

## Celebrating Marriage in the Christian Church

On January 1, 2009, in a private civil ceremony in our home, with a small company of family and friends, Thomas Roach and I were legally married. Having been a couple for thirteen years, we were privileged, as Canadians, to join the institution of marriage. The day after our wedding we sent out a message by email sharing our news and were flooded with emails, cards, letters and gifts from friends all around the world who sent us their enthusiastic congratulations.

Given that I am an Anglican parish priest, we had to figure out how best to share the news with the congregation I serve. With the controversies that have swirled around the Anglican Communion regarding the place in the church for lesbian and gay Christians, we were understandably anxious about how or indeed whether to do this: wise mentors gave us good advice, and so, on Sunday January 4, with sweaty palms and pounding hearts we made the announcement. I had prepared a little speech: *“On New Years Day, in a small private civil ceremony in our home, Thomas and I were legally married. We are proud of our country, our families, and our friends and we are grateful to have received the support of so many. Thank you.”*

I got to the end of the first sentence and with the words, *“Thomas and I were legally married,”* the congregation (about 300 people) stood, applauded and cheered for 3 minutes. A senior leader of the congregation came to the microphone and said, *“We believe that marriage is a good thing, that this marriage is a good thing and we support Thomas and Peter in their married life.”* And then he added this Biblical quote from the Sermon on the Mount, *“Let your light so shine before others that all may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* The congregation applauded again: Thomas and I kissed and the service continued.

I begin with this personal story because it witnesses to a lived reality in at least one Canadian Anglican Church. While the United Church of Canada has opened the sacrament of marriage to all duly qualified people, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and other denominations continue to deny this sacrament to GLBT people. Given that our Anglican denomination is still in the midst of a discussion about how to recognize and celebrate committed long-term same-sex relationships, Thomas and I chose to have a civil marriage: a retired priest—a long time friend—blessed our vows and our rings—but he did this unofficially.

While it has been a time of great celebration for us as a couple and a family, I continue to be saddened by the inability of the church to embrace the new Canadian reality of same-sex marriage. Marriage, after all, is not primarily a religious institution. Neither Christians nor Jews invented marriage. As the *Doctrine of the Church of England*, (1922) states: *“Marriage stands in a special position because, both as a rite and as a*

*state of life, it is not something peculiarly Christian, but rather is an institution... which is taken into and sanctified by the Christian Church.”*

The social history of marriage (see *What is Marriage For?* by E.J. Graff, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) has more to do with economics than with gender. The wedding ring, romanticized as a symbol of eternal love, originally was a sign of the value of the bride's dowry to the groom's family. There is not an unbroken history of marriage: rather, it is an institution that has long been in transition. The church's understanding and practice of solemnizing marriages has similarly gone through a lengthy process of change as the institution has evolved. These changes have been many and profound: marriages, once (and still in some cultures) arranged by parents, evolved to mutual choosing based on love. In recent memory, interracial marriage was illegal in the United States and certainly not popular in Canada. The Anglican Church has allowed the remarriage of divorced persons only since 1968.

As I recall January 1, 2009, it is clear to me that Thomas and I did not have a gay wedding—we had the celebration of a marriage—family, friends, blessing, and witnessed public commitment all combined to make a wonderful day, and begin a season of celebration that has been so very affirming to us as a couple living with dignity and recognition in our culture. Members of the congregation we're privileged to be part of were keen to celebrate with us. I look forward to the day when churches can embrace the love that draws couples together and bless and celebrate that life long commitment of marriage with all the prayers and blessings that the church has to offer.

*The Very Reverend Peter Elliott*

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