

A Reflection
On One Parish's Process of Reaching Consensus on the Blessing of Same Sex Unions
The Reverend Scott A. Benhase
FALL 2004

Introduction

St. Philip's Church will begin offering a blessing to couples of the same sex in the coming year. We decided to offer these blessings so we could help ensure that we are welcoming, supporting and nurturing the gay and lesbian members of our parish community. We wanted to provide a means within our community for the declaration, acknowledgement and spiritual support of their committed relationships.

The process by which we arrived at this decision is very important. If a process like the one outlined below is not followed, then it is entirely likely that whatever decision is made by a parish will actually do more harm than good. This issue is volatile within our Church. Unless there is a clear commitment by the clergy and lay leadership to conversation and dialogue about this, then the leadership should work first on its internal dynamics of trust development and teamwork before beginning. That may require the use of an outside facilitator or consultant prior to any consideration given to discernment on this issue.

Background

Shortly after Bishop Curry announced to the clergy in September 2003 that he would allow rites of same sex blessings to be offered in congregations in the Diocese of North Carolina, I approached St. Philip's Vestry with this news. I told the Vestry that since we have many Gay & Lesbian persons in the parish, they would soon learn of the Bishop's decision and approach me for what we as a parish were going to do. Rather than being reactive to this, I asked the Vestry to be proactive. To do nothing or to pretend that this issue would simply go away would not be honest and we would not be true to our calling as leaders of this parish. I suggested that we as Rector & Vestry enter into a period of conversation and discernment around this issue with the following ground rules:

- The Vestry would operate on a consensus model, which is different than unanimity;
- Unless consensus was reached, no decision would be made;
- We would reach a consensus Vestry position when we were ready (and not before);
- That consensus position would be honored by all Vestry persons once it was reached (in order to avoid dissension and possible sabotage); and,
- Our conversation and discernment would be confidential until we reached consensus so there would not be outside pressure on us to come to a consensus before we were ready.

The Vestry agreed to enter into conversation and discernment under those ground rules and we began to do so that night at the September Vestry meeting.

The Vestry Process

The Vestry ended up devoting 5 months to a discussion and exploration of this issue. It is fair to say that the Vestry did not all think alike on this issue. Over the months of discussion, some members of the Vestry expressed discomfort about having any kind of liturgical rite, while others felt quite comfortable from the beginning that this is what the parish should do. Some felt that if we were going to have a rite, then it ought to look much like the marriage liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer. Some others disagreed and held that it should only be a blessing and have no sacramental quality to it. Finally consensus was reached that we should have a blessing rite for same sex couples. The rite we agreed upon is attached.

Once we reached consensus we still recognized that our consensus did not mean that everyone was now in the same place on this issue. What we sought to do in finding consensus on this rite was to honor the diversity of theological positions we represented while also responding to the current reality of where the Episcopal Church is in its common journey. We also recognized that our consensus as a Vestry should not be mistaken for certainty. As Louie Crew, a gay man who is on the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, has said: "Anyone who says anything about this issue ought to begin with the words - 'I may be wrong, but here is what I believe'." Like all discernment of what is God's will, we recognized in humility that we are not God and could not know for sure what God would have us do. But that should not and would not paralyze us into inaction. Historical circumstances brought us to this place. We all felt strongly that God is sovereign and Jesus is Lord. If we were in error in this decision, then God would correct us in God's time. If what we found consensus on was in accordance with God's purposes, then God would bless our life together.

The Congregational Process

The Vestry announced its consensus position at our Annual Meeting in January 2004. We also announced this as the beginning of listening and discernment among all members of the Church for the course of action we should take – a period of discussing, praying and reflecting on what God would have us do in terms of this issue.

During this congregational process:

- The parish clergy were open about this topic and their feelings on this matter and encouraged the laity to speak with them and others about how they felt;
- We set aside five Sundays in February for open conversation and dialogue as well as a portion of our Parish Retreat in March

These scheduled conversations were widely attended and had some basic ground rules: Participants were asked to share their thoughts without denigrating other participant's

positions on this issue. If we were truly going to listen to one another, and hopefully hear what God was saying to us in our conversations, then we had to have an a priori respect for another's words.

What we learned as a result of this process was that as a parish we were not of one mind on this issue. Some were concerned that blessing same sex unions deviates from the teachings and traditions of the Church. Some also felt that the proposed rite, because it was not sacramental, fell short of the acknowledgment and support they sought as members of this Christian community.

But we also learned that while we were of divided minds, we remained of One Spirit. There was no stronger evidence of this truth than the process we engaged in around this issue. We created a spiritual space where all members of our Christian community had a safe, secure and supportive environment to speak their understanding of how Christ is calling us. Our engagement of this issue resulted in our seeing each other with new eyes, hearing and celebrating the diverse voices present in our parish. It was also a testimony to our embodiment of Our Savior's commandment "that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12).

The Vestry Decision

At our mid year congregational meeting in June, we offered another opportunity for us as a gathered people to speak to this issue. The Vestry made it clear that they wanted to hear from everybody before coming to a decision. That meeting had very little conversation as most people had had plenty of opportunities to speak prior to it. At its June 2004 meeting the Vestry decided unanimously that it was time for us to forward with the blessings of same sex unions and passed a resolution encouraging the Rector to provide the rite as a pastoral response to members of the parish (see the attached guidelines). That was all the Vestry could have done since it is the Rector's sole prerogative to administer the rites of the Church. In making the decision the Vestry recognized that some parishioners would be comforted in their faith while others would be challenged in their faith.

The Future

The media picked up on the Vestry's announcement and we got more than a fair share of newspaper and television coverage. This was not pleasant to deal with, but it was an expected reaction to the decision. Many people outside the parish misinterpreted the decision thinking that we were going to perform homosexual marriages now. We also received messages of both support and condemnation via email, voice mail, and letters. We tried to respond to each with the same charity and love we shared with one another when we were discerning the decision. We are also committed to remain in constant listening mode with one another. This process has actually strengthened our parish in that capacity. We have found our lives together strengthened and our loyalty to one another confirmed.

Conclusion

It is said that as a rule trial attorneys should never ask questions in court to which they do not already know the answers. I think a similar rule applies here. If the Rector & Vestry do not know the answer to the question: "Is our parish capable of entering into such a discernment process," then they better find out the answer before proceeding. The question is not what will ultimately be decided. The question is one of capacity and competency. Is the parish mature enough in its common life to enter into such a dialogue?

I also believe the relationship with the Rector & Vestry is key here. I have worked hard over the last nine years to develop trust with my Vestry. I have promised them that I will never make an important decision without consulting them and they have promised to do the same. We work as a leadership team. There has to be a critical mass of trust within the leadership team for this process to work.

This process is not for the faint of heart or for those who at the first sign of conflict seek to appease, distract, or run away. It takes a communal willingness to engage one another at the deepest level and stay with one another through the process.