

A Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of Idaho

The Rt. Rev. Brian Thom , Bishop

July 30, 2009

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Anaheim, CA, July 7-17th, took two significant steps in the matters of ordination and toward examining resources for the blessing of same-gender relationships. I want to tell you what I understand about them and their meaning for our life together in the Diocese of Idaho.

In Resolution D025, the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies acknowledged a reality of The Episcopal Church in that gay and lesbian persons have been and are members of our Church and, therefore, by the endorsement of their baptism, may not be inhibited from the discernment provided by the ordination process. It was the General Convention of 1994 that first established that sexual orientation may not prevent such access. This new resolution reaffirms that each order of ordained ministry may be considered in such discernment. As has always been the case, access to the ordination process for all persons is what is guaranteed; suitability for ordination depends upon the discernment of the community.

Resolution C056 asserts that, as various civil jurisdictions of the United States have authorized or forbidden marriage, civil unions, and domestic partnerships for gay and lesbian persons, the Church is being called to a renewed and generous pastoral response to such persons who commit to relationships "characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection, and respect". Towards this end, the Standing Committee for Liturgy and Music of the national church has been directed to collect and develop theological and liturgical resources and present them to the 77th General Convention in 2012.

It was further noted in this resolution that there may be a particular pastoral need for some recognition of these unions by the Church in those states that have extended the rights of marriage to homosexual couples. While the resolution gives the bishops of those specific dioceses breadth to address the issues, it also acknowledges that all bishops may need to review the pastoral needs of their own dioceses.

This brings us to the Diocese of Idaho. Marriage or civil unions between same-sex persons do not exist in Idaho, therefore, no clergyperson in our state can be asked to preside over either situation. What is more likely for Idaho Episcopalians is that lesbian and gay couples from our congregations, having been married in another state, may return and wish to receive a spiritual blessing of their union.

While I will have a role in our diocese's response to such needs, most of the responsibility will fall to the clergy of our congregations. Canon law gives clergy complete discretion to decline to participate in any marriage. Likewise, I would consider it a matter of a priest or deacon's conscience as to whether they participate in a community affirmation. Therefore, I intend to engage our clergy in conversations about how they might pastorally respond to such requests. I will invite them to do the same among you.

As both resolutions acknowledge, faithful Episcopalians, "based on careful study of the Holy Scriptures, and in light of tradition and reason, are not of one mind, and Christians of good conscience disagree about these matters". Please join me in prayer that, as we consider our response to these General Convention resolutions, we here in Idaho will do so with compassion and respect for the consciences and integrity of each of our sisters and brothers.

Yours in Christ's service,

+Brian

XIII Bishop of Idaho