

The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh



November 25, 2013

Dear Friends in Christ,

As you know, the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Indianapolis in 2012, authorized at the discretion of the bishop, a provisional rite for blessing a lifelong covenant between persons of the same sex. Prior to that, I had announced my intention to conduct a series of conversations in the diocese to give me a sense of the faithful and to lay the groundwork for our continuing unity. These conversations have occurred, and I include a report as part of this letter. Beyond that process, I have listened to many other voices, reflected deeply on Scripture, consulted broadly, and prayed throughout, asking that God would guide me toward a decision consistent with His will. The purpose of this letter is to convey not only that decision, but also my hope in our future together and the scope of some of the pastoral considerations I believe we will need to keep in mind going forward.

As I have listened to you, I have heard many passionate, and sometimes contradictory, hopes and fears. Some have insisted they will not tolerate any permitted use of a blessing liturgy in this diocese, while others have insisted they will accept nothing less than sacramental marriage for same-sex couples. Between these poles I have heard a host of nuanced positions, usually accompanied by the sincere desire for the unity of the Church and a deep hope that, whatever my decision, we would find a way to hold onto one another in Christ, setting an example for the world by our love.

This unity in diversity has been in the forefront of expressed values since the earliest days of the rebuilding that took place in this diocese after 2008. Our "Mission, Vision & Values" covenant from that time speaks of our commitment to each other, despite differences and disagreement, being united in greater measure by our faith expressed in the Creeds; by the authority of Scripture, tradition and reason in our common life; and by a commitment both to the order of the Episcopal Church and the fellowship of the Anglican Communion. While that covenant does not explicitly name the issues concerning human sexuality, it has been understood that these matters are part of the diversity in the diocese, expressed in the character of local communities of faith, some congregations in the aggregate being more conservative on issues of sexuality, others more progressive, and a few quite mixed.

Since this local character exists in variety of conviction, I find it reasonable that this variety should be allowed to express itself in local practice, by allowing the decision of whether or not to use this rite to be made by each pastor, in his or her own parish. This "local option" will allow each rector or priest-in-charge to minister pastorally according to his or her commitments and conscience, while putting none under constraint or duress.

Having said this, I must also be clear, both as your bishop and from my own place in this spectrum of belief, that I have serious reservations concerning the theology and intention of the rite, for reasons I have specified in an assessment that appears below. I know that at least a few of the clergy inclined to use this rite share some of my concerns about it; I also know they see it as a way of offering public recognition and pastoral support to same-sex couples in whom qualities of mutual devotion and fidelity, care and nurture, and faithful participation in the life of the Church are clearly visible. It is out of respect for their local pastoral authority, as well as out of my own pastoral regard for the free conscience of all who are under their care, that I will allow the use of this rite according to the guidelines that also appear below.

As for the somewhat related matter of ordained ministry, I believe the principal determining factor in regard to my role as ordinary rests in my discernment, in concert with the Church, as to whether God is calling any given individual to Holy Orders. Therefore, I will not alter the non-discrimination policy begun under Bishop Price; an individual's being in a committed same-sex partnership will not, in and of itself, be a barrier either to ordination or call in this diocese.

I have previously acknowledged that these policy decisions, along with the accompanying materials, will not satisfy everyone. However, I believe we are called into one Body, as Christ's members, and in and through that Body are called to bear with one another, not out of obligation, but out of joy in the gift God has given us through one another, perhaps especially in the gift of those who differ with us and yet whom we embrace as sisters and brothers in Christ. In an increasingly polarized and contentious world, let us pray that our forbearance with one another in love will show forth the character of Jesus the Reconciler, whose heart of peace yearns over all our wars.

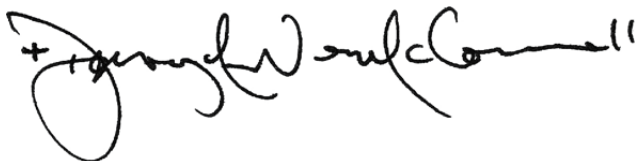
Finally, I know that even to open this topic exposes the most tender areas of human identity and affections, the deepest questions of our aspirations and purpose in life, our acceptability before God and others, our call to holiness, and our need for grace. Mindful that we all must one day render an account before the judgment seat of Christ, especially for those who were kept from the mercy of God by anything we have done or said, I ask your particular prayers and consideration, in the coming days, for the following:

- Those gay, lesbian, or transgendered people who have not found a welcome in the Church; as well as those who rejoice that their committed relationships may now be celebrated.
- Those of homosexual or heterosexual orientation who are committed to lives of holy celibacy, as a matter of obedience to God and faithfulness to Scripture.
- All who are married; especially those struggling, seeking the grace of God and the support of a Christian community to heal their relationship and reconcile them to their spouse.
- Those whose marriages have ended badly and who bear old burdens of grief or guilt.
- The divorced and remarried who may still encounter a spirit of condemnation in the Church.

I have often said that I believe I was called to be the bishop of the whole diocese, not merely a part of it. That remains my commitment. I am available to talk and pray with you around any concerns you may have regarding any part of this letter. I only ask again that, as we move forward, you hold in your own heart and prayers those whose views may be utterly different from your own, but who share with you the same hope in Christ.

May the coming holy season of Advent serve as a time to renew our souls, quicken our repentance, and refresh our joy as together we await the celebration of the Savior's birth.

Faithfully your bishop,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dorsey W.M. McConnell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

(The Right Reverend) Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.
The Bishop of Pittsburgh

Guidelines for the Use of the Rite

The rite is permitted for local use as of The Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 2014, by the rector or priest-in-charge of a parish, or by an assisting priest acting under the authority of that rector or priest-in-charge, within that parish.

No priest may be compelled to use this rite in violation of his or her own conscience.

The rite may be used outside the diocese by clergy canonically resident in the Diocese of Pittsburgh only by joint permission of the Bishop of Pittsburgh and of the bishop in the hosting diocese.

The rite must be used according to its rubrics and may only be adapted within their provisions. No other liturgy may be used for the blessing of same-sex covenants.

It shall be the responsibility of any pastor contemplating the use of this rite to assess the likely pastoral and liturgical implications, and to address them with the couple, the parish leadership, and the bishop well in advance of the prospective date of its use.

The Provisional Rite: An Assessment

The new rite for blessing a lifelong covenant between people of the same sex is entitled “I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing.” If I am correct in interpreting both the extensive prefatory material included in Resolution A049, as introduced and approved at the 2012 General Convention, as well as many public statements on the part of members of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, the intent of the Commission is eventually to establish this rite as matrimonial. Consistent with this intention, the rite appears to follow the pattern of the celebration of matrimony as set forth in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer: an opening announcement, readings, an exchange of vows and rings, prayers and a final blessing over the couple.

Beyond this general form, however, the similarities disappear. The rite does not give a coherent statement of the nature and purpose of the covenant being celebrated. It does not base its authority in Scriptural warrant. There is no reference to bodily union. Its understanding of the role of procreativity, while helpful in one regard, is ultimately compromised. And the “theology of blessing” that pervades the liturgy is inadequate to establish the sacramental character of the rite. I will briefly expand on these points in order, through a comparison of the 1979 rite of matrimony and the provisional rite of blessing.

The rite of matrimony is clear in establishing the purpose of the covenant: lifelong union of man and woman “in heart, body and mind” for mutual joy, help, comfort, and procreation of children. The authority of the rite is located in four specific Biblical warrants (Genesis, John, Ephesians and Hebrews) incorporated into the text of the opening instruction, and by several readings that refer specifically to marriage. The bodily nature of the union is referred to at least twice (in the opening instruction and in the prayer for the couple “made one flesh in holy matrimony”), as is

the procreation of children and the role of the parents as primary teachers of the Gospel. Finally, the governing theology of the rite from beginning to end is rooted in the classical narrative of redemption – a good creation, fallen through sin, dead under the Law, redeemed by the Cross of Jesus Christ, and given new life through His Resurrection. The couple signifies the totality of humanity, representing the image of God – once shattered in Eden – now restored in Christ. The sacramental character of marriage, as with all sacramental rites, is shown to be transformative: the couple is changed, embodying the hope that we all may be changed, transformed by grace into a new creation.

The provisional rite is unclear from the outset as to its nature and purpose. The opening instruction mentions certain qualities the parties are supposed to demonstrate – such as strength and bravery – but the “love” that is referred to as the basis for the covenant is not further defined. Is it sexual love? Familial love? Friendship? A diverse set of Scriptures, beginning with the responsory reading from 1 John, are brought in to develop the general theme of “love,” but none sheds any light on the question of the covenant’s nature or purpose, and none rises to the level of a Biblical warrant. Sexual congress is assumed, judging from the extensive prefatory material which includes guidelines for counseling the couple, but never actually mentioned. Procreativity is referenced in the inclusion of existing children in the liturgy – to my mind the rite’s greatest strength – but the couple’s role in raising them is unclear. (For example, the children are to go “from strength to strength” but no mention is made of them being raised to know God, nor are the responsibilities of the adults toward them further defined.)

Further, the “theology of blessing” throughout the provisional rite seems to be a deliberate departure from the classical narrative of redemption. In the provisional rite, the creation remains wholly good, we are made to be a “blessing,” and the couple become (again, in a way unspecified) an affirmation and reminder of that good creation. Some language from the narrative of redemption is sporadically used (e.g. “grace,” “new creation,” and even in one instance, the “saving work of Jesus”). However, since in this “theology of blessing” all is apparently well and good, it is uncertain what that redemptive language means in this new context, what we might need to be saved from or saved to. No transformation is necessary. Since the very nature of sacrament entails transformation by means of grace, I am not sure what place sacraments could have in such a world.

I note that Resolution A049 specifically charges the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to review its work in the light of classical systematic theology. This is hopeful. However, if the intent of the rite is to establish a persuasive theological and liturgical case for the sacramental blessing of same sex unions, that case is at best unproved. If it is further to establish a rite that may be used, at some point in the future, for matrimony of heterosexual couples, the replacement of a theology of redemption with a theology of blessing represents a clear departure from our historic understanding of the Gospel.

I will be conveying my thoughts to the Commission during this period in which it is seeking comment and feedback on the rite, and encourage others in the diocese to do the same.

+D.McC.

Summary Report: Conversations on Human Sexuality and Communion

In January 2013, the Diocese of Pittsburgh began a process of dialogue among its members. This process had two primary goals. The first was to learn a non-confrontational manner of discussing issues where there was disagreement. The second was to bring diverse people together to discuss issues concerning the blessing of same-sex covenants and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy, and the larger topic of our life together.

Two groups were formed to assist in the process: a Steering Committee, which worked in the early stages to help design the overall plan; and a prayer team, which provided on-going spiritual support. The format was structured by the Public Conversations Project, a consulting group that specializes in addressing topics where there is a deep divide among people. The dialogue design was tested by the Steering Committee, adjusted, used with two pilot groups in March and April, and then, following training of a corps of facilitators, rolled out to the diocese in June.

During the period from June 27 through September 28, dialogues were held at St. Peter's, Brentwood; St. Paul's, Mt. Lebanon; St. Thomas, Oakmont; St. Mark's, Johnstown; and St. Michael's, Ligonier. An invitation to participate was sent out in *Grace Happens*. While 143 people signed up in response to this, about one-third of those were unable to participate, generally due to schedule constraints. The ability to devote a full day was difficult for many.

Thirty-two people participated in the January through April phase of the project. An additional 92 participated in the nine sessions held from June through September.

Following an opening prayer provided by our prayer team, each session began with an explanation of the differences between debate and dialogue, with emphasis that the sessions were not for arguing or swaying the minds of others, but rather, hearing diverse views in a safe and confidential manner. Participants then split into two groups, each containing those of similar views. This allowed participants to practice the dialogue format of *listen, think, speak* before engaging with others who had different views. The two groups were mixed for the afternoon session, which concluded with the question, "What could happen in the diocese over the next year that might enable moving forward *together* as the body of Christ?" Responses were written on a flip chart, typed, and forwarded directly to Bishop McConnell for his review as part of his personal discernment on the issues.

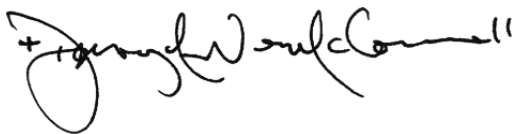
What did the participants convey to the bishop? Six key themes emerged:

1. The diocese needs to avoid making issues of human sexuality THE defining issue of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh. All need to focus on our common ground rather than on polarizing issues. Diocesan goals and activities towards those goals need to be clear.
2. Education is needed across the diocese on Episcopal polity at the congregational, diocesan, and national levels. Education is also needed on the various interpretations of scriptural references to homosexuality and on current knowledge of human sexuality and sexual identity.

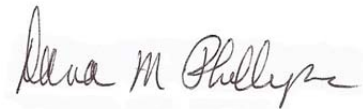
3. No one should be marginalized due to their position on issues regarding human sexuality. As a diocese, we have more than a decade of experience with marginalizing those who disagree. This is not a Christian response. Everyone needs to be heard and to feel that they have been heard.
4. We need more time together. Many commented on how fragmented we have become and how many parishes have isolated themselves from the diocese during the last decade. If we are to become a strong diocese with a common focus, we need to devote the time to being together. The more time we spend together, the more common ground and Christian love for each other we feel. We need to do this through district and diocesan meetings. We might develop sister parishes with whom we share worship, music, mission and outreach, and regular fellowship.
5. What could happen? Participants envisioned homosexuals being welcomed and heterosexuals not feeling threatened, because in thought, word and deed, all seek to make others comfortable and part of our worship community; that we realize the majesty of the faith we share makes our differences less consequential; and, that parishes would have latitude to operate within the historic Episcopal traditions of diversity and welcome, accepting the wisdom of the past while respecting the wisdom of the present. It was also noted that some people may leave no matter what the decision.
6. The conversations need to continue. There was almost unanimous sentiment that this type of dialogue is good and needs to continue. Suggestions were made that it happen at the district and congregational levels through the next year, both to help us discuss these issues as the diocese moves ahead and to allow a forum for other difficult topics to be discussed in a healthy way.

We, the undersigned co-chairs, are grateful for the members of the Steering Committee who were so instrumental in helping us initially plan and refine our process: the Rev. Nancy Chalfant-Walker, Greg Davis, Alan Lewis, Mary Roehrich, and the Rev. Philip Wainwright. We appreciate the support of the prayer team, led by Carol Gonzalez and the Rev. Kathy LaLonde. We also thank our facilitators from PCP, Bob Stains and Mary Jacksteit. And above all, we are indebted to the participants of these dialogue sessions for coming to them with open minds and caring hearts, and to all who supported the process in spirit and in prayer.

In Christ,



(The Right Reverend) Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.
The Bishop of Pittsburgh



Dana M. Phillips
Co-chair

November 25, 2013

Additional Resources

A guide for those who wish to do further study of the provisional rite or to access materials referenced in this Pastoral Letter and accompanying documents:

Resolution A049 to Authorize Liturgical Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships:
www.generalconvention.org/gc/resolutions

“I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing” (purchase or free download of the rite with one page theological summary):
www.churchpublishing.org/products/index.cfm?fuseaction=productDetail&productID=9743

Full SCLM theological statement (prefatory material) as prepared for the 77th General Convention: https://www.ctepiscopal.org/images/customer-files/I_Will_Bless_You_Corrected.pdf

The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music:
<http://www.generalconvention.org/ccab/roster/399>

To contact SCLM: sclm@episcopalchurch.org

SCLM Online Survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SCLMSame-SexResourceFeedback>

Mission, Vision & Values Statement of the Diocese of Pittsburgh:
www.episcopalpgh.org/resources/mission-vision-values/