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Guest column: What our faith demands of us, even as we disagree

ALAN SCARFE is the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Iowa. Contact: ascarfe@iowaepiscopal.org

The Episcopal Church held its triennial General Convention in Anaheim in July. The focus of the media and the worldwide Anglican Communion of which the church is a constituent member was on what we would do on matters of human sexuality. Regardless of the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the communion, came to deliver a keynote speech on the spiritual and ethical challenges of the economic crisis, even he responded after the convention on the two resolutions on same-gender couples.

Iowa finds itself along with the dioceses of the five New England states where equal marriage is upheld in the forefront of the church's conversation on marriage equality. Faith communities are deciding what this means to their traditions or what it does not. Many faith communities have long awaited the chance to celebrate civil marriage for same-gender couples. The Episcopal Church has been engaged with this for more than 30 years - almost alone among churches of the Catholic tradition. That Episcopal couples were among those cited in the Iowa State Supreme Court Ruling is significant.

Of course, we are not of one mind in this. Not all my own clergy or congregations agree with my position in celebrating this opportunity for same-gender couples. But is there not a beauty in this situation? Faith communities that cannot and will not welcome or embrace these marriages have that freedom in this state and nation, even while others that do coexist beside them peacefully and lawfully. When a bishop in Southern Africa learned of the Iowa ruling, he sent me a note asking me its implications. He was concerned that we might be seen as going against the constitution now if we disallowed such marriages. He found it rather admirable that there was no such pressure upon religious institutions, and that there was a specific exemption for religious institutions to pursue their consciences.

Marriage and its significance for all people is an essential value in our social life. For every faith community, marriage exists not only to protect but to reveal the deeper connection of God's love for us. It is precisely as such that it is as important an institution to same-gender couples as it is to heterosexual couples in those same faith communities.

Faith, however, demands more of us. At the recent General Convention, we heard a sermon by Bishop Stephen Charleston, a Native-American bishop. He stood before us and said in hyperbole that he "had 10 minutes to save the world." Boldly claiming his anointing as a prophet of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, he said that the alarm clock, which had been ticking away the hours toward our civilization's demise, had stopped its ticking. "The alarm bells are ringing," he said. He went on to say that unless we woke up and put aside those things that have used up our energies for the past 30 to 40 years in our disputes together, and bring the peace among human beings needed to care in common for each other and for the planet God has given us, none of what consumes our heated passions today will mean anything. The generations to come, he added, who will have to rebirth civilization on their burned up cinder of a planet, will not thank us, nor will God thank us.

I find myself considering, as a growing number have had to in recent times, the vital nature of jobs and resources to feed the married family, peace across our global communities to keep us safe in our extended families or a fair sharing of the world's goods, education and health resources to provide for all people. In seeking these things the clock is ticking, calling us to action as one, even as we disagree on marriage. These efforts, too, are how we reflect the commandment of our God to love one another as God loves us.