**Remarks to Mass Church Rally**

**By Premier Hon. Alden McLaughlin, MBE, JP, MLA**

**5 p.m., Sunday, 11 September, 2016**

I am grateful to the Cayman Ministers’ Association and the Seventh Day Adventist Conference for the invitation to be here this evening as the churches of these Islands seek to affirm and promote the bible-based family values upon which this beloved country of ours was founded. I am looking forward very much to the speeches and discussions that will follow. And I believe that it will help to put those discussions in proper context if everyone has a clear understanding of the government’s position with regard to the institution of marriage on the one hand and the rights of persons in same-sex relationships on the other.

Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, and that is that in a country of laws such as the Cayman Islands we are all bound by the Rule of Law. The Marriage Law defines marriage as the union between one man and one woman. Not one man and another man or one woman and another woman; one man and one woman. That is the law of the Cayman Islands. And that is also what I and the government I have the honour to lead believe and will defend. Marriage is an institution ordained by God and is reserved only for persons of the opposite sex. Whatever relationships exist between persons of the same sex, they are not and cannot be considered as marriages under the laws of the Cayman Islands.

In 2009 for the first time in its history the Cayman Islands obtained a Bill of Rights as part of a new Constitutional Order. That Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which it contains, was the work of eight years and three administrations. It was also the work of civic society and importantly, the churches of these Islands represented then as now, by the Cayman Ministers’ Association and the Seventh Day Adventist Conference. As an elected member I was engaged in the constitutional discussions throughout those eight long years. As a government minister I led the talks for the final four difficult years until the Constitution was finally agreed to by the United Kingdom in February 2009 and approved by the people of these Islands by referendum in May that same year. As a result, I know intimately how much work and agonizing went into crafting our current constitution and The Bill of Rights.

I therefore want to take a moment this evening to pay tribute to my dear friend and namesake the late Pastor Al Ebanks and my equally dear friend the current President of the Seventh Day Adventist Conference, Pastor Shian O’Connor, for the significant leadership roles they both played in creating our current constitutional document. Not only were they intimately involved in the constitutional discussions in Cayman, but they also sat around the negotiating table at Lancaster House in London. Both the Bill of Rights and the Preamble to the Constitution were significantly shaped by the representations made by these God-fearing men on behalf of their respective organisations and churches and the country owes them both an enduring debt of gratitude.

With regard to the institution of marriage, it is worth noting that at the urging and with the assistance of both the Cayman Ministers Association and the Seventh Day Adventist Conference, the Cayman Bill of Rights recognizes that the right to marry is reserved only to persons of opposite sex of marriageable age. No such right is conferred on persons of the same sex.

Section 14 of the Constitution provides:

“Government shall respect the right of every unmarried man and woman of marriageable age (as determined by law) freely to marry a person of the opposite sex and found a family.”

Thus, to repeat what I said earlier, in Cayman marriage is the exclusive province of persons of marriageable age of the opposite sex. There is no right under the Constitution or otherwise for persons of the same-sex to marry. Further, I can confirm that I have been given the assurance by the former UK Overseas Territories minister, Minister Schapps, and as recently as this past Friday, by Her Excellency the Governor, that the United Kingdom Government will not require the Cayman Islands to adopt same-sex marriage legislation, nor will it seek to impose such legislation on these Islands.

Although I have previously explained the Government’s position in writing to the Human Rights Commission and publically, including on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, I want to repeat it here this evening and to continue to assure the country that the Government and the Party that I have the privilege to lead have absolutely no intention, nor any desire, to make changes to the Constitution or the Marriage Law that would alter the definition of marriage or impinge on the Christian values upon which our nation was founded.

I equally want to make it clear that no matter what my own religious beliefs, or indeed the beliefs of the other members of my Government, as your Premier I also have an obligation under the law and the Constitution, and indeed given my religious upbringing under the teachings of Christ, to ensure that all people, but especially any minority group, regardless of differences, receive fair treatment and respect under the law and constitution of our Islands.

Those of you who know my family, especially the Adventists among you, may know that my great-grandfather Gilbert Madgdaly McLaughlin was the founder of the Adventist faith here more than 125 years ago. Others of you will know that my dear, departed mother Althea was a devout Christian and an Elder of the United Church. l grew up in a Christian household. So I am well aware how the Christian teachings of love, faith and charity have helped to build this nation.

But I also recall the stories of the challenges my great-grandfather and others faced when bringing the teachings of the Adventist movement to Cayman. Challenges compounded because there were those of other faith communities back then who quite frankly did not want the Adventist movement to exist here. But with the assistance of God and fair protection under the law the Adventist movement has thrived. And today in our Islands we have an interfaith community where we respect one another - both for the things we have in common as well as for our differences. And because of this we are here today, people of differing faiths and from different lands, of differing ages and different perspectives – yet all are able to worship freely together and discuss our views peacefully. We are able to exist respecting our basic humanity and the teachings of Christ to love each other as he has loved us.

Section 16 of the Cayman Islands Bill of Rights, which mirrors a similar provision in the European Convention on Human Rights, protects the basic human rights by prohibiting discrimination by Government against the individual on grounds ranging from race and gender to religion and nationality and yes, sexual orientation.

There has been concern expressed by some that the recent decision of the Immigration Appeals Tribunal will have the effect of somehow changing either the Constitution or the Marriage Law with regards to same sex marriage. As your Premier and as an attorney I can say that this is not the case. We still have the right of holding fast to the Christian precept of marriage being only between a man and a woman, while allowing our Immigration Law under very narrowly defined circumstances to accommodate the dependency of one person on another. This adheres to our Bill of Rights and our treaty obligations under international human rights law without forcing us to legally recognize same-sex marriage. I assure you that the ruling of the Immigration Appeals Tribunal was based on law and not on any policy of this Government. We certainly have no policy to introduce same sex marriage anywhere, anytime.

As a people we have to be careful of losing the very thing we cherish by being intolerant and inflexible. I am not here to try to change anybody’s beliefs – on either side of the issue. What I would urge is that we consider Christ’s teachings of tolerance with regards to how we treat each other.

I believe that we have a great opportunity to unite the country as a result of this issue. Pause and take a step back and ask ourselves what would Jesus have done. I am no theologian, but some of the earliest lessons I learnt at Sunday School were of Jesus’ teaching of love, grace and acceptance.

As Caymanians we expect those who come to live here to respect our laws, our customs and our cultural mores. But respect is not something we can demand. We must command it by our example. Just as I will not allow same sex marriage to be forced upon us; neither will I allow hatred and bigotry to drive divisions between our own people or those who come to work and live here. It is wrong and is it un-Christian.

So my message today is to cherish and build on the things that we have in common and that unite us – not divide us – for what unites us far outweighs our differences. I have every confidence that through gatherings such as this we will use the opportunity to build a stronger, more caring community. I ask you in turn to have confidence that your Government is not going to allow the rights and freedoms enshrined in our Constitution and our laws, to be undermined.

I will conclude with an excerpt from the opening words of the Preamble to the Constitution of the Cayman Islands, which was crafted in large part by the churches of these Islands:

“The people of the Cayman Islands, recalling the events that have shaped their history and made them what they are, and acknowledging their distinct history, culture and Christian heritage and its enduring influence and contribution in shaping the spiritual, moral and social values that have guided their development and brought peace, prosperity and stability to those Islands, through the vision, forbearance and leadership of their people, who are loyal to Her Majesty the Queen:

Affirm their intention to be-

* A God-fearing country based on traditional Christian values, tolerant of other religions and beliefs.
* A country in which religion finds its expression in moral living and social justice.
* A caring community based on mutual respect for all individuals and their basic human rights.
* A country committed to the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom.
* A community that practices honest and open dialogue to ensure mutual understanding and social harmony.

The Constitution of these Islands was adopted by our people by an overwhelming majority in a referendum. There is therefore no doubt in my mind as to where the people of these Islands stand with respect to a bible based system of values and our acknowledgment as a community that such a system is entirely consistent with respect for the basic human rights of the individual. Long may it remain so.

I thank you again for the opportunity to address you on this important occasion.

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