



July 19, 2012

From Bishop Sisk

To My Brother and Sister Clergy of the Diocese of New York:

Things change.

In 2009 the General Convention urged "generous pastoral oversight" with respect to the question of offering Blessings for same-sex couples. It also created a Special Committee to study implications of the issue, and to develop, for consideration at the 2012 General Convention, a liturgy for the conduct of Blessing rites. New York State's happy decision to adopt the Marriage Equality act intensified this already crucially important conversation. In a very real sense, this State's action advanced the conversation dramatically by shifting the frame of reference itself.

Over the course of the past years I have tried to "thread the needle" between conflicting opportunities and demands: The General Convention's undefined offer of "generous pastoral oversight"; The Book of Common Prayer's largely unchallenged expectation that marriage was between a man and a woman; and the State of New York's requirement that a cleric officiating at a marriage do so in compliance with his or her denomination's teaching. It was in recognition of these shifting and conflicting demands that I gave permission for clergy to bless couples who had already had a civil marriage, but not to perform that marriage service themselves.

But things do change.

The 2012 General Convention adopted Resolution A049 titled "Authorize Liturgical Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships." In my view the debate over this Resolution was of crucial importance. At one point in the House of Bishops' consideration the question was asked: couldn't the resolve that read,

That bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church

be interpreted to mean that clergy in jurisdictions that allow civil marriage of same-gender couples, were permitted to officiate at those services? The answer from the Special Committee spokesman was, yes, that is what they had had in mind. The debate then continued. No amendment was offered. The unamended Resolution A049 passed by a nearly 2/3 majority. I conclude therefore, that it was the mind of this General Convention to extend the meaning of "generous pastoral oversight" to include circumstances such as those in which we in New York find ourselves.

This seems to me to be a typically oblique way for the Episcopal Church to approach a

complex but important matter: indirectly. Let the life of the community play it out. This is a messy way to change, but there is a certain attractive organic quality to it.

Where then does that leave us? We are left with a situation in which the mind of this recent Convention appears to be to allow such services. However, The Constitution and The Book of Common Prayer still say something else, and the State of New York sits on the sidelines.

But also, and of critical importance, is the reality of life as we know it. We are also left with men and women, faithful followers of our Lord, our brothers and sisters in Christ, who want to have their love and commitment to each other sanctified by the Lord and the Church they love.

Those of us who are ordained have, each and all, taken a vow to abide by the Doctrine, Discipline and Worship of the Episcopal Church. But we have also taken a vow to care for the people committed to our care. We are, therefore, in a quandary; we find ourselves in one of life's very real dilemmas. Frankly there is simply no easy way out.

I believe that the best that we can do, with humility and trust that we have correctly read the movement of the Spirit of God working in our midst, is to embrace the promise of full marriage equality between same and opposite sex couples, while recognizing, candidly, that the Constitution of our Church has yet to formally reach that conclusion.

It is my interpretation that the actions of this 2012 General Convention permit, perhaps even encourage, those of us who live in jurisdictions such as New York, to act on that conviction. Therefore, in my view, if a cleric of this diocese feels moved by conviction and pastoral need to respond in the affirmative to a request to perform a same-sex marriage, he or she is free to do so, on or after September 1, 2012.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but I send you this letter after consultation with Bishop Dietsche, whose own reflections follow below, and with Bishop Smith. They and I are of one mind in our conviction that marriage equality is right and just, and happily they join me in offering this new policy for the life of the Diocese of New York.

+Mark
The Rt. Rev. Mark S. Sisk
XV Bishop of New York

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From Bishop Dietsche

My brothers and sisters,

I am delighted to give my support to the decision which Bishop Sisk has made to change the practice of our diocese regarding the marriage of gay and lesbian couples. Clergy may now sign marriage licenses and officiate at the full civil and sacramental marriages of same sex couples. It is so gratifying that the long-awaited day has come when same sex and opposite sex couples may share in the grace and blessing of full marriage equality!

But please be assured that no clergyperson or parish which in conscience does not believe they can offer marriage to same sex couples will be required to do so, nor will they be penalized, and the integrity with which priests set policy in their own churches will be

respected. I dearly hope that in a time of great change in our church and in the world, and where disagreements remain among faithful Christians, we may commit ourselves to live with one another in charity, in mutual trust, and with the bonds of our affection intact.

Please remember that you must meet all of the canonical requirements of marriage, including appropriate pre-marital counseling in all cases, and the seeking of godly judgment when there have been earlier marriages. We are not yet ready to provide a recommended liturgy for same sex marriage, but we will. In the meantime we commend to you the blessing liturgy just approved by General Convention, which may be easily adapted to serve the purposes of marriage.

I am deeply moved and more than happy that we now extend the grace of marriage to all people in the Diocese of New York, and to those of you who choose to avail yourselves of this opportunity I offer my heartiest congratulations, my most sincere best wishes, and the certainty of my continued prayers. I have always known that marriage equality would be a mark of my own episcopate, and so I assure you that this new policy is close to my heart and that these changes to our common life are permanent in the Diocese of New York. So many clergy and people in this diocese have been exemplars of patience and trust, and of the love of our church, even when that church would not include them as equals. Perhaps it is just such fidelity and courage that we honor when we pray at marriage, as we do, that the couple's life, and those of all married persons, may truly be a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world.

+Andrew
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Bishop Coadjutor of New York