

Advent 2012

Dear Brother and Sister Priests -

This past summer, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church authorized the trial use of a liturgy for the blessing of same sex unions, beginning in Advent. This letter is to offer guidelines for how we will proceed with that ministry in this diocese. While this is not a confidential document, I ask that you do not copy it or make it available for larger distribution at this time.

Introduction

I recognize that widely divergent views about the appropriateness of welcoming same sex couples in the Church – and blessing their partnerships – are held by Episcopalians. This is an issue where it is very difficult to find middle ground. Each one of us must prayerfully and faithfully decide where we stand, and then gently but firmly stand there. As I made clear during the time prior to my election as your bishop, I am in favor of celebrating the life and ministry of gay and lesbian people in the Church and I am delighted the Church is making its way towards full sacramental marriage equality.

Right now we are in an in-between time, as Church and state both seek to clarify how same-sex couples will be supported, and how and whether same-sex marriage will be sanctioned. Our General Convention authorized one very particular sacramental possibility for same-sex couples desiring to have their relationship affirmed and supported by the Church, that is, *the blessing of a same-sex union*.

As it is currently illegal for same-sex couples to marry in this state, it is essential to emphasize up front that priests in this diocese are, at this time, not permitted to preside at the **marriage** of same-sex couples. This includes presiding at a gay marriage as an act of protest or conscience.

Theological Grounding

At the most basic level, the Church does not marry people. Though priests have become agents of the state in the U.S. with the authority to marry, that authority does not derive from the sacramental theology of the Church. The Church rather *blesses marriages*. We do this because a healthy marriage (a covenanted relationship of monogamy, fidelity and sacrificial love) is a witness to the Church of the power and presence of Christ himself. We can really do nothing *but* bless such a union.

If a same-sex couple should approach looking to have their partnership affirmed by the Church, the point of engagement for the parish priest lies here. Is this partnership an

incarnate witness of the powerful, sacrificial and grace-filled love of Jesus? If so, it is appropriate for the Church to offer support and celebration.

Your Church Community

Certainly there is not unanimity among the members of the body of Christ about the appropriateness of blessing same-sex relationships. While many experience the loving and generative witness of Christian gay and lesbian couples as persuasive evidence that God can be present in such partnerships, Holy Scripture and ancient Church tradition both suggest that gay partnerships are not normative. The tension caused by these opposing views exists in most local churches (and in many individual Christian people.) It would be a rare parish indeed in which every member shared perfectly and equally in their understanding and belief regarding this issue.

All are to be welcomed as Christ in the local parish. It is appropriate however – even essential – for priests to consider the sensibilities of their local parish (including their own personal beliefs) as they decide how to support gay and lesbian couples in the church. Community input and education is appropriate. No priest in the Diocese of Nebraska shall be required to act in a manner that opposes their own sincerely held theological or moral position on this issue. There are suggestions below for other ways you might be able to offer support for same-sex couples in your parish if you cannot offer this liturgy of blessing.

If the current climate or composition of a parish church make it likely that discord would flow from a parish liturgical celebration of a same-sex partnership, I would expect a priest to refrain from presiding at such a celebration in the parish. I regret this guideline needs to be published. We would certainly not poll the members of a congregation and ask their permission to celebrate a marriage between a man and a woman, no matter how flawed that relationship. But we are all still learning and adapting. It is incumbent upon our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the Church to be patient yet, for a season.

Norms for couples

Though the Church cannot offer a marriage ceremony to gay and lesbian couples at this time, the liturgy approved for trial use is not intended as something “less than” marriage. It is rather for same sex couples who intend to live into a covenant virtually indistinguishable from that entered into by straight, married couples. Though not required, it would be most appropriate for the Church to bless the partnerships of couples who have been legally married in another state. In this way, parity would be preserved between straight and gay partnerships in the Church (we’re not blessing something substantively different for gay and lesbian couples.)

- The same sacramental pattern is expected of both same-sex and opposite sex couples. The Church calls couples to live in a covenanted relationship of monogamy, fidelity and sacrificial love with God at the center.

- The same canonical tests and requirements that apply to straight couples need to be applied in the case of same-sex couples. (One baptized Christian, required preparation sessions, special requirements for those previously married, etc.)

- The same non-canonical requirements that apply to straight couples should be applied in the case of same-sex couples. (Regular communicants, pledging to support church ministries, etc.)

What can we offer?

- Connection and affirmation. Parish churches support couples in many ways, from offering “couples retreats” to publishing photos of couples in parish directories (a subtle but meaningful witness of approval and support.) All such modes of connection and support should be offered to gay and lesbian couples.

- Counseling. Gay and lesbian couples should receive the same kind of pastoral counseling and care that clergy provide for engaged and married straight couples. Let me emphasize that pre-nuptial counseling is not principally for the purposes of “testing” or even “educating” a couple. It is about inviting couples to live deeply into a sacramental pattern of partnership that is Christ-like, and equipping couples who desire to live out such commitment over the long haul.

- Liturgical support and celebration. If a couple makes the love of Christ incarnate for their parish church family and the wider world, it is appropriate to bless such a partnership in the name of Jesus and to offer community prayers in celebration and support of that relationship.

Next Steps

If a same-sex couple presents themselves to a priest seeking to have their partnership blessed, the following steps are to be taken:

1) Contact the bishop to discuss this matter.

2) In consultation with the bishop, complete any community work necessary to ascertain whether your parish is ready to meaningfully and joyfully support a same sex couple. This may include adult education events, vestry discussion, etc.

3) Engage with the couple in preparation for the celebration of a life-long commitment and in planning for a parish liturgical celebration.

4) Use ONLY the liturgical texts approved by General Convention for the blessing of a same-sex partnership. These can be found in the resource, “I Will Bless You and You Will be a Blessing,” which is available on-line from the ECUSA.

5) Be ready to engage in conversation and prayer as we dialogue with the larger Church about how this provisional rite works for the people of God in the coming triennium.

I look forward to partnering with the priests of this diocese to celebrate the lives and partnerships of our many gay and lesbian members. Please do not hesitate to be in contact with me if any portion of these guidelines require clarification, or if I can be of assistance in these matters in any way.

Faithfully Yours in Christ –

The Right Rev. J. Scott Barker
Bishop of Nebraska