

# The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut

May 10, 2012

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Ordained Ministry:

We, the bishops of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut, want to take the opportunity in this "Episcopal Epistle" to reflect with you on Christian marriage and, more specifically, how we are to understand pastoral and liturgical practices related to marriage here in our diocese at this particular point in time. The invitation for this reflection grows out of Resolution #6 - "Permitting the clergy of the Diocese of Connecticut to voluntarily officiate marriage of same sex couples" from our 227<sup>th</sup> Diocesan Convention in October 2011. We are thankful for this resolution and the opportunity to discuss our current understandings of pastoral responses related to Christian marriage.

The first resolve of Resolution #6 "urges the Bishop of Connecticut (and we understand the episcopate to include the diocesan and bishops suffragan) to acknowledge that there are people living in same-gender relationships of mutuality and fidelity who want to be married by their clergy. . ." We bishops know personally that there are good and faithful lesbian and gay sisters and brothers in Christ in the Diocese of Connecticut who seek to be married by their clergy within the context of their worshipping Christian community; and we give thanks for their faithful Christian witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second resolve of Resolution #6 asks "that the Bishop of this Diocese permit the clergy of the Diocese to determine the appropriate generous pastoral response to meet the needs of the members of his or her own local eucharistic community, including officiating at weddings of same-sex couples, and acting as legal agents of the State in signing marriage licenses." We very much appreciate the intent of this resolution. The Episcopal Church, however, has not yet embraced marriage equality for all people. In this The Episcopal Church lags behind the statutes of the State of Connecticut. More specifically, the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage service in the Prayer Book articulates that marriage is between a man and a woman, and that the union is between a husband and a wife. Similarly Canons 18 and 19 of The Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church: 2009 describe marriage as between a husband and a wife. All clergy, including bishops, have vowed "to conform to the doctrine discipline and worship of The Episcopal Church" as put forward in The Book of Common Prayer and The Constitution and Canons. We, as bishops, do not have the independent authority to change the Church's definition of marriage as currently articulated in these documents.

We do believe that the current definition of marriage in our Church is oppressive to gay and lesbian couples who seek the same recognition and blessing of their relationships that heterosexual couples receive. This causes us great sadness, and we further believe that the Church's position limits our witness to God's mission of restoration and reconciliation for all people in Christ Jesus. Only the General Convention, however, can resolve this situation of inequality. It is thus beyond our power to give clergy permission at this time to officiate (in a legal sense) at weddings of same-sex couples and act as legal agents of the State by signing marriage licenses for gay and lesbian couples. It is heartbreaking for us to have to say this, yet our understanding of our responsibilities as bishops lead us to this conclusion.

The 2009 General Convention of The Episcopal Church has passed Resolution C056

that says: "bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-gender marriage, civil unions or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church." At the present time, "generous pastoral response" in The Diocese of Connecticut is understood as allowing for the blessing of same-sex unions as best interpreted by the clergy and pastoral circumstances of a local eucharistic community. Priests, responsible for the liturgical life of their congregations, are urged to work with their lay leaders to establish parish norms and guidelines for the most robust and generous pastoral response possible for lesbian and gay Christian sisters and brothers seeking the Church's blessing of their relationships characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, and holy love. These guidelines might include the services of a Justice of the Peace or other qualified person who can legally officiate at a marriage of gay and lesbian couples in the State of Connecticut.

Resolution C056 also asked the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music of The Episcopal Church to develop theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same-gender unions and report to the 77th General Convention. We have seen drafts of the Standing Commission's report both at our House of Bishops Meeting and at the recent Province One gathering in preparation for this July's General Convention. We expect the 2012 General Convention to consider trial rites for the "Blessing of Same Sex Couples" as well as address the legal implications of blessings of same-gender relationships in states where marriage equality exists. We look forward to revisiting our diocese's liturgical, pastoral and legal position on same-gender blessings and marriage in light of the decisions of General Convention this summer.

Finally, we would like to begin a discussion, in general, about the legal and ethical ramifications related to clergy of this diocese signing a License and Certificate of Marriage for the State of Connecticut. There are some in The Episcopal Church today who believe that the Church should no longer act as an agent of the state in any legal matters. They maintain that it is inconsistent for The Episcopal Church to claim "separation of Church and State" when it comes to matters of the payment of property taxes and at the same time act as an agent of the state in the signing of a License and Certificate of Marriage. Also, for the sake of justice, some clergy choose not to sign marriage licenses for heterosexual couples in order to stand in solidarity with our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers who are currently excluded from marriage in The Episcopal Church. Perhaps it is time for clergy of The Diocese of Connecticut to consider not signing a License and Certificate of Marriage for heterosexual couples married in the Church. This could easily be accomplished by inviting a Justice of the Peace to participate in the service and then sign the License and Certificate of Marriage. We look forward to discussing these ideas with you at the upcoming Clergy Conference, in clericus meetings, and in other venues.

We, the bishops of Connecticut, appreciate that we are living in in-between times with respect to the Church's position on marriage equality. We hope and pray that the guidance provided in this "Episcopal Epistle" will give some clarity to clergy providing care to all seeking the blessing of the Pastoral Offices of The Episcopal Church.

Faithfully,  
Ian, Jim and Laura

The Rt. Rev. Ian T. Douglas  
The Rt. Rev. James E. Curry  
The Rt. Rev. Laura J. Ahrens  
The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut

---