

A Pastoral Letter to be read in all congregations of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast  
at all Services on the 15th of July 2012,  
being the Sunday following the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church  
having met in Indianapolis, Indiana the 5th - 12th July 2012

*The Rt. Rev. Philip M. Duncan, II*  
Bishop of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast

The 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church has approved for provisional use, a rite for the blessing of same-sex unions. Some of us in the Central Gulf Coast will find this action unsettling. Some of us will find it an occasion of great joy and a time for celebration. I write this pastoral letter to the entire Diocese, but especially to those troubled by what the Convention has authorized.

I voted not to approve the blessing of same-sex unions. That is because I voted my conscience and my understanding of blessing; and while many concur with the Convention's action and many deplore the Convention's action, I believe we are in a time in our history that calls us to be gracious and generous in hospitality and welcome for all people. The Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast has always been a traditional Episcopal diocese and I do not see that changing. It has always been a place where all people have been welcomed into our midst and blessed by our community and sacramental life together.

Part of our Episcopal tradition is to affirm the faith as understood by those who have laid a firm foundation in the past, while also affording space to those who take a different view for the future. In the past, we have maintained our communion even when differences ran deep.

And occasionally, when new circumstances required it, we have reinterpreted traditional understandings and adopted new policies. Perhaps the best example was in 1972 when, overturning centuries of tradition, the church began permitting the remarriage of divorced persons. This policy reversal was effected for good pastoral reasons.

We cannot now know how history will judge the actions of the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, but if a need arises in any of our parishes where the Rector, Vicar or Priest-in-charge discerns that the blessing of a same-sex-union would be a good pastoral response, I will consult with that priest and, if I concur, authorize the blessing. The norm in the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast will be that marriage is between one man and one woman. In light of the possibility for blessing covenanted relationships of same-sex couples, I will consider each request for blessing individually, and I shall permit it where it has pastoral warrant.

Episcopalian and former Secretary of State James A. Baker has asked his Episcopal Diocese of Texas to adopt an "all-are-welcome approach that allows our parishes to make important decisions on this issue." This is what I envision for the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast as well. As St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "I give thanks to my God always for you."

As your bishop, I thank God for you, for your faithfulness, your prayers, and your willingness to travel with one another and with me as together we seek the mind of Christ.

**Response to the Pastoral Letter from the Bishop GC 77**  
**By The Rev. Jim Flowers, Rector**

We received this letter Friday, so I haven't had the time to parse it out. This is the first "Pastoral Letter" written by our bishop since I've been ordained....and the canons of the church require that pastoral letters from bishops be read to each parish in each service. We have been informed by the diocesan office that every member of the diocese will receive a copy of the letter this coming week.

Again I haven't had a lot of time to reflect on this letter, but I will offer a few observations and try to put what the General Convention of our church has done in some sort of perspective....First of all as to the Bishop's letter: He has obviously attempted to strike some middle ground here....On the one hand he informs us that he voted against the resolution that the church provide rites for same sex blessings...out of "conscience, and because of his understanding of blessing"....I won't presume to know what that means. But as I read the letter, the bottom line is that although opposing the Churches' resolution on providing resources for same sex blessings....he will however as a matter of "pastoral" response allow such blessings to occur in this diocese....he affirms on the one hand that this is a "traditional" diocese....and then acknowledges the diverse and progressive views also present in this diocese....and states that such a diversity is cause for celebration. That's about all I can say for the letter until I've had further conversations with the bishop...I think I must say that it seems a little duplicitous to vote one way and act in another way...but that is just my take....and again I do think the bishop is trying to honor all points of view in our diocese....hence I think the bishop is well meaning, the ambiguity of the letter notwithstanding.

Let me give you just a brief history concerning the church's struggle over the issue of human sexuality.... this has been an ongoing conversation...an ongoing debate in General Convention for well over forty years, catalyzed by the American Psychiatric Association's position taken in 1976 that homosexuality was not a pathology nor a disorder, but a normal aspect of the human population (a case in point that the church must continually wrestle with new knowledge as it relates to scripture, tradition and reason) ....so this resolution on approving rites of same sex blessing didn't just happen on a whim or in the dark of night...but after years and years of discernment and struggle, just as our culture, our institutions, our families have struggled with this issue more openly for decades....To my mind the issue, at least in the Episcopal Church, was resolved at the election and consecration of Gene Robinson, an openly gay bishop living in a committed relationship.... that was nine years ago....This recent action; the providing of liturgical resources to bless such commitments is a mere culmination of a long process...a long process I believe that has made us a much more mature church.

I want to say that this is not so much about sexuality, that wonderful and great mystery that is a gift from God, which will never be fully understood, neither by the church nor the arts nor the sciences.... but this is mostly about dignity.... honoring the dignity of every human being, which means this is a gospel issue... we, brother and sister church-people... we are in the business of blessing.... we are not in the business of condemnation nor judgment... but we are in the business of blessing; of dignifying... and it makes good sense to me that it is a high honor that the church is able to offer the church's blessing upon the love and commitment and loyalty people have for each other.... we have been given by the grace of God a privilege, lo after these years of struggle.... The resolution does not compel bishops or priests to perform such blessings. It is a discretionary option, with bishops in their respective dioceses having the final say...The church has simply given us a way to do so if we choose.... I have supported such legislation since I first became a deputy to general convention in 1991; my struggle with this issue is a long story

that I won't go into here...thirty years ago the votes on these matters usually were around fifty-fifty... the church was clearly divided and contentious.... Now after years of discernment, very nearly 80% of both houses...t he house of bishops and the house of deputies voted for the capability to use these rites... we have come a long way over a rocky path; we've lost members in the process...and...we have gained members.

I know there are loyal and good Episcopalians who still struggle... still have doubts about the wisdom of the position the church has taken...that is O.K. because we need all voices in a conversation that still continues... In fact this resolution refers to these rites as provisional, still in process.... Let me finally offer this possibility.... Could it be possible that the church is becoming more human... Is it possible that we are maturing towards our true humanity, a humanity within which there are no outcasts.... and if that is so...I f that is what is happening then we are inch by inch engendering God's kingdom in earth.... a kingdom in which all are equal... in which all have dignity... in which all are blessed children of God... If that is what is happening then we have something to celebrate indeed.... I hope that this is so... my gut says that it is.... the church has spoken definitively.... May God bless the struggle... may God bless us with courage and trust for this journey we are on.... may God bless the Episcopal Church and its willingness to do the work of faith... may God bless us all who are willing to struggle for the truth.... because when all is said and done, that is why we are here.

*This pastoral letter, and the response from the Rector, were read from the pulpit at All Saints on Sunday, July 15, 2012 at both the 8:00am and 10:30am services.*