

A Message From Bishop Waynick Concerning the Blessing of Same-Sex Couples
September 14, 2012
Holy Cross Day

Dear Friends,

For more than 20 years the bishops of the Diocese of Indianapolis have permitted the blessing of same sex unions on a case by case basis, in consultation with parish clergy, as a pastoral response to our own members. In that period of time I believe such blessings have taken place in no more than seven of our congregations, always in response to an expressed pastoral need, and with the permission of the bishop.

The clergy of this diocese have been aware of my thoughts and the limits on their own responses to requests for these blessings. It has been my intent always to provide for the needs of our own members, taking into account that this issue is one about which faithful people have been disagreeing for decades.

My own understanding has been that while the Bible does contain some passages which condemn some sexual practices, both heterosexual and homosexual, it (Bible) also contains passages which condemn other acts and behaviors which, over time, have been considered by many of the Church to be permissible. The re-marriage of divorced persons is one example, and this practice has developed even though Jesus taught that it should not be permitted.* We have gained the experience of seeing what happens in the lives of people who are able to remarry after the pain and turmoil of unhappy marriage and divorce. We may all know someone whose life bears witness to this reality.

I also have the conviction that as Christians it is legitimate for us to read the Bible through the lens of the Gospels – those writings which provide us with the teachings of Jesus about a wide range of issues. Among his teachings, which has been especially important for me to ponder) is that no bad tree can bear good fruit, nor a good tree bad fruit...meaning that it is important to allow the fruit to develop in order to test it...in other words to gain some data and some experience of what a tree is producing.

It seems to me that just as the heterosexual community needs the example of faithful, mutually life-giving marriages, the homosexual community also needs that witness and example. All of us have options about how we behave toward others, and lifelong, monogamous relationships are possible (and present!) in both groups. A young heterosexual person has always been able to observe married couples as examples either of honesty, monogamy, and mutual respect, or of abusiveness, indifference, and unfaithfulness. A young homosexual person has not always had such models available.

In my own ministry I have encountered both married couples and same sex couples whose commitment to each other has born very good fruit. They are disciplined in their lives and work, they contribute in positive and generous ways to their communities, they raise healthy children, they are pillars of the churches to which they belong. I have also encountered couples in each group whose lives produce bitterness and anger. Neither group seems to have exclusive right to claim complete faithfulness; both groups can mess it up!

We are also very clear that no married couple can be completely successful without the support and encouragement of others – which is precisely why our marriage liturgy includes a declaration from the congregation (representing not only themselves as individuals, but the Church) to provide that ongoing support. The accountability for that relationship, while not equally shared by couple and church is, nevertheless, a shared accountability. Many of our members, living in faithful, same-sex relationships for decades, have had neither that accountability nor that support.

For at least twenty five years The Episcopal Church has been having open conversation about how to regard and respond to all of our members. These conversations have yielded a wide range of responses, as

you know. It is no secret that some of our members found it impossible to engage that conversation, or to remain in a church which would. It is also no secret that we are not alone in this – every mainline church has experienced similar turmoil and some loss of membership because of disagreement on this issue. The same was true when remarriage of divorced persons and ordination of women were under discussion and eventually implemented. It must also be noted that we have gained some new members because of our openness to consider all of these issues, without requiring unanimity about them.

You are probably aware that the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, gathered at Indianapolis in July 2012, received a Blue Book report from the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music which includes both resources for discussion and study of the issue, and the text of a liturgy *to be used on a provisional basis, with the permission of the diocesan bishop*. A provisional text is provided by General Convention and used and reflected upon in order to gain helpful feedback, for use in possible revisions of it. *There is no mandate that a provisional text be used, and it may only be used with the permission of the diocesan bishop.*

Let me repeat that. No priest is under any obligation to preside at the blessing of any couple. A parish priest always uses some pastoral judgment and discretion about whether or not to bless a marriage. We are not obligated to marry any couple who asks, even members of our own Church. Nothing about that has changed.

For the past fifteen years I have had an understanding with the clergy that if a same sex couple should ask for a blessing, several things need to be in place before they agree.

First, the priest must be willing, and the congregation must have had enough conversation and study of the issues of marriage and same sex blessing to ensure that moving forward with such a liturgy will have rather wide general support. It's not a matter of choosing up sides and voting – we don't respond to pastoral matters in that way. It is about being sure this will not come 'out of the blue', or is something only the priest is comfortable with. In other words, such a blessing can't be a secret.

Second, the couple must be known to the parish. We don't marry just any couple who walks in off the street asking to be wed "in your beautiful church" without asking them to commit to participation in the life of the Church. The whole point in being married in the Church is that you intend to have the Church involved in your marriage, otherwise our clergy are acting as agents of the State – ecclesiastical justices of the peace. And don't forget the promise the congregation makes – it must be made honestly.

Third, the couple (like any couple) must receive thorough counseling. The stresses for same-sex couples may be greater than usual; employment issues, financial issues, family support (or lack of it) rights regarding health care decisions, inheritance rights, etc.

The bishop must be in on the conversation, and approve whatever liturgical rite is contemplated.

Finally, I have agreed to alert all the clergy when a blessing of this kind is taking place, so they can be ready to answer questions or address concerns about it in the congregations they serve.

Two things about this policy will now change. The provisional liturgy provided by General Convention will be the only liturgy used for such blessings, and formal evaluations of it will be done in order to provide helpful feedback to the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music. The format for these evaluations has not yet been developed, but I envision including lay people in the conversations as well as clergy.

I repeat – as always – we are well aware that there is still disagreement among us over this issue. Not all bishops are willing grant permission for use of the provisional rite. Not all priests are willing to bless same sex-unions even if the bishop is willing to grant permission. Some among us regret that this is

happening at all, and others regret that it isn't happening more quickly.

It has been this way from the earliest days of the Church – we will not come to 100% agreement about all things in our own time, and only time will tell what kind of fruit we are beginning to bear. In the meantime, we are commanded to love and forbear with one another until things come clear, and in the keep ourselves busy seeking and serving Christ in all people.