

First Sunday of Advent, 2015

A Pastoral Letter On Marriage

To my sisters and brothers in the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina,



Greetings in the name of our risen Lord Jesus Christ!

In the short time that I have been your bishop, great changes have taken place in this country and in our church with regards to marriage. Civil marriage is now equally available to all persons in the United States, following a ruling by the Supreme Court that was announced on June 26, 2015. Days later, The Episcopal Church, gathered for its triennial General Convention, amended the Church's Canon on Marriage and voted to provide liturgies for use by same sex couples wishing to marry in the Church.

By its adoption of Resolution A036, General Convention ruled that our new Canon I.18 on Marriage would become effective today, Sunday, November 29, 2015, the First Sunday of Advent. The most notable change in this Canon is the removal of gender specific language regarding the parties who can be married. By this Canon, therefore, marriage is equally available to all couples.

With its adoption of Resolution A054, General Convention has made a new liturgical resource available to the Church that includes a revised form of "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant" first made available in 2012, and also two other liturgies for trial use, "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage" and "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2." These liturgies are available to the Church for use beginning today, Sunday, November 29, 2015, the First Sunday of Advent, subject to the pastoral leadership of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority. The liturgy titled "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" on page 423 of The Book of Common Prayer (1979) continues to be a resource available to the Church for use with the marriage of a man and a woman.¹

As your bishop, I committed myself to an extended period of listening across our diocese before writing this pastoral response to the actions of General Convention. Taking time to listen to the members of our diocese is a promise I made during the search process through which I was called to be your bishop and that commitment continues today. It is consistent with the plan I introduced at our own Diocesan Convention last February, before the ruling of the Supreme Court or the decisions of General Convention.

"Deanery Conversations" were hosted by each of our five deaneries this fall. I am grateful to all who assisted with the planning, hosting, presenting, and listening, and I am also grateful to all who took time to attend at least one of the conversations. Late in October, our clergy had further opportunity for conversation at our annual conference. Please know that I benefited from listening to the questions and concerns that were

¹ The full texts of Resolutions A036 and A054 are available from the General Convention website at <http://www.generalconvention.org>, by clicking on the blue "Legislative Information" button then following the links to particular resolutions. The new "Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessings, Revised and Expanded 2015" may be purchased from Church Publishing, by visiting their website at <https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/liturgicalresources1>.

raised during these conversations. I believe that my pastoral response is stronger because of this time that we have spent together.

Pastoral Response

You should know that I voted in support of resolutions A036 and A054 at General Convention and that I am committed to supporting the decisions made there. Since my teenage years, in the seventies, I have been aware of the crossroads that our Church has faced regarding human sexuality. Gay and lesbian friends and seminary classmates called to ordained ministry were turned away by the Church because of their unwillingness to commit to a life of celibacy, when that was required and marriage was not an option. For my entire adult life, I've watched our Church (in Canada and in the United States) take small steps towards the decisions that were made this summer at General Convention. My formation, as a follower of Jesus and as an ordained leader in the Church, has included deep engagement with Holy Scriptures, with our traditions, and with reason and experience. I am able to say that, as a person of Christian faith, I am fully able to support the decisions we made this summer.

But let me be clear. I am very aware that others in our Church, equally committed to following Jesus and every bit as committed as am I to disciplines of study and prayer, hold positions regarding the marriage of same sex couples that are very different than my own, and understand Holy Scriptures, tradition and reason to undergird their position. I am persuaded that, in our Episcopal/Anglican "via media," it is possible for scripture, tradition, and reason to support multiple theological positions, and I recognize that such theological diversity is not equally comfortable for all people. Even as many of us support the decisions of this summer's General Convention, many others are deeply disturbed by these decisions and wonder if they can remain as members of a Church that seems to them to have changed too much and too quickly. Still others left some time ago, impatient with the Church's slow decision-making, or upset that we were even having the conversation.

For as long as I have been conscious of "thinking theologically" I have been committed to a pair of Christian values that often seem to clash. The first value is rooted in my reading of the opening verses of John's gospel: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14 - NRSV) or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message: "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." The second value is rooted in my reading of another part of John's gospel, in Jesus' prayer for his disciples on the night before he died, that "they may be one." (John 17:22 - NRSV)

On one hand, the mystery of the incarnation is something that will be experienced and understood differently by each of us, according to our own unique context and as led by God's Holy Spirit. Our priorities for ministry will vary and our theological perspectives will sometimes conflict. On the other hand, being committed to unity in the Body of Christ, as a more perfect witness to God's glory, compels me to seek ways of staying together in relationship with others, even when our differences seem to dominate. Maintaining my commitment to both values has almost always been a great challenge, but never more so than now. How does each of us remain faithful to the particular path God has revealed to us, while remaining committed to being in relationship with those to whom God has revealed other paths? There ought to be room in The Episcopal Church for people of varying theological stripes and expressions, with each of us committed to the full inclusion of as many others as possible.

It is my prayer and my deep desire that this diocese will commit itself to being a place of welcome to all persons; to being a community which, while centered in Christ, affirms and nurtures the theological diversity of its people; and to being a Church that actively builds unity amongst its members within and beyond the

diocese, in the name of Christ, wherever the possibility for such unity exists. Each of us must welcome, respect, and value those who are different from us, while expecting the same in return.

With this pastoral response, I am giving permission to the clergy of the Diocese of East Carolina, canonically resident or licensed to serve here, to use all of the liturgies included in “Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be A Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015.” With The Book of Common Prayer (1979), these liturgies permit marriage in church for all couples legally entitled to marry, and are to be used according to the instructions and “rubrics” that accompany them, and for the purposes for which they are intended. As we get hard copies of these liturgies in our hands, we will determine whether or not some tutorials in their use would be helpful for our clergy.

Although some elements of Canon I.18 on Marriage have changed, let me point you to section 7 of the Canon, which reads “It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to solemnize or bless any marriage.” This canonical provision has not changed from the older version of Canon I.18. Clergy have always had the discretion to marry, or not marry, any specific couple. This continues to be the case. Although individual members of a congregation, or the Vestry of a congregation, may seek to influence the decisions of their clergy in this regard, the decision remains with our clergy. Having said this, the exercise of good pastoral judgment by parish clergy should always include assessment of the needs and concerns of the members of the congregation they serve.

As bishop, I am committed to providing access to our Church’s new liturgies for all couples in this diocese that are properly eligible to be married, according to our Church’s amended Canon. Some of our clergy are willing to solemnize the marriage of same sex couples, and will be able to do so knowing they have the support of their congregation. Others will not be willing to solemnize the marriages of same sex couples, either because of their own conscience or because of their determination that to do so would cause irreparable harm to the unity of the congregation they serve. All clergy should know that they have my support, and will not face any disciplinary measures simply because of their personal theological position.

With this letter, however, I am asking that the clergy of our diocese work together with me to provide properly for the needs of all couples seeking marriage, and especially for the needs of same sex couples. If you are unable to say “yes” to a couple who approaches you to be married, I am asking that you provide the couple with a referral to a neighboring colleague whom you know will be willing to solemnize their marriage, while offering them solid and compassionate pastoral care. If you are unable to arrange for such a referral, please contact my office so that others of us in the diocese can be of support to you and to the couple.

With this letter, I am asking the members of our diocese to recognize that most of our congregations, if not all, contain individuals holding a variety of positions with regard to the marriage of same sex couples. It is therefore unlikely, I believe, that any congregation could honestly declare that they are entirely of one mind. Instead of speaking in terms of majority and minority positions, and pitting members of a congregation against one another, I am hopeful that our clergy and Vestries will exercise the sort of leadership that will allow congregations to honor and respect all of their members, even across significant differences. It is for this work, the nurturing of communities of theological diversity, that I hope and trust our diocese will work to provide leadership training and good resources.

With this letter, I am also asking gay and lesbian couples to continue to have patience with our Church, as we work through the pastoral implications of our new reality. Even if you have worshiped in a local congregation for years, and are active in that congregation’s ministry, there is still the possibility that you will face rejection if your parish priest indicates that they are unwilling to officiate at your wedding, when you ask them. Please find your way clear to love them, to pray for them, and to be patient with them as they work with you to find a

priest willing to solemnize your marriage. Remember that I have committed to working with others in the diocese to make access to the liturgies of the church available to all members of the Church. If you need help in finding a church home, please know that, with our diocesan staff and leaders, I am prepared to help you do so.


Between now and General Convention 2018, we will most certainly be asked to participate in the review of these new liturgies and asked to share our experience of their use in our congregations and our diocese. Please, as you're willing, take time to write me a note or share a story as you have experience with solemnizing the marriages of same sex couples.

Let me finish with a brief story. Following the adoption of resolutions A036 and A054 by General Convention, some members of the House of Bishops rose to express their disagreement with the actions we had taken. They expressed their disagreement gently and with clear love and respect for the rest of us. Their position was published in a document titled "Communion Partners Salt Lake City Statement." In response to their statement, another group of us framed a statement titled "Communion Across Difference" that included these words: "We thank God for the rich variety of voices in our House, in our dioceses, in The Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican Communion, that reflect the wideness of God's mercy and presence in the Church and in the world." In this statement, we recognized that each of us would be returning home to a mix of responses, and we expressed this hope: "The equanimity, generosity, and graciousness with which the Communion Partners have shared their views on Christian marriage and remain in relationship is a model for us and for the lay and ordained leaders in our dioceses to follow."²

As we continue forward together in our life as a diocese, I pray that our relationships will reflect the sort of equanimity, generosity and graciousness that I experienced this summer with the House of Bishops. We will probably not always agree with one another, now about the marriage of same sex couples, or about other matters that we will face in the future. In fact, there will likely be times when some of us vehemently disagree with one another. Let us remember, however, that that which unites us – our love of our Savior Jesus Christ, and our service in his name – is so very much more than that about which we disagree. It will continue to be my prayer that, particularly in the midst of our disagreements, we will every more earnestly seek the unity that comes through Christ, that through our unity in Christ the glory of God might be more fully revealed in the world.

As we begin this Advent season, I pray that God's Holy Spirit will be at work in you, to prepare a place in your hearts for the new life of Christ that seeks to be born in us each Christmas, and every day of our lives. You will remain in my prayers as we work together in these new directions. Please know that the Diocesan House staff stands ready with me to be of service to you in any way that you need, as you engage in God's mission in the world.

Advent blessings,



The Rt. Rev'd Robert S. Skirving
Bishop, Diocese of East Carolina

² The full text of this statement, adopted enthusiastically by members of the House of Bishops, can be found as Resolution X022, with other resolutions on the General Convention website, at <http://www.generalconvention.org>, by clicking on the blue "Legislative Information" button and then following the links to particular resolutions.