

Monday, July 6, 2015

Dear Friends in Christ,

On June 26 the Supreme Court ruled that the right to enter into a civil marriage applies equally to everyone: opposite-sex and same-sex couples. At our General Convention the Episcopal Church authorized trial rites that may be used for same-sex couples.

Reactions to the Court's ruling and the General Convention's actions range from jubilation to outrage. There has been no shortage of news stories, blog posts, and social media comments on the subject. Unfortunately, much of this talk has resulted in more confusion than clarity. Some commentators seem more interested in fueling anger than in providing clear, rational explanations.

One effective way to get at the truth and to regain emotional self-control is to ask a clear question. That question is this: What do the Supreme Court ruling and the actions of General Convention mean in the Diocese of Western Louisiana?

We are a majority-traditionalist diocese. And we are also a gracious diocese. There is a place at the table for minority points of view. No congregation, no priest, will ever be forced to perform same-sex marriages. However, we recognize an array of opinions about marriage and make a space for progressive voices.

Before the Supreme Court ruled and the General Convention voted, two of our congregations requested permission to use trial liturgies for same-sex blessings. I granted that permission with the clear understanding that there is no expectation for any other congregation to do so.

Just as I have asked traditionalists to respect the brothers and sisters with whom they disagree, I have urged our progressive congregations to embody that same respect. Staying together in disagreement is difficult work. But it is holy work.

General Convention provided liturgies and made canonical changes to make it possible for progressive congregations to perform same-sex marriage and for traditionalist congregations to refrain from doing so. The canon we passed contains the provision that no clergy person can be coerced to preside at a same-sex marriage.

At the same time, the new canon requires that each bishop make some provision for access to these liturgies for couples seeking them. The congregations that already have permission to make use of the previous trial liturgies have permission to use the newly authorized ones. So, as a diocese we are in compliance with canon law, and no additional congregations are required to make use of these liturgies.

We do not all agree. Living together amid our differences is our vocation. We are one in our belief in the risen Christ and in the Triune God. On these two doctrines we do not and cannot waver. However, there are matters—weighty matters—on which we can disagree while retaining our unity.

The House of Bishops recognized this. As a result, we issued a Mind of the House resolution. In that resolution we acknowledged our love and respect for one another in our differences. We stated clearly our need for one another and urged that we all move forward together in the one Christ.

I urge us in Western Louisiana to yield to that same spirit. The Holy Spirit is guiding us through a season of sometimes turbulent social and cultural changes. By his guidance we are groping our way forward. Together.

As we move forward together, stay focused on Jesus. It is he that binds us together. His love for us and our love for him binds us together into a communion not of our own choosing.

I will close by reminding you how deeply I love you and how grateful I am to serve as your bishop. Let's use this time of differences as an opportunity to show the world what real love looks like. Let's embrace each other and move forward together. The world will know that we are Christians by our love.

Faithfully in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. Jacob W. Owensby, PhD, DD
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