (more positive) in SSM provinces, though the difference in internal impact scores was not quite statistically significant and may have been due to chance (Table 6).

Comparing across provinces places where SSB or SSM were allowed by decision with places where they were not, there was no difference for SSB internal scores, but external scores were significantly higher where SSB was allowed (Table 7a). For SSM, both internal and external scores were higher where SSM was allowed (Table 7b).

Taken together these results suggest that:

[2]The situation in Canada as a whole is uncertain in terms of national provincial agreement, so Canadian responses were excluded from this analysis.

Table 6. Mean internal and external impact scores compared between SSB only and SSM provinces.

		N	Mean	SEM	*t*	*p*
Internal impact	SSB only	22	28.2	1.6		
	SSM	22	32.0	1.2	−1.92	.062
External impact	SSB only	22	10.4	0.6		
	SSM	22	12.9	0.4	−3.55	.001

Note. SEM = standard error of the mean; *t* = Student's *t* statistic. *p* = probability that the difference in means is due to chance.

Table 7. Mean internal and external impact scores compared between places where (a) SSB and (b) SSM are allowed or not allowed. (for explanation, see Table 7)

a) SSB		N	Mean	SEM	*t*	*p*
Internal impact	Not allowed	14	28.4	2.0		
	Allowed	44	30.3	0.9	−0.93	.354
External impact	Not allowed	14	8.7	0.8		
	Allowed	44	12.4	0.3	−5.46	<.001
b) SSM		N	Mean	SEM	t	p
Internal impact	Not allowed	26	27.6	1.4		
	Allowed	32	31.6	1.0	−2.35	.022
External impact	Not allowed	26	10.0	0.5		
	Allowed	32	12.8	0.3	−4.62	<.001

a) The decision to allow SSB but not SSM may not have resulted in much difference in terms of the effect within the Church, but it was associated with perceived better relationships with society at large.
b) Where provinces and/or dioceses had permitted SSM, respondents generally reported better effects within the Church and much better relationships with society at large.

Open answers: lessons learnt and general insight

The first four open questions asked about parts of the process specific to each province, such as how decisions were arrived at and how they were communicated. They are not reported here, but this section reports instead on answers to the broader issues of lessons learnt and general reflections on processes and impacts.

New Zealand

The longest responses were from the dioceses that have accepted the decision to allow SSB. The one diocese that has not accepted it is in 'impaired communion' with

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the other dioceses, but this is not always understood elsewhere. The respondent from that diocese reflected that:

> We should have worked harder on the wording of the statement from our regional synod to indicate the state of our inter-diocesan relationships. (Executive officer)

The majority of respondents expressed the wish that what divisions there are could be healed, and some wished they had done more:

> I would like to have pushed a lot harder for the congregations which disaffiliated by a very high margin to have at least tried the Community of St Mark option. (Diocesan bishop)

> I think the most important element of our time together was to focus on the relationship we hold as the Body of Christ and embrace our ability within Anglican polity to hold various views. We needed to have the deep listening experiences without judgment to be able to get a point of respect for various theological, scriptural and rational interpretations of the issues before us. We also needed that to be able to develop a sense of how we could create space within the church for Anglican Communities where identity could be framed around one perspective, to give identity within the Body of Christ so that they were able to remain in relationship. (Diocesan bishop)

> As a Diocese we are grateful to God that we did not have any clergy or parishes that chose to break away in response to this decision. From a Diocesan level, the following principles seem to have led to a largely positive outcome in relation to same-sex blessings.
>
> - The key focus that the aim was to remain in relationship despite theological difference, and to have conversations well.
> - Allowing individual parishes/clergy vestries to outwork the Provincial/ Diocesan decision as they best feel appropriate for their own context and congregations.
> - Putting hard work in to preparing resources (from a range of perspectives), facilitating small group, parish and regional discussion meetings, strongly led and communicated from senior leadership.
>
> In general (and arguably this is the case in any Diocese/group/situation) where parishes hadn't done the hard work around cultural and ecclesiological discussions – irrespective of issue – then it became harder for them to have conversations well that had the potential to be fraught or divisive. In this respect equipping leaders of all kinds well is critical. (Executive officer)

One respondent weighed the pain of the process against the eventual outcome, while another noted that issues still remain.

> Splitting has been very painful and still stings. We are sad to have lost the people we have lost. Friendship and collegial networks have been affected. Our Diocese has been discombobulated in various ways, including financially, even

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> though no properties were taken by those who left. On the other hand, it is very nice not to have the issue hovering over us, continually second guessing when a certain group of people, always threatening to leave, would actually leave. Further, it has highlighted the importance of being Anglican is being able to live with difference. (Diocesan bishop)

> The province remains divided over the issue: one diocese claims 'impaired communion' with the rest of the province, though the nature of the impairment is not defined, and is not evident in any outworking. (Diocesan bishop)

One bishop was helpfully honest about his own role once the decision was made:

> There has been one request for a same-sex blessing in [our] Diocese, and the request was granted. I would have been less fearful in hindsight. (Diocesan bishop)

Australia

The final reflections from Australian respondents were mixed, which reflects the sharply divided opinions across the province. They also convey something of the pain and difficulty of trying to maintain unity when options are sharply divided and strongly held. While some felt the formal decision-making process was helpful, others stressed the problems with deciding such matters in synods. For example, from two dioceses who both oppose SSB:

> Synod was the appropriate body to deal with such matters, and I feel it worked well. It was helpful for our congregations to see the church leadership standing on, and being committed to, the authority of Scripture, especially in a society which has moved away from Scripture. (Executive officer)

> The primary lesson is that matters which impact the identity of persons cannot be dealt with productively in abstract ways. Synods are by their nature ill formed to resolve 'questions' about relationship and sexuality because they will unhelpfully polarize, simplify and objectify matters which require pastoral and personal attention. This means (in my view) that those who wish utter conservative clarity or freedom for progression need to temper their desires.

> We need to be careful that in the desire to protect a sense of faithful adherence to God's revealed will, or the full affirmation of deeply held and sincere progression regarding sexuality we fail to treat each other as co-heirs with Christ of God's Kingdom. (Diocesan bishop)

The importance of listening, as well as openness and communication at senior levels between dioceses, was stressed as important, perhaps because it has not always happened:

> The inability to come to agreement on this issue should have been acknowledged and embraced earlier so more time could be spent on how we now interact with each other given the fractured nature of our fellowship.

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> Discussions on the ways we can still work together and how we may or may not be able to provide alternative episcopal oversight or even discussions on church-planting outside of one's diocese are topics that could have been addressed earlier. (Diocesan bishop)
>
> At the national level, we have still not had adequate conversation across the divide on this issue, in my opinion. A written resource presenting differing views was widely regarded as not engaging with differing opinions, i.e., different contributions talking past one another. There might be a way for this to be facilitated. (Diocesan bishop)
>
> Open and frank discussions amongst the Australian bishops have been helpful for unity and keeping the lines of communication open; but this has really only happened in the last 18 months or so. Before that, we were not encouraged to, or allowed time to, discuss the matter. So starting these honest discussions sooner (like a decade ago) would have been helpful.
>
> Also, something like Living in Love and Faith would have been helpful. (Diocesan bishop)
>
> A lot has changed since 1998 across the Communion and locally. If we had been able to help people be safe early on (very few gay Anglicans felt safe after Lambeth 1998, especially clergy) and had been able to listen well, to listen to scripture and the different approaches to living into the future as people given the ministry of proclaiming the good news of Jesus and living mission in a fast-changing world we might have done better. But perhaps not . . . . Working with schools and Church Agencies of Social service and community care has worked well. They are clear about their values and work. (Archbishop)

The sense that this is an issue that divides the Church is evident in several responses to the 'Anything else?' question:

> Only that the Australian church is in the early stages of tearing itself apart over these issues. (Diocesan bishop)
>
> Still a mess at the national level. (Diocesan bishop)
>
> It is very demanding on the Diocesan Bishop, the House of Bishops, and the College of Bishops. It is another dimension of juggling competing views and insights in our Communion. (Diocesan bishop)
>
> The introduction of same-sex blessings in our churches has been catastrophic for the unity of the national church, not because some Anglicans are obsessed with sexuality as some may claim, but because the blessing of that which God does not bless impacts one's very understanding of the nature of the gospel and the salvation Jesus offers.
>
> The actions of some outside of our diocese, including bishops, in speaking publicly against Sydney's stance on this issue or providing journalists' information to use against our ministries have also undermined unity and trust.

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> I have asked a number of bishops who wish to introduce same-sex blessing to their churches whether this will lead to more people in their churches or more people having an opportunity to get to know Jesus. At least one said he hoped so, especially the parents of children who are LGBTQI. One said that for him inclusion was the lens he viewed things through rather than salvation. Another said that it would make no difference, and we just needed to do this because society had already left this issue behind.

> Our desire in [our diocese] is to see as many people as possible come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ through meeting Jesus through the words of the bible, through the love of His people, and the power of His Holy Spirit. We want to see people saved from hell and to know the love of God the Father for the rest of eternity to the glory of Jesus. This is why we will not be introducing same-sex blessing. (Diocesan bishop)

> There is still considerable pain, grief, uncertainty, and impaired fellowship at a national level over the blessing of same-sex marriage in some dioceses, and the range of responses to that decision having been taken. In [our diocese], for example, there appeared to be more interest in and reaction to how this unfolded at our synod from beyond the Diocese than there was within it. At the local level, we are at peace with the freedom our clergy have to bless and not to bless, and are moving forward with respect to other, equally important aspects of our share in God's mission to the world in Christ, conscious of the ongoing need for healing and the rebuilding of trust where there has and continues to be hurt and confusion over actions or inaction. (Diocesan bishop)

> . . . National meetings of Bishops are a difficult space for me as the bishop of the Diocese as many still frowns upon us because of our decision. (Diocesan bishop)

Brazil

In Brazil, the process was preceded by a lot of discussion and dialogue. The respondents on the sample were very positive about the process and outcome, though they recognized that it had led so some leaving.

> I think we had a lot of time to talk about it and the result was better than expected. Some people did not want to talk and preferred to leave the church. Those who spoke, approved or accepted naturally. . . . I wouldn't change a thing, because the process was very well done. (Diocesan bishop)

> [We should have] made the decision faster, and earlier, but that was impossible. I think we took it as it came and we made it work. (Diocesan bishop)

For one respondent, the Church may have over-estimated the problems the issue would cause:

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> Considering that the demand for same-sex marriages has not been great, experience to date does not point to the need for any significant change in the pastoral practice related to the preparation and administration of the sacrament.
>
> Honestly, my feeling is that after 4 years after the decision, the life of the Church was not received any new challenges in this field. It seems to me that the issue of resistance to change was more of a taboo issue than anything else. (Diocesan bishop)

Another mentioned the positive impacts:

> Today we have received many people who have come from other churches, because the Diocese welcomes, loves and ministers the sacraments and sacramental rites to all people, regardless of gender, race, social status and sexual orientation. (Diocesan bishop)

Canada

As with some other provinces, there were some personal and honest responses from some of the Canadian respondents, often reflecting on the crucial place of dialogue, acceptance of difference, and on the inadequacy of deciding by synodical vote.

> Important to allow for full discussion, allowing for safe spaces of conversation that are held respectfully and prayerfully. Everything done in the context of prayerful gatherings and allow for all voices to be heard. (Executive officer)
>
> There needs to be trust. Both sides of the debate (those in favour of same-sex marriage and those not) need know that both voices are welcome. Just like what took place at Lambeth this year, there needs to be recognition and trust that both views are needed in the church of today. That level of trust was not present in our diocese in 2003. (Diocesan bishop)
>
> It is difficult for me to say formally, having participated in the General Synod debates, but only latterly holding this office. Perhaps the one observation is that at times I feel that we have talked about people (perhaps risking forgetting their humanity) rather than with people. (Executive officer)
>
> Parliamentary process does not lend itself to serious discussions when time for speakers and debate is limited nor does it generally bring about changes in opinions. (Executive officer)
>
> Decision-making using parliamentary procedure with a binary yes/no vote cannot help but lead to hurt, dissention and division. For us, episcopal directives were less divisive, and allowing for individual choice for congregations, and latterly individual clergy, seemed to provide the most space for harmony. (Executive officer)

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From a provincial perspective:

> Our most difficult moments were around the methods of voting. We had technical glitches with electronic clicker devices in 2016 that caused the exacerbation of divisions as the vote was declared initially lost on same-sex marriage (to the joy of some and the pain of others) and the next day discovered votes mis-recorded so that it was declared won (to the joy of some and the enormous pain of others).
>
> In 2019 the result of the loss of the second vote on same-sex marriage – was received with a weighty silence that satisfied no one punctuated by the keening of a young trans person who felt abandoned by their church.
>
> The pain of those two General Synods has been so profound for everyone in the church that no one wants to enter the discussion again at this time. We have talked and talked, discussed and discussed and we do not have consensus on what is right. Dioceses that could wait no longer have made pastoral provisions for blessings and marriages. Dioceses that believe this is unfaithful are unhappy but not desiring further fights. Our public image is not good in Canada as most of the other mainline Protestant denominations have made public affirmations of same-sex marriage, including our full communion partner, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.
>
> What has worked best – is to not vote but hold discussions that are grounded in good listening practices and that honour the diversity of our Church. Breakout groups – with rapporteurs who listen and gather up what has been said – then synthesize into a document that is reflected back to the plenary have been helpful. Our General Synod in 2010 did this and had a good result – not unanimity but respect of differing views and a sense of where we could stand together in our differences.
>
> Pushing the church to make a final decision when it is clear that we are not ready – has divided us. We also have found that despite our gospel proclamation we do not fight well. (Archbishop)
>
> Bringing matters of human dignity to a vote at synods was a fractious enterprise that strained the bonds of affection between faithful disciples who understood marriage differently. At the same time, creating space for holy conversations about such matters during synod was a worthwhile exercise. A more pastoral and theologically-centred approach, guided by the leadership of the bishop, to permit but not require clergy to preside at same-sex marriages may have helped bring people along the Spirit's leading in a less confrontational and divisive manner.
>
> It is important, in all matters, to understand that these conversations involve real people with real lives; it is difficult for the Church not to objectify a community and/or polarize a community of faith unless intentional care and compassion is engendered in all matters. Holding this in mind and being less desiring of 'being right' may have better helped us find a via media that may have prevented costly legal battles with breakaway parishes and a polarized

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> community. As our bishop reflected recently, we needed not to find a way to win, but a path forward that found us bearing with one another with love. (Executive officer)

There was a mix of reflections on whether the Church was still divided or had moved on. From a provincial perspective:

> We remain in a state of limbo at the official level, but at a practical level – at the level of many dioceses – people are finally able to get on with their lives as same-sex weddings are celebrated with the same joy and dignity as opposite-sex weddings. (Executive officer)
>
> We are still in a 'limbo' space but it is a space where we can focus on other more pressing issues. The same-sex blessings/marriage issue has been a distraction in some senses as the world around us in Canada thinks we are anachronisms anyways and this just proved it. We have lost the public space to have a voice about sexual intimacy and human thriving. We have been distracted from other serious questions that need the voice of the Church – climate change; racism; other aspects of human sexuality (transphobia; homophobia). I hope and pray we have learned something through our journey on this. It has also taken a serious toll on the House of Bishops – as the divisions run deep there. However we have learned to find a place for respectful dialogue; and a humility about our understanding of God and God's ways that is inviting us to build healthier relationships. (Archbishop)

A response from diocese that moved early on the issue contained pain and hope:

> I do think the process was as open as possible. I lost many friends and colleagues in the walkout in 2002 – people who refuse to speak to me today. At the same time, some who walked out could no longer stay apart and have returned. It was a stressful time, an emotional time. I do think that many had their faith deepened and the church is slowly being recognized as being relevant in our contemporary society.
>
> I do know that what is appropriate in Canada may not be so everywhere. I also know that no one should ever be harmed in any because of those they love but supported, protected, and welcomed in the Church. (Executive officer)

One diocese offered an extended response to 'Anything else?

> The lawsuits generated from breakaway parishes arising from our discussions related to the blessing of same-sex unions were costly, even though the diocese ultimately prevailed. We invested resources in legal battles and were distracted from the mission God had imagined for the Church in our diocese. Human relationships were also severely strained at all levels of the Church and our wider witness to the society was impaired because of the division that was sowed, despite society increasingly being supportive of blessing same-sex unions.
>
> These struggles did not materialize in the same way after the approval of a rite for the blessing of same-sex marriages, as our diocese has lost much of its

> evangelical wing to the Anglican Network in Canada and most people in our congregations – and society at large – were generally accepting of same-sex marriage, having lived with that reality for more than a decade civilly.
>
> Given [our diocese's] context of several years of blessing same-sex unions and then the subsequent time of marrying same-gender couples, it seemed that the most powerful and authentic response from us to the proposed changes to the marriage canon was to capture stories of same-sex married couples and the priests who presided over their weddings. We invited several couples and priests to share their lived experiences of inclusivity in the sacrament of marriage on video, in the lead-up to our recent General Synod process on the marriage canon. (Executive officer)

Indecision, lack of clarity and lack of communication were mentioned as things that some diocesan respondents would want to avoid if the process is repeated:

> In my opinion once the original conversations happened it may have been helpful to gather a group of leaders in the diocese and beyond to discuss next steps. To discuss implementation or not implementing. To discuss how to communicate well the decision that was clearly being made. To establish a clear answer for people on either side of the issue the decision, why it was made and what, if any, chance there would be for revisiting the issue in future. Our biggest failure in our diocese has not been choosing one or the other side. It has been the utter lack of communication and clarity.
>
> In terms of a by-product of this whole thing – I think the ability of people to have civil discourse with each other on topics within which they stand on opposite sides has been a huge disappointment. We had the opportunity not just to allow for conversation, but to teach/guide/encourage people to speak, respond and listen with the eyes/ears/heart of Jesus. We lost that opportunity.
>
> Leadership matters. People who are willing to be clear and decisive but also are willing to help guide us all to listen, speak and treat one another with the mercy and grace we have all received from Christ is VITAL. Leaving things undecided leaves everything destabilized and relationships is tatters. (Executive officer)
>
> I would have made the decision to move forward with same sex marriage much sooner. Questions are asked about how many people have left the church because of the decision to move ahead with same sex marriage. I know we have lost more families because we took so long to make the decision. (Diocesan bishop)

Scotland

The open responses from SEC respondents showed understanding of both the benefits and dangers of being a small Church:

> The cascaded listening process referred to above certainly helped enable the church to come to a decision in General Synod. We are a small denomination

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and in the context of debate of contentious matters in our Synod, those who might take opposing views on an issue tend to be known to one another. That may mean that disagreement is perhaps more respectful than might otherwise be the case.

The processes leading up to General Synod decision also meant that there had been plenty of opportunity before the formal debates for individuals to make their views known and have the opportunity for discussion with those with whom they disagreed. Discussions at General Synod in 2014 and 2015, which were deliberately designed so as not at that point to require decision by the Synod, helpfully allowed discussion in a less pressured environment. (Executive officer)

Our church was broadly in a place where our small size and close relationships meant this was going to be either a) handled in the context of existing good relationships or b) toxic because of the closeness. The lack of a party structure in such a small church meant the small number who could not live with this had to leave. Those were courted hard by the GAFCON/ACNA structures, esp those in England – a proxy war for the issues there maybe. That is still live now, but on the fringes, just outside. Overall, we are just fine on the other side, 5 years on from the decision. (Diocesan bishop)

A number of useful lessons seemed to have been learnt:

Stronger messaging that those who did NOT wish to opt in were valued in the church. The sense that 'one side' had 'won' is not helpful. All must lose a little for this to work well. (Diocesan bishop)

While the whole process worked well the need for constant clarification of where we were in the process and how the final decision was to be implemented cannot be underestimated. (Diocesan bishop)

Giving people across the Province time and space to consider and discuss these issues led us to a debate then to an agreement. For clergy and congregations to have a choice in the matter made way for a positive outcome. This continues, nothing is forced from Provincial level. (Executive officer)

The SEC's decision did cause hurt and anger in parts of the Anglican Communion . . . .With the Province, the Cascade Conversations were important. There was much prayer, discussion and theological debate. The whole Church participated in the process – including the youth in the Church. Those of different views continue to walk together, for the change to the Canon recognises that there are different understandings of marriage, and no member of the clergy is compelled to conduct any marriage against their conscience. (Executive officer)

There were also reflections on the importance of making a decision and moving on:

It has shown that the Church is in touch with our culture. As was made clear by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the recent Lambeth Conference, in reference

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to the Scottish Church and others, 'They are not careless about scripture. They do not reject Christ. But they have come to a different view on sexuality after long prayer, deep study and reflection on understandings of human nature. For these churches not to change traditional teaching challenges their very existence'. Our decision, alongside not dissimilar decisions in Brazil, Canada, the USA, and Wales, does seem to many in our Church as in stark contrast to the position in England – the impact is positive for us, but leaves the position in England appear extremely problematic. (Diocesan bishop)

While there was an amount of discontent it was outweighed by the positive response of many congregations, individuals and secular society. We are 5 years on, and we are not burdened by this issue sapping the church of energy and creating constant dispute. (Diocesan bishop)

USA

The TEC final responses seemed to offer the reflection of those who had had some years to adjust to the change and move on from the pain of divisions. Nonetheless, those memories seem to remain, and there were some very divergent opinions expressed, perhaps reflecting different contexts across this large and sometimes divided country. In terms of lessons learnt, several mentioned the importance of preparation and open discussion.

Change is hard, and some folks were certainly unreconciled to the changes. On the whole, I believe extensive periods of conversation and reflection, in a variety of settings, provided the best opportunity for information sharing and for reflection. Early on, there were theological and biblical studies in the diocese that were very helpful. As the conversation became more political, it became more contentious, but the long periods of conversation made the difference. (Diocesan bishop)

More conversations at the parish level would have been more helpful. (Diocesan bishop)

Making reactive decisions does not work, doing the slow hard work first is best, leaders need to lead with Unity prayed for and redeemed by Christ for the sake of God's mission. (Diocesan bishop)

It is said that bishops should never surprise people. That does not mean you never do anything new. It just means that when you do something new, it is after a time of preparing people for the decision through a variety of communication outlets – preaching, blogs, pastoral statements. (Diocesan bishop)

One respondent felt a better strategy for dealing with those who disagreed would have helped:

It would have been better to have a clearer strategy on how to relate to those who disagreed and chose to leave The Episcopal Church, including property disputes. Incessant lawsuits by all sides, greatly damaged the work of the

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Gospel. Although there is overwhelming support for same-sex marriage within our diocese, it continues to be a sensitive topic (very negative reaction to Lambeth Call on Human dignity). (Diocesan bishop)

While some were proud of the changes made, there were also those who had found the long-term effects were perhaps not what was predicted.

I believe having liturgies drafted and tested over time was helpful; it was probably also helpful to have a period where there were different expectations in different dioceses so that we could test where the Spirit was sending us – but ultimately, I am extremely grateful that I am in a church that I can say concretely does not discriminate on the basis of gender or sexuality, and that there are no longer dioceses where my ordination is considered invalid, or where a couple is worried about whether they can get married. (Diocesan bishop)

I was consecrated bishop in 2012. In 2003, when Gene Robinson was consecrated bishop in New Hampshire, I was a parish priest in New York. A number of people in Western Massachusetts left the Church in 2003. When we gave permission for blessing same sex unions in 2012 and same sex marriage in 2015, no one left the church and through the years others have joined the church because of same sex marriage. (Diocesan bishop)

We are now seeing 'deconstructed' evangelicals, who feel unsafe or unwanted in their respective churches, entering the Episcopal Church. In many areas of our diocese, The Episcopal Church, is the only church that welcomes LGBTQ+ individuals. This has not reversed our chronic decline overall, but it has provided a welcome for marginalized individuals. (Diocesan bishop)

Some said that doing this would open our doors to everyone, and everyone would come to The Episcopal Church . . . Not so. life goes on . . . . I'm afraid we continue to cease following the Good News, and only focus on what we think the world wants to hear. There is so much more that we have to speak about. (Diocesan bishop)

I wasn't here during the hardest years of conflict on issues of human sexuality. By the time I was consecrated, the tensions had mostly abated. I felt that there was room to be generous and accepting of those who, for theological reasons, could not support same sex marriage or the ordination of LGBTQ clergy. I still feel that way, but the climate is less tolerant now for those who do not support the diocesan position of inclusion. I find that challenging. (Diocesan bishop)

Several expressed thanks and pride for the way that TEC has moved on:

Proud of our church for this inclusive action. (Diocesan bishop)

I thank God that most of the divisions over this issue seem to be behind us, and we can move forward in mission. I believe our position is in accord with that of the vast majority of society. And I believe that God comes down on the side of love and commitment. In any case, when I stand before God at the judgment day, I will be able to say that I stood for love and commitment for all God's people. (Diocesan bishop)

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> It was one of the bravest things the Episcopal Church has done in my lifetime and I am grateful. (Diocesan bishop)

Wales

The three respondents generally felt the process had worked well:

> I think the process was good and worthwhile and the current, gradual and gentle discerning is wise. (Archbishop)
>
> I believe it has worked well. The response in dioceses has varied according to the makeup of the clergy, and the proportion of conservative clergy unable to accept this development. It has also depended on the level of trust between the bishop and the clergy. It is realised that a move to same-sex marriage in Church will be more difficult if this is promoted as a change on completion of the five-year experimental period. (Diocesan bishop)

One respondent at the diocesan level also highlighted some factors that made the process better or more difficult:

> It helped us enormously that almost the whole Bench of Bishops has been in favour of equal marriage. The Archbishop who was most ambivalent retired before this decision was made thus reducing the likely conflicts between us. Being in lockdown and other personal factors in the 18 months before our decision was enacted made interaction difficult. Pressure from the Archbishop of Canterbury did not help and was, at times, inappropriate.
>
> Within the diocese keeping good relations with those clergy and congregations who were less than enthusiastic reaped great rewards and resulted in us focusing our energy elsewhere rather than on disagreeing on this topic. (Diocesan bishop)

The same bishop foresaw a positive future outcome:

> Moving on to a liturgical provision for those in same sex partnerships was not only the pastorally right thing to do but it opened a better place for the diocese and Province. We began a LGBTQ+ chaplaincy which included chaplains from across a wide spectrum of conviction, respecting the differences with which we live. We challenge those who use 'inclusive' to mean anything but, genuinely welcoming all, especially those living faithfully in lifelong partnerships. We are leaving behind the preoccupation with this subject and that feels healthy. Our destination is equal marriage and I do not anticipate it causing any great trauma. Our clergy who are married to same sex partners are great role models. (Diocesan bishop)

Discussion and conclusions

Before discussing what the survey indicated about the two main research questions, it is worth noting that the answer to the NSG's question regarding the impact of

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these decisions on churches is largely unknown. The responses suggest that no provinces or dioceses had easy access to any records or data that showed accurately how many clergy or lay people left the church following decisions to allow SSB or SSM. Such data may exist in diocesan records in some places, but if they do they have not been collated, publicly reported or used to assess impacts. A more obvious gap is the unknown impact of provinces delaying decisions or maintaining the status quo on those who want change. A few open responses hinted that this had been detrimental, but generally little is known about how far the Church has lost people because it has not moved with the shifting mores in many Western societies. There is some evidence from a survey in the USA that people who became more supportive of SSM over time also tended to show lower attendance and less strong affiliation to unsupportive churches (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022). The shift in attitudes in societies at large has been widely and carefully studied, but Anglican churches have not generally gone about systematically assessing beliefs about their laity. In the Church of England, the LLF processes involved a survey of those who took part (LLF, 2022), but this may not represent wider opinion across the Church, which varies considerably between different traditions (Village, 2018). This may well be true elsewhere, but there seems to be little information available.

The first main research question was about the perceived impacts of making the decision to allow (or not allow) SSB or SSM. In terms of estimates of numbers, the impacts were relatively small: there have been some losses of clergy and congregations, some congregations may have reduced financial commitments, but some dioceses did not experience these impacts. The open responses in some cases indicated that when SSB is allowed before SSM the additional impacts of allowing marriage are likely to be small because those who were going to leave had already gone. The survey did ask about any evidence of changes in attendance, but few respondents had any data, and what there was impossible to attribute to particular decisions. Any effect would be hidden in long-term trends (generally declines) and, for provinces who made decisions in the last few years, the severe disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that while there have been losses, the longer-term picture for those who moved on this issue some time ago is that life goes on and other issues take centre stage.

The quantitative measures of impact show how making decisions was generally positive in terms of allowing Churches to move on and healing divisions, though in some cases this has not been so. It did seem, as might be expected, that allowing SSB or SSM improved the Church's standing in society, and for Anglicans, especially in England, this may be a key consideration. The results here point to the crux of the issue for many Anglicans who try to balance the need to offer a meaningful Gospel to the societies in which they are set, against the call to stand as counter-cultural challengers of trends in society that might oppose that Gospel.

The second research question was to ask what lessons key informers had learnt from the process of decision-making and the outcomes of decisions made. Here the rich, thoughtful reflections of the respondents speak for themselves about how these issues played out in different contexts. A few observations might be worth noting:

First, the move to allow SSB but not SSM may not necessarily be a way of easing change into churches. Several respondents noted that when this happened the conflict tended to occur with the advent of SSB, and people either accepted or left at

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that point. In the minds of those who oppose and change, blessing a same-sex union has already involved an unacceptable shift in theological understanding. On that basis, the Church of England's decision to allow SSB but not SSM may have been an unnecessary and unhelpful fudge.

Second, it is clear from the open answers that smaller provinces, with a handful of dioceses, have found the processes easier, not least because of the greater opportunities for discussion and debate in 'informal' settings. This does not just happen, however, and the experience of New Zealand, for example, was of having to make deliberate efforts to seek unity above all else. This led to the restarting of the process when unity was threatened, which entailed more work of listening and learning. Several people elsewhere noted that, while synodical decision-making may be required legally, it is a poor way to make decisions. Preceding formal debate by processes that bring people of different perspectives together may enable better understanding and better debates. The LLF process seems to have been exemplary in that respect because the focus has been listening to those who are 'other', rather than trying to sort out the intellectual work needed to make theological sense of what is happening to our understanding of human sexuality in the current century.

Third, it was clear that in many cases there was a lack of clarity about the process and decisions made, and/or poor communication of what had been decided. When decisions were made, it was not always clear how they were going to be implemented in practice and liturgically. In some ways this is understandable, given that this has been new ground to break, and systems and rubrics had to be devised from scratch. As more and more provinces travel the journey to allowing SSB or SSM there will surely be experiences to draw on, and as the Church of England implements its decision, and the issue of SSM inevitably returns to fore, it would benefit from listening to some of the voices recorded in this study.

Limitations of the study

This study had to be completed in a short space of time, so provinces and dioceses had just a few weeks in which to respond. The sample was limited, and not all dioceses replied. The length of time since decisions were made varied a great deal, so some respondents had had more time to experience and reflect on the long-term impacts than had others, but by the same token may have long moved on from any impacts. Future work of this nature would benefit from more systematic record-keeping of impacts, gathering reflections while those involved are still in post and memories are fresh, and from more systematic surveying of the opinions of clergy and laity on the ground.

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Ethical approval. The survey aims, procedures and methods were vetted by the Humanities Research Ethics Committee to ensure it complied with best ethical practice (approval code: HUM-RS-AV-09-22-03). All respondents were given a four-page information sheet which explained the project and were required to tick a box to say they were 18 or over and consented to their data being used for research purposes.

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