

Clarity & unity in the midst of confusion & discord

The current debate on S377A and the constitutionalizing of marriage

(A Pastoral Letter by Rev Christopher Chia, Moderator)

Dear brothers & sisters in Christ of ARPC,

1. Jesus' Call to Watch and Pray

We started the year with Mark's Gospel. The touchstone of Jesus' ministry was his death on the Cross. Jesus' atoning death accomplished three humanly impossible feats – satisfy God's wrath, destroy the devil's work, and make us the children of God.

Jesus' final preparation for his historic life-giving mission was his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was deeply anguished to the point of death and prayed to be faithful to God's will, even if it cost him his life.

He called his inner circle of Peter, James and John to follow his example of spiritual alertness – to obey God's salvation plan and to reject Satan's ploys to derail it. Jesus called them to "watch and pray."

The disciples failed to obey resoundingly. Jesus simply obeyed resolutely.

We must learn this seminal lesson from Jesus: that in partaking in God's salvation plan, Gethsemane must precede Calvary. Heart wrenching prayer precedes life-giving ministry.

Christ's watch and pray is finished. The church's watch and pray has begun.

There has never been a more urgent and important time for Christians in Singapore to watch and pray as our nation faces a watershed moment that could impact our social fabric irreversibly. We stand at an inflexion point as we define, or more rightly, redefine marriage.

2. Watching & Praying in the Past

The lightning rod issue is the controversial Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises gay sex. The South China Morning Post reports that "top officials, religious groups and gay rights campaigners have in recent weeks traded views over the controversial legislation – Section 377A of the Penal Code – amid growing indications that the government could soon strike it down".

Abolitionists argue that the government's stance – to not enforce the legislation – not only renders it a toothless legislation but perpetuates discrimination. The retentionists, on the other hand, hold fast to Section 377A as a moral marker to signify our mainly-conservative society's disapproval of same sex unions.

The Presbyterian Church in Singapore (PCS) issued a Statement in 2018, in the aftermath of the Penal Code being struck down in India. The gist of the Statement states that **"if Section 377A is to be repealed, there must be a commensurate review and a strengthening of our Constitutional guarantees and rights to practice religion. It advocates that S377A should not be repealed unless and until the following guarantees are included in the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore:**

- A) the religious rights of those who favour God's design for marriage are protected,
- B) there will be no legalisation of same-sex unions, and
- C) the laws will not penalise and discriminate against those who do not support the homosexual lifestyle."

The full statement is attached below. It is a small window into God's sovereignty and our human responsibility to be prayerful, responsible and measured as fellow citizens of Singapore, seeking to carve out common space for our diversity.



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The Presbyterian Church in Singapore (The “PCS”)

A Denominational Statement on Section 377A: Current Issues and Future Hope

In 2017, the PCS affirmed that marriage between a man and a woman is God’s original, good and enduring design for the propagation of family and society (at the PCS Synod AGM and in our Constitution). Consequently, we reject same-sex unions as they undermine the life-giving marriages and wholesome families which are the bedrock of a stable society.

The PCS agrees with and is united in the stance of the National Council of Churches of Singapore¹, the Diocese of Singapore², the Roman Catholic Church of Singapore³ and PERGAS⁴ to support our Government’s and our Courts’ carefully calibrated position expressed in these significant legal, executive and social touchstones.

1. The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of Section 377A in October 2014.
2. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in the Parliamentary Debate in October 2007 on Section 377A, explained why the Government would retain Section 377A in the Penal Code but not enforce it.
3. The scope of the Government’s present Penal Code Review of 2018 did not include Section 377A. The majority of Singaporeans regard Section 377A as a moral marker foundational to fostering stable families and a strong nation.

We empathise with those struggling with same-sex attraction (“SSA”) and their reasons to repeal Section 377A. We regard everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, with equal respect and worthy of God’s love and mercy.

We, however, affirm that S377A should not be repealed as a moral marker of Singapore society under the present circumstances, unless and until the following rights and/or guarantees are included in the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore:

- a. that the religious freedom and/or rights of the many who favour God’s original and good design for family are protected and safeguarded;
- b. there will be no legalisation of same-sex unions, adoption by same-sex couples, surrogacy by same-sex couples; and
- c. the laws will not penalise and discriminate against those who do not support the homosexual lifestyle.⁵

If Section 377A is to be repealed, there must be a commensurate review and a strengthening of our Constitutional guarantees and rights to practice religion. Liberalism or secularism of modern democracies should not be allowed to curtail or revoke our cherished religious freedoms in Singapore.

Singapore is a secular state but the majority of its citizens (81%) are religious practitioners.⁶ We reject the false dichotomy that simplistically separates state from religion and conveniently silences the majority voice of religious adherents. We believe this freedom from religion in our common space holds dire and irreversible consequences for our marriages, families and children in our pursuit of racial-religious harmony in Singapore for our enduring peace and prosperity.

We seek to live together in our multi-religious society and hope for unique expression of democracy in Singapore that will guarantee the peace and prosperity of our nation into the 21st century regardless of race, language or religion.

The Presbyterian Church in Singapore
26 September 2018

¹ National Council of Churches Singapore (NCCS) Statement, 13 September 2018.

² Diocese of Singapore Statement, 12 September 2018.

³ Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore Statement, 18 September 2018.

⁴ The Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (“Pergas”) Statement, 19 September 2018.

⁵ For example: The inclusiveness pressures in places of employment or academia compelling employees or influencing students respectively to support same sex relationships and unions.

⁶ 81.5% of the Residents of Singapore are religious <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/visualising_data/infographics/ghs/highlights-of-ghs2015.pdf>.

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Stated Clerk : Rev Dr Steven Gan
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3. Watching & Praying in the Present

The latest developments have led to speculation that the government might seek to enshrine monogamous heterosexual marriage in our nation's constitution.

Channel News Asia (CNA) quoted legal experts who suggest that a constitutional definition of marriage is a way of politically "accommodating both retentionists and abolitionists" of Section 377A. Other experts opine that this is highly unlikely as enshrining man-woman marriage in the Constitution is "much tougher," compared to amending other laws. There are existing laws that prohibit marriages between same-sex persons, namely Section 12 of the Women's Charter. And striking down Section 377A would have no effect on the Women's Charter.

In summary, there is understandable uncertainty and anxiety as we await the unfolding of a new social compact regarding marriage, family and society involving citizens, the executive and our law courts. What can we do on this journey? How can we watch and pray wisely, humbly and patiently?

a) Watch & Pray for Our Statements

We highlight our "2018 PCS Statement on S377A: Current Issues & Future Hopes," lest there are some who are unaware of the prayerful and responsible steps we have taken on these issues.

Yet, we are fully conscious that a sound denominational statement should be a statement not just of the leadership but of the followership in its churches. A nationwide survey of Singapore churches found that the majority of those under 40 years of age favour the repealing of S377A. Admittedly, there seems to be weight in acknowledging that S377A is a legal tool lacking finesse or fitness today as it was crafted in another era to meet different needs. It has, however, served its purpose and must not be dispensed of lightly. We will issue new Statements on our position if need be.

b) Watch & Pray for our Stance

The Bible and church history tell us that moments of crises can be turned into moments of educating, enlightening and maturing God's people about our faith, about our place in society and about our witness to the world. In that light, we pray and plan to have a series of rolling meetings to enlighten our Presbyterian churches so that we can have Biblical clarity and loving unity in increasing circles of "buy in" on these crucial issues.

c) Watch and Pray for our Strategy

The long game is to do the hard work of strengthening our marriages and families. We will work on this at the denominational and local church level. We will work on providing leadership, resources and training (LRT) for these.

It is not enough to keep championing the rightness of God's definition of marriage without showcasing the goodness of God's design in our marriages and families. We have got to walk the talk about Godly marriages. We have got to watch our doctrine and life. In exhorting us about what we can do, this is what we should not do:

***Do not allow S377A and sexuality to be the single issue that defines and divides us.**

***Do not vent on social media about this. Not much use to win the argument but lose the person.**

***Do not be a vigilante lone ranger, voicing your personal opinions that may misrepresent, rather than represent, Christ and his church to our nation.**

In the final analysis, the Bible and church history show us that we ultimately do not need to trust in any manmade law, party or personages for the perseverance of the saints. We start and end our journey by grace, assured that Jesus our Lord knows how to purify his church through discipline. Jesus our Shepherd also knows how to protect his church through persecution. God knows how to be God. We must humbly learn how to be his church – content in plenty or in want – be it in the bliss of serenity or the heat of adversity. Amen.

Serving you for God's glory,
Pastor Christopher Chia