

Sunday, April 26, 2015

Dear Friends,

Last year the Standing Committee sent to each congregation a summary of all actions by the 77th General Convention (2012) involving congregational or diocesan action.

Among those resolutions was A049. This resolution authorized the trial use of Same-Sex Blessings, commended to each congregation a study of these rites and the theological reflections involved in them, and directed each diocese to provide a generous pastoral response to gay and lesbian persons.

As I have said previously, our diocese has for some time embodied informally a generous response to gay and lesbian persons. This fact has been verified by the following. Clergy in charge of congregations submitted written reports to me outlining their view of same gender blessings, their vestry's point of view, and the view held by the broad center of the congregation. Additionally, at a clergy day last February each clergy person shared openly and honestly his or her thoughts on the matter.

Most of our congregations embody a traditional expression of our common faith. They seek to express love for gay and lesbian persons, their families, and their friends, while being very clear about their view that the Church's blessing is reserved for couples comprised of one man and one woman. They have my respect and support.

A few of our congregations offer a safe and welcoming spiritual home to gay and lesbian individuals and couples. For this I am grateful. These congregations find in Scripture, Tradition, and Reason grounds for seeing holiness in lifelong commitments between gay and lesbian persons, and I respect and support them.

In other words, the diocese provides a generous pastoral response through the varied practices of each of our congregations. This variety is good, and I am grateful for it.

Upon returning from the last General Convention, I refrained from giving permission to use the liturgies for same gender blessings. The canons clearly allow any clergy person to refrain from solemnizing any marriage, and those same canons mean that no clergy person will ever be required to bless a same gender relationship. No clergy person or congregation can or will ever be required or in any way pressured to bless same gender relationships.

Two congregations have engaged the study materials commended by A049: Holy Cross in Shreveport and St. Barnabas in Lafayette. As a result of the study, the clergy, the vestry, and the people of these congregations have requested permission to bless long-standing relationships between persons of the same gender. I have granted permission to those two congregations to use the trial liturgies designed for this purpose with the understanding that this is not marriage. The laws in this state are clear. Marriage in Louisiana is reserved for opposite sex couples.

We are a majority conservative diocese. However, we are able to make a very gracious space for a theological minority in our midst. While it is sometimes the case that conservative congregations in largely progressive contexts have felt excluded or pressured to change, we in

this more conservative context are intentionally showing respect and appreciation for those with a minority point of view.

Let me be clear. No congregation is required to undergo this study. No priest or congregation will be required to use these rites. These differences among our congregations have in the past been the source of conflict and division. I urge all of you now to let such differences be the occasion for deepening our mutual affection. What we hold in common is Christ. Let our shared devotion to him be the source of our unity in difference.

My love for each of you is deep and abiding. The changes in the Episcopal Church have been for some of us a source of joy and relief. For others these same changes have brought confusion, anxiety, and even hurt. I understand. And I am here for all of you. You are all a gift to me just as you are. And I thank God every day for the privilege of sharing your lives and serving with you as Bishop.

In Christ's Love,

The Rt. Rev. Jacob W. Owensby, PhD, DD
IV Bishop of The Diocese of Western Louisiana