



pcn britain

*where contemporary thought and understanding
matter as much as scripture and tradition*

**PCN Britain membership consultation in response
to the Government's proposals to enable
same-sex couples to have a civil marriage.**

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1] SUMMARY

1.1] At the time of our membership survey, PCN Britain had 472 paid up members and 190 responded to our questionnaire, representing some 40% of the membership. All 190 [100%] stated that PCN Britain should respond to the consultation. 177 respondents [94%] were in favour of same sex marriage. 7 [4%] objected to same sex marriage. 6 could not be categorised. We must assume that those who have not replied to the questionnaire either did not get around to it in time, missed the email or the letters with a hard copy of the consultation, or are fairly easy either way about whether we respond or what we say.

1.2] One member summed up the thinking of a number when writing, "I think it important for PCN to say something. While the leadership in several Churches speak out against gay marriage a significant section, possibly a majority, are in favour of equality in this area. As so often happens, those against something are more vociferous and threaten their departure or schism etc: while those wishing for change cause less upheaval." Another member commented, "Please lobby the government for same sex marriages conducted in churches ,as this will make the church treat everyone equal for the first time in it's history."

1.3] It is necessary that there is two-way respect between those with deeply held feelings about the inviolability of the traditional meaning of the word "marriage" on the one hand and those who feel equally deeply that they want their relationship to be fully accepted and publicly celebrated within a faith context.

1.4] In response to the availability of same sex marriage in church, 173 [92%] were in favour of same sex marriages in church. 174 [93%] were in favour of civil partnerships being offered within a religious context. 151 [80%] voted in favour of opposite sex couples having the civil partnership option and 142 [76%] wanted opposite sex civil partnership ceremonies to be available in a religious context.

1.5] So with the above in mind it can be taken that there was a mandate to make a submission to the Home Office based on the broadly representative voice that emerged from our survey while recognising that in so doing we do not speak for every member of PCN Britain.

2] BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

2.1] This report is the outcome of a consultation process requested by the PCN Britain Management Committee seeking whether or not PCN Britain should make a formal response to the Government's Consultation on the proposal to allow Same Sex Marriage.

2.2] All members were invited to respond to a questionnaire designed by the PCN Britain Hon. Secretary. There was around 40% response.

2.3] The Government's proposals are to enable same-sex couples to have a civil marriage. The key proposals of the consultation were:

- to enable same-sex couples to have a civil marriage i.e. only civil ceremonies in a register office or approved premises (like a hotel)
- to make no changes to religious marriages. No religious organisation will be allowed to conduct same-sex religious marriages as a result of the proposals

- to retain civil partnerships for same-sex couples and allow couples already in a civil partnership to convert this into a marriage
- civil partnership registrations on religious premises will continue as is currently possible i.e. on a voluntary basis for faith groups and with no religious content
- individuals will, for the first time, be able legally to change their gender without having to end their marriage

Current legislation allows same-sex couples to enter into a civil partnership, but not civil marriage.

2.4] The Government's intended audience:

- members of the public - particularly those currently in a marriage or civil partnership or those wishing to legally register their relationship in future
- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organisations
- religious organisations
- local authorities, including registrars who are responsible for conducting civil marriage ceremonies
- organisations with an interest in families and relationships
- comments from all other interested parties are also welcome.

3] FINDINGS OF ADDITIONAL COMMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION DOCUMENT TO MEMBERS

Of the 190 members who returned the consultation document 99 added comments. However, the comments were made [a] across a range of items and did not always relate directly to the item as stated in the PCN Britain consultation document, and [b] often were composite and offered relevant comments that were not itemised on the PCN Britain consultation document itself. As a consequence the responses were regrouped into the broad categories that better reflected the comments:

1. The place and role of the Church	41%
2. Equality and Justice	26%
3. The Role of the Government	15%
4. Education	14%
5. Members against the Government's proposals	4%

[NB: % are approximate]

3.1] The place and role of the Church [41%]

3.1.1] General comments

Some members commented that it is important that the churches do not end up on the wrong side in this debate. i.e. always opposed to progressive thinking and to change. It seems both cruel and invidious to select who might and might not commit themselves to a lifelong relationship by means of a ceremony which is conducted in church. It was noted that numerous opposite-sex weddings without any religious commitment on the part of the couples concerned occur in church, and therefore those whose genuine desire is to receive a church service are as

entitled to a religious service as any other couple. The essential point is loving commitment and witnessed by a community of friends.

Historically marriage has been understood as being a lifelong commitment between one woman and one man, but that understanding of human relationships has developed so that the majority of those who responded to the PCN Britain consultation now want to enable people of the same gender to enter into a marriage if the couple concerned so wish. Some way has to be found for same-sex couples to make their vows in a religious context if that is the framework for their living. Ideally one would want to give each individual minister and congregation the right to decide either way, free of over-riding by institutional hierarchies.

One member summed up several responses by stating, "It's a no-brainer really, if you believe in equality, compassion and the Church being inclusive.... "Two track" gender equality isn't really full equality, otherwise you are proposing that people of non heterosexual gender/sexuality have some sort of handicapped, deformed or deficient "image of God" expressed in them; like we did towards other ethnicities in colonial times."

Another member stated that there is a case for the continental practice of a civil marriage being mandatory for all, and a church service afterwards as optional.

One member commented "I fail to see much logic in allowing serial marriages in churches at the same time as condemnation of gay partnerships on the ground that they "may" be promiscuous or not long lasting. We must recognise that all humans are fallible - but keep high standards to which all aspire (even though few will succeed)."

One member commented that, as a divorcee allowed to marry another divorcee in church 10 years ago "I feel strongly that gay couples should be fully welcomed and allowed equal rights in the church. It does worry me that it might cause division in the Anglican community and I appreciate being part of a world wide church but this seems to me the only loving and inclusive way forward. I would like PCN to recognise this in some way in their submission."

3.1.2] Comments by ordained ministers

Two ordained ministers stated that the same pastoral support should be offered to faithful committed gay couples as that offered to straight couples. One ordained minister also stated that support should include the option of a marriage service. One ordained minister stated that he had conducted services with religious content celebrating civil partnerships on more than one occasion and that these services were valued by the couples and by their families and friends - and by members of the regular church community as well.

One ordained minister commented on the existence of extremely unhappy marriages where one partner has sought 'normality' by pretending to be heterosexual, not revealing the truth until after a wedding. In such cases the impact on the heterosexual partner is devastating.

Another stated, "If the Church of England can agree (albeit with bad grace and shameful inconsistencies) to the remarriage in church of divorcees at least two generations after most people (in and out of its pews) had ceased to see the problem, then it ought to be possible to persuade it that at the very least the blessing of same-sex marriages (which would quite soon be followed by their solemnization) is where it ought to be."

3.1.3] The Church and the Bible

It is recognised by many of the comments that the over-riding principle in the Bible is to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. One respondent wrote "Any possible objections in the Bible to loving and monogamous same-sex relationships are very minimal indeed - if they exist at all."

Another member commented stated, "Biblical teaching on the subject is rarely if ever, related to committed relationships but rather relates to cultural practice of 'shopping around', making use of others for one's own pleasure and satisfaction rather than for love of the other person(s). Such practice clearly contradicts the biblical injunction running like a thread through the Bible, to have concern and compassion for others, treating them as one would wish to be treated."

There will be a need for fresh liturgies to be devised to cater any new rituals. One comment was, "I think it would be helpful if it was said in the preface that, historically, marriage was understood as being between one man and one woman, and for life, but that understanding of human relationships has developed, so that we now want to enable people of the same gender to enter into a marriage.....or something like that."

There were five comments that stated clearly that neither congregations or clergy should be obliged to be involved in same sex marriages in church, but neither should any strongly and sincerely held views prevent other congregations or clergy being involved.

Two commented that opposite-sex couples have the option of a Blessing in Church following a civil ceremony and therefore same-sex couples should have the same option.

One stated "I would be very happy for the solemnising of gay relationships (whatever you call them) in church and with religious content."

3.2] Equality and Justice [26%]

3.2.1] Although there is some overlap between the findings of the previous section and this one, the report here quotes all those responses that are explicitly related to equality and justice.

"Jesus whole life was spent in showing us that we must be inclusive."

"Equality for all of god's children, however they were made, as simple as that."

"I have no personal involvement in the issue, but I think it is a matter of justice for all."

"I happen to be male, heterosexual and happily married, and thus am in the fortunate position that no-one has ever discriminated against me, so far as I know, on grounds of my gender or sexuality. That seems to me a powerful reason for supporting the wishes of minorities who do suffer discrimination one way or another."

"I think this is a matter of justice and equality. I am in a civil partnership and would prefer to be married to the person I love. It is not really equality when there are two different arrangements."

"Having had a Church of England Blessing several years ago, and in 2006 having had a civil partnership, I think it would be justice seeking and inclusive for Gay people to be given the dignity of being allowed to marry in Church or in a Register office, exactly the same as straight people."

"My fundamental view is that same options should be available to same and opposite sex couples."

"It important that same sex couples have exactly the same rights and duties as opposite sex couples. No more, no less."

"It is a matter of justice equality."

"I am in favour of same sex marriage civil, or religious, the couple's choice."

"It's both logical and compassionate to allow the same rights to both gay and straight couples."

"It's time to acknowledge that all people are equal and love should be celebrated for everyone."

"I believe in complete equality for both same sex and heterosexual couples. It is their choice as to how they wish to tie the knot, be that through a civil partnership or marriage in a registry office or church setting with religious content, should they so wish."

"All couples should be treated the same. Marriage in church is a religious commitment. Civil partnership is a legal agreement. If a couple want the church to bless the union, why should they not make the full commitment and marry?"

"I would like to see the legal act of marriage for everyone being a civil ceremony with a minimal amount of fuss allowing individuals to choose to celebrate this independently of the legal act in whatever way they choose, religious or not."

"I would prefer there to be just marriage for both gay and straight couples, with the option of religious content if the couple want it."

"Those who seek marriage rather than civil partnership whether gay or straight do so because marriage brings a cultural sanction, an added dignity which should be available to all. This affirms the institution of marriage."

"Same-sex marriage would be a powerful contribution to an open, honest, and free society without the rigid control of main-stream, old-fashioned church interference."

"Love and commitment should be honoured and supported with or without religious content to the ceremony."

"Marriage has of course always implied sexual consummation, and should be continue to be available to any opposite-sex couples who by reason of age or biology are not or are no longer fertile. Even those who are impotent or frail can find many ways of being intimate and creative."

"My understanding of civil partnerships is that they were introduced as an alternative to marriage at a time when same sex marriage was not considered appropriate. Once same sex marriage is available I would have thought the obvious thing to do would be to abolish civil partnerships for anyone (there may have to be some thought about the transitional period of course)."

3.2.2] Comments were also made concerning the apparent injustice towards opposite sex couples who do not wish to marry either within a religious or civil ceremony but who are denied the right to celebrate a civil partnership in the same way that same sex couples are currently permitted.

One member stated, "I hadn't thought about offering civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples but in strict equality terms, they should be available. Having said that, weren't they always merely the poor relation of marriage, and isn't a Registry Office marriage effectively the opposite-sex version of a civil partnership? I think my preferred solution would be Civil Partnership for gay couples, either in Church or elsewhere, and married partnerships for opposite-sex couples, either in Church or elsewhere. Whilst I truly value diversity, I am losing my way in the subtleties of same sex civil partnerships with no religious content and same sex marriages with no religious content - what exactly is the difference? And equally with religious services - what is the difference between marriage in a church and civil partnership in a church?"

3.3] The Role of the Government [15%]

3.3.1] The main responses concerning the role of Government indicated that Government should decide on the civil issue of whether or not to permit same sex marriages, and if it should so decide in the affirmative then it should also allow those churches that wish to conduct religious same sex marriages to do so.

Indeed, the overall response from the main PCN Britain consultation of the membership demonstrated that the vast majority of those who responded did not think that the Government's present proposals [i.e. not to allow religious communities to conduct same sex marriages] were radical enough. The conclusion to be drawn from the additional comments is that members believe the Government should not restrict the religious content of marriage or civil partnership ceremonies. Same-sex marriages in religious communities is for individual religious communities to decide. It is not the business of government to ban or indeed to interfere with religious observances in churches providing no laws are being broken.

3.3.2] Other comments included:

"It is important that faith communities work with rather than prescribe how relationships between two individuals should be structured in our society. It is that which creates strong bonds not shoe-horning everyone into the same model. While I do not expect all churches to comply with same sex religious services it would be better to have legislation that supports any that are willing to do so."

"I think we are now, on this issue, where we were a few decades ago on marrying divorced people; or on ordaining women. But once it starts happening - because a local church, often non-conformist (in all senses of the word), is willing to do it - and more and more people have been to such a service - it begins to feel more ordinary. And this is far more powerful an agent of change than words alone. So 'allow' not 'require', and lets see what happens."

3.3.3] There was also an expectation on the part of 5 who responded that by allowing same sex marriages the time is not far off when additional titles [i.e. civil partnership; same sex marriage; etc] could be replaced by a single category of 'marriage' as there may be no advantage in having two kinds of legal partnership on the statute book.

However, concern was raised by two who responded: the first that the Government may not be proposing single sex marriage to take place in churches as do opposite sex marriages currently out of deference to the hierarchies of the churches. The second that by pushing too greatly for the right for same sex couples to marry in church might diminish the likelihood of getting the proposed changes onto the statute book. This response also included, "I would want to support the government proposals as a step forward and then look for the chance to add later, rather than risk splitting a vote for change."

Taking a different view, one comment stated, "As now, civil partnerships could be entered into by those, both homosexual and heterosexual, who do not wish to make such promises, but for reasons of finance, inheritance, and companionship wish for the legal protections such partnerships give. After all, a civil partnership does not necessarily imply that the relationship is a sexual one."

It was also stated by one that not all members of the LGBT community want any further changes to the current law and, in fact, prefer to keep the 'traditional view' of marriage intact.

3.4] Education [14%]

Although something of a minority concern education about the LGBT communities was considered to be essential for those who consider themselves to be in the 'straight' community.

3.4.1] As a society we do not ban marriages between those who are different [examples given were for Jewish/black/disabled people], but legally we continue to discriminate against LGBT orientations. Comments included:

"Gay people are the last acceptable prejudice in the UK. We need to set a standard of moral behaviour to show other countries that we do not tolerate discrimination."

"We should encourage education about the cultural differences of understanding of the term 'marriage', both historically and contemporaneously."

"The assumption by many people that gay or lesbian people are promiscuous or a hazard for children and young people rather than committed to one partner, needs to be exposed as false in many, perhaps most cases."

3.4.2] There are strengths of relationships no matter what the sexual orientation may be. Comments on this issue included:

"There is now much evidence from the lives of same-sex couples that shows they are at least as united and creative as opposite-sex couples. They may not be biologically procreative: they are certainly pro-being-creative."

"It is also clear that many same-sex couples have the care and nurture of children: one of the parties may have been in an opposite-sex marriage and fathered or mothered children, who now have the equivalent of a step father or step mother. The couple may have adopted children. This strongly suggests that the law on marriage should clearly include an additional promise, whether in a civil or religious ceremony: 'We promise to care for such children as may be entrusted to us, until such time as they become adults.' As a footnote, an inward-looking nuclear family with only one child needs to take care that the child has close adult friends, both male and female, as role models and confidants. This might suggest a further clause: "We promise to bring into their lives, whether as godparents formally or as friends informally, responsible adults, both women and men, to supplement the nurture we have already promised."

3.4.3] As part of the education process two people suggested that it would be a good idea to find an alternative to the word 'marriage'. "Words are powerful and this one is probably a stumbling block in many minds. As long as the ritual brought the same rights, I feel an alternative word would be preferable."

3.4.4] The situation regarding people of all faith communities needs to be explored with people of those faiths as part of the on-going process of education.

3.5] Members against the Government's proposals [4%]

3.5.1] This report acknowledges that not all PCN Britain members are in favour of the proposed changes. The following comments are all those who voiced some level of opposition to the Government's proposals.

"For me, the term Marriage can only be understood as being between a man and a woman with the possibility of a reproductive outcome."

"My stance reflects several considerations. Same sex partnerships are biologically not even potentially child-bearing, and therefore are intrinsically distinct from opposite sex partnerships. If the word marriage is applied to same sex partnership, then there is no longer a word to identify what we now understand by 'marriage'. This diminishes the language. Seeking to apply the same term to same sex partnership in the name of equality is misguided. It falls into the trap of confusing equality with sameness. Civil partnership achieves equality already. To achieve cultural parity we really need a new term without the limiting connotations of 'civil', which can then also be used of church blessing ceremonies for same sex unions. Allowing opposite sex couples to opt for civil partnership seems unnecessary and potentially confusing. Marriage already defines this. What about 'life-partnership' for same sex couples?"

"I see [a] marriage as a two-gender thing, and [b] civil partnerships as being open to any pair serious enough to want to make a long-term contract (and for me just as serious as marriage)."

3.5.2] There were some objections to [a] the Government and [b] PCN Britain spending time on this issue because it is "just one of the many issues that arise in a journey of Grace and has its roots in justice issues that we are all battling with every day."

Another commented, "I think there more bigger problems in the world i.e poverty, social justice... The continued debate around this issue is tiresome... and for most of society irrelevant. Church leaders need to wake up and move forward..."

A third comment argued for no change to the present situation: "If the legal position of marriage and civil partnership is essentially the same (except for one being for straight couples and the other for gay couples), then I don't see the need to extend civil partnerships to male/female couples or marriage to gay couples."

4] CONCLUSIONS

4.1] There exists a mandate that PCN Britain make a submission to the Government's Consultation process. We acknowledge that our submission cannot be representative of all the views of our members. By nature of the Government's own consultation questionnaire, the responses that PCN Britain was able to make

were limited [see Appendix]. However, this report adds 'meat to the bone'.

4.2] Although there are differences of opinion on aspects of the Government's proposals PCN Britain members who responded to its own consultation unanimously wanted PCN Britain to publicly contribute to the debate.

4.3] The overwhelming majority (94%) of those taking part in our members' survey supported same-sex marriage. Almost as many (92%) felt the government proposals are not radical enough and should include the option of a same-sex marriage in church. In added comments there was an emerging consensus that no church congregation or minister should be compelled to conduct same sex marriages against their conscience.

4.4] Members of PCN Britain objected to the government determining the religious content of ceremonies held in church. Not only were 92% in favour of religious same sex marriages in church, but even more (93%) favoured allowing religious Civil Partnership ceremonies in church.

4.5] In comments added by respondents, many expressed their support for gay marriage in terms of their religious conviction. Nearly as many expressed their support as a matter of equal treatment for a minority.

4.6] In their comments, a number of members mentioned the Government's injustice in allowing opposite sex marriage in church but not same sex marriage. Other members referred to the need for education of the public concerning the culture, needs and contributions made by the LGBT community.

4.7] Of the PCN Britain members who responded to its consultation a minority [4%] objected to the proposals for change. The views of these members are respected by PCN Britain.

APPENDIX ONE

Here are the answers to government questions, based upon responses of members to our own consultation.

Question 1. The overwhelming majority (94%) of our members who responded to our own consultation agree that all couples, regardless of their gender, should be able to have a civil marriage ceremony?

Question 2: If two people (whatever their sexual orientation) wish to commit themselves to a long term relationship (however that is defined) in which love is the foundation (however that may grow and develop) then institutions, both civil and religious, should recognize that this is the basis of human existence. This is a matter of justice and equality for both same sex and heterosexual couples. It should be their personal choice as to how they wish to commit to a lifelong relationship, be that through a civil partnership or marriage in a registry office or church setting with religious content.

Question 3 and 4. Insufficient details from members to comment.

Question 5. The government does not propose to open up religious marriage to same-sex couples but the overwhelming majority of members who responded disagreed with this proposal and want religious marriage should be opened up to same-sex couples

Question 6. Although not the majority of members who responded commented on this question, a significant number agree with keeping the option of civil partnerships once civil marriage is made available to same-sex couples.

Question 7. Insufficient details from members to comment.

Question 8. The government is not considering opening up civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples because it has been unable to identify a need for this. However, a significant number of responses indicate that civil partnerships should be opened up to opposite-sex couples.

Question 9. Insufficient details from those who are in a civil partnership to judge whether or not they would you to take advantage of the proposals and convert their civil partnership into a marriage.

Question 10. Insufficient details from members to judge whether or not there should be a time limit on the ability to convert a civil partnership into a marriage.

Question 11. There is support amongst members that there should be an option to have a civil ceremony on conversion of a civil partnership into a marriage.

Question 12 and 13. Insufficient details from members to judge whether or not married transsexual people would want to take advantage of the proposal and remain in their marriage while obtaining full Gender Recognition Certificates.

Question 14. Equality and justice for all should be the governing principle.

Question 15. Some way has to be found for same-sex couples to make their vows in a religious context if that is the framework for their living. Ideally one would want to give each individual minister and congregation the right to decide whether or not to conduct same sex marriage ceremonies. It is invidious to select who might and might not commit themselves to a lifelong relationship by means of a ceremony which is conducted in church. Numerous opposite-sex weddings without any religious commitment occur in church, divorce cannot be predicted; therefore those whose genuine desire is to receive a church service are as entitled as any other couple. The essential point is a loving commitment, hopefully lifelong, witnessed by a community of friends. Same-sex marriage would be a powerful contribution to an open, honest, and free society. The over-riding principle in the Bible is to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. Any possible objections in the Bible to loving and monogamous same-sex relationships are very minimal.

APPENDIX TWO

PCN Britain Members' Questionnaire relating to Gay Marriage

Background

(We are grateful to Sussex solicitors, MayoWynneBaxter, for the this information)

The 2004 Civil Partnership legislation tackled the inequalities of legal rights relating to personal relationships. For the first time same sex couples had a way of achieving the same rights on everything from inheritance to property ownership.

Civil partners and married couples are entitled to the same social security and pension benefits. Both are also able to obtain parental responsibility for a partner's child, receive maintenance, tenancy rights and next of kin rights.

However the legislation achieved this legal equality without embracing same sex relationships at a cultural level. It created two separate systems depending on sexual orientation. Those in favour of allowing gay marriage believe it would go a long way towards putting everyone on an equal footing. Those against it fear that extending marriage to same sex couples would marginalise traditional values.

The Home Office's consultation paper relates to England and Wales. Scotland has already carried out its own consultation. The Home office proposes:

- ³⁵/₁₇ To allow same sex couples to marry in a registry office or other civil ceremony
- ³⁵/₁₇ To retain civil partnerships for same-sex couples and allow couples already in a civil partnership to convert it into a marriage
- ³⁵/₁₇ To maintain the legal ban on same-sex couples marrying in a religious service

PCN Britain would like to gather members' opinions of the government's proposals in order to decide whether and how we should contribute to the Home Office's consultation. All members are welcome to respond including those in Scotland.

Opinion Survey – for PCN members only. Deadline for return of forms is Wed June 6th

Name:

Post code.....

1. I would like PCN Britain to make a submission to the government's green paper on gay marriage. (*If you do not wish us to make a submission then you may if you wish, ignore the rest of the questionnaire.*)

Yes No

2. *The government is proposing to allow gay marriages in non-religious premises **but not in churches.** Please read the following 3 options and then tick the one which most closely matches your opinion*

i. I would like PCN Britain to object to gay marriage.

ii. I would like PCN to support the government's proposals on same-sex marriage as they stand **including** the exclusion of church ceremonies?

iii. I would like PCN to go further than the government is currently proposing and to ask for an option to allow **churches** to conduct religious gay marriages?

iv. Other, please specify

3. *The following options relate to where and how civil partnership ceremonies may be held. Please tick the statement which most closely matches your opinion*

i. I would like PCN to support the government's plan to make no change to the rules on where civil partnerships may be held – ie may be held in a church but with no religious content

ii. I would like PCN to ask for an option to allow churches to conduct ceremonies with religious content for civil partnerships.

iii. Other, please specify

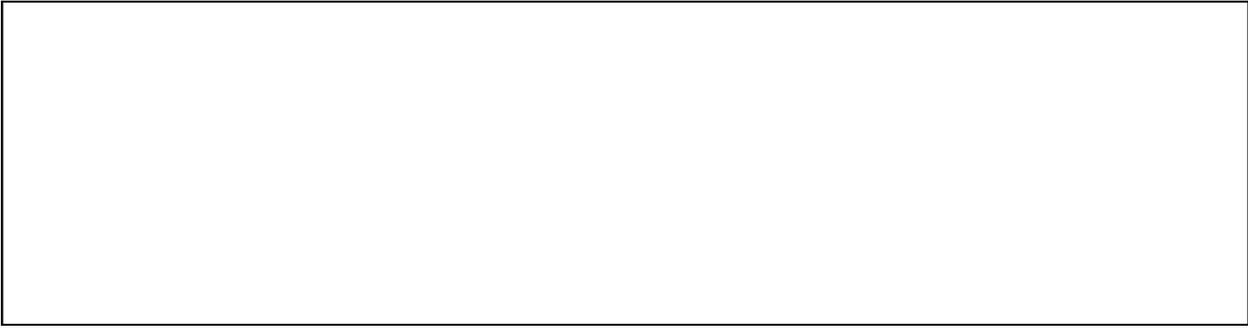
4. *If gay couples are to be offered the option of a civil partnership **or** a marriage, there is an argument that the same option should be available to opposite-sex couples. Please tick as appropriate for both these statements.*

i. I would like PCN to ask for an option to allow opposite-sex couples to form civil partnerships
Yes No

ii. I would like PCN to ask for an option for churches to conduct civil partnerships with religious content for opposite-sex couples
Yes No

iii. Other, please specify

5. Please use the space below to share any further insights or opinions on this subject that you would like to give us. (Continue on your own sheet if need be)



**Please return this form to Andy Vivian, PCN Britain, 26 High Street, Newnham,
Gloucestershire, GL14 1BB**