

PASTORAL LETTER

Dear brothers and sisters,

On July 12, 2012, the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church adjourned, after eight days of intense labor. During our time in Indianapolis, Convention dealt with a myriad of resolutions, addressing issues as diverse as the structure of the church, the relationship between Baptism and Holy Communion, and the Anglican Covenant; but clearly Resolution A049 – authorizing a provisional liturgy entitled “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant,” a liturgy for blessing same-sex unions – drew the most attention in the media, and will require a policy decision on the part of every bishop. The purpose of this Pastoral Letter is to outline that policy in the Diocese of Northern Indiana.

General Convention debated Resolution A049 fervently and with great generosity of spirit. In the House of Bishops, nearly two hours of honest yet gracious conversation led to a roll-call vote on the measure. It passed by a vote of 111-41. I voted in the negative. The House of Deputies approved A049 by a 75% margin. Our own clergy deputation voted in the affirmative by a 3-1 margin; the lay deputies were divided, 2-2.

In the aftermath of General Convention’s decision to approve Resolution A049, I joined a group of bishops in issuing the Indianapolis Statement, a minority report and a word of principled dissent from this action. A copy of the statement is appended to this pastoral letter; you can also find it on the website of the Communion Partners (<http://www.comunionpartners.org/> - click link to “CP Bishops Minority Report”).

The rubrics of the liturgy itself contain two reminders that the church is far from a settled mind on this difficult topic. First, the liturgy’s use in a diocese is “under the direction and subject to the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority.” Second, using words from the church’s canon on marriage, the rubric states that “It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to’ preside at any rite of blessing defined herein,” and goes on to add that “this convention honor[s] the theological diversity of this church in regard to matters of human sexuality.” Thus the rite in its own rubrics recognizes that the practice of blessing same-sex unions will not be universally embraced in the Episcopal Church. That is certainly the case in the Diocese of Northern Indiana.

Many in the diocese have been yearning for this liturgy; their sense of theological conviction, and of pastoral care for gay and lesbian Christians, requires them to extend the church’s blessing to same-sex unions. At the same time, many in the diocese believe that this development subverts the church’s traditional and biblical teaching on holy matrimony. People of good will – Christians deeply committed to Jesus and seeking the best for the church – come down on both sides of this difficult question. In my address to the 113th Convention of the Diocese of Northern Indiana

last October, I recognized both the diversity of conviction and the necessity that I now face of articulating a policy in the diocese regarding the provisional liturgy. I said:

General Convention in 2009 passed a resolution (C056) that asked the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to assemble and develop theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same-sex unions. As I mentioned in earlier addresses, I voted against this resolution, though with some sadness. I am very grateful for the gay and lesbian Christians who are members of our diocesan family. Their presence is a gift to their parishes and a gift to me. And I realize that they may understand my "No" vote to be a negative word about them. That, however, is far from my intention. Rather, I believe that such a development violates an important Anglican principle: Lex orandi, lex credendi – "the law of praying is the law of believing" – or, more colloquially, you can tell what people believe by listening to the content of their prayers. Anglicans enshrine their doctrine in prayer. We simply do not have the consensus of the Anglican Communion, or of our ecumenical partners, in making such a change in doctrine. A liturgy for blessing same-sex unions will put the Episcopal Church out of the Anglican mainstream and indeed out of the Christian mainstream more generally.

I am profoundly aware that many of you do not agree with what I've just said. If we took a poll in the room, we'd be divided close to 50-50. Many people in the Diocese of Northern Indiana, people of strong faith and a deep love for Jesus, believe that our Lord is calling us to provide just such a liturgical form. And there lies our challenge. While I have no crystal ball, I have been listening carefully to diverse voices around the church – and as a result, I have every expectation that next summer's General Convention will formally approve a liturgical form for the blessing of same-sex unions. That will trigger a crisis of conscience for people on all sides of this painful issue. As a matter of conscience and conviction, I cannot authorize such a liturgy. As pastor of the whole diocese, however, I am aware that brothers and sisters of equal conscience and conviction believe that it is time to move forward with these liturgies. At this point, I cannot see an easy or simple way through this pastoral and theological tangle. But I do know this. We're in it together. Whatever happens, Jesus prays for us:

My prayer is not for them alone [the disciples in the room with Jesus at the Last Supper]. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (John 17:20-21).

In other words, our credibility is at stake. People will make their decision about Jesus on the basis of how we deal with one another. And so this challenging moment in our church's life is fraught with both danger and potential.

In light of the actions of General Convention, and of the convictions and pastoral concerns articulated last fall at our diocesan convention, I make the following response.

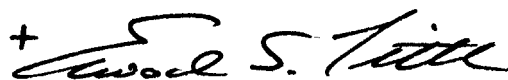
First, the provisional liturgy entitled “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” is not authorized for use in the Diocese of Northern Indiana. There will be no exceptions to this policy.

Second, priests of the Diocese of Northern Indiana who, for pastoral reasons, wish to use “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” may travel to a neighboring diocese to do so. I have spoken with the bishops of Chicago, Western Michigan, Michigan, Ohio, and Indianapolis (dioceses that border our own), and they have agreed that Northern Indiana priests may request permission to use a church in their dioceses for such a liturgy. Those priests should also apply for a “license to officiate” from the bishop of the neighboring diocese, since the liturgy would be under that bishop’s sacramental covering rather than mine.

I have attempted in this two-point policy to find a solution that will honor the conscience of all. On the one hand, as your bishop I believe that every sacramental act in the diocese is an extension of my own ministry; and, by theological conviction, I cannot extend my ministry to include the blessing of same-sex unions. On the other, priests who believe that they are called to use this liturgy have an avenue for doing so, though it will require traveling to a nearby diocese. In recent years, I have been both vocal and quite public about the importance of creating a “safe space” for people of divergent theological convictions. This policy is an attempt to do just that. While the solution is far from perfect, it will – at least in the short term – provide space for everyone to exercise conscience, and will require no one to act in a way that violates the deepest convictions of heart and mind.

We are utterly dependent upon the grace and mercy of Jesus. There are no good or perfect solutions to an issue that generates such passionate convictions and such a breadth of response. But Jesus is Lord, and we can rely on him to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). We can rely on him as well to enable us to “maintain the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3). St. Paul’s words are wonderfully appropriate for the Episcopal Church – and our diocese – in this challenging season: “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body” (Colossians 3:14-15).

Yours in Christ,



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