

June 22, 2010  
St. Alban, Martyr

Dear Friends in Christ,

As you are aware, the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church passed resolution C056 which resolved “that all bishops, noting 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.” I believe that this resolution changes the posture of our Church toward gay and lesbian persons who desire the Church bless their relationships. In its totality, the resolution creates openness to move forward pastorally, honors those who disagree with same-sex blessings, and does not prescribe particular liturgies.

I know that some of you are eager to be able to answer the pastoral needs of your gay and lesbian members. In moving forward, I want you to bear in mind that the General Convention gave responsibility to bishops in this matter. At this point in time, I do not believe that it is appropriate to make some sort of general policy regarding same-gender blessings. Yet, I want to share with you how you may proceed pastorally to celebrate the unions of your gay and lesbian members.

First, in **all** cases, clergy who wish to bless such unions must seek my permission and I will endeavor to respond pastorally.

Before any such request is made, it is my expectation that you will engage in some preliminary work with your congregation. At a minimum, you should conduct a thorough and balanced study of human sexuality in your congregation. I particularly commend the Holiness in Relationships Report which I sent to you earlier in the year as the basis for your study. Also, you must discuss proceeding with same-gender blessings with your vestry. I will expect you to have received the support of your vestry before requesting permission from me to conduct such blessings. It is my sense that these two steps will prepare the ground for congregational events which might otherwise be divisive.

With this accomplished, you may proceed to ask me to give permission to pronounce blessing over a civil marriage of a same-gender couple or to bless a domestic union. As I have already said, at this time, I am not going to promulgate a rite for such moments. So, I ask you to write me a detailed letter, including the proposed service. If there are earlier marriages, then I will need to see divorce decrees. If there are other noteworthy relationships, I would like you to explore them as you would for a couple contemplating remarriage. Finally, I ask that you have the couple send me letters from each explaining to me what this service means and how it will change their lives.

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I know this is a lot to ask of you. I join you in the work of this pastoral care. However, I am convinced that this is necessary and will be an important contribution to the Church's work of discernment on this issue.

Finally, if you are not comfortable with these provisions or oppose same-gender blessings, your position will be honored by me and the wider diocesan community. The Church is not of one mind on this issue and generosity across differences should be our character. In that spirit, if you and your congregation decide not to take advantage of these provisions, I would encourage you to refer same-gender couples to colleagues who can. Please give me your thoughts and feedback. I am committed to full inclusion, including a valued place for those who disagree with these decisions.

I look forward to working with you to provide God's guidance, blessing, and hope to the people of God.

Faithfully,

The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes  
Bishop

JRM:bh