

October 24, 2014

Dear Friends,

I expected that at some point during my time as rector we would face the question of marriage equality, but I certainly didn't expect to address it so soon! However, since same gender marriages have been made legal in North Carolina, I feel God is calling us to explore this question now, regardless of whether or not I received a request from parishioners to officiate at their same gender marriage at Good Shepherd.

Last week the bishop issued a statement saying that, in light of the court ruling regarding marriage equality, he would authorize but not require clergy in the diocese to officiate at the weddings of same gender couples. In his *Liturgical and Pastoral Policies and Guidelines* he clarifies that "no church or priest will be compelled to exercise this particular way of ministry and none will be prohibited from doing so." For a priest and parish to receive the bishop's authorization to "exercise this particular way of ministry," he requires that there first be a process of congregational discernment:

The sacramental ministry of blessing the marriage is a ministry of the community of faith, not just of a priest and a couple. It is intended to be a liturgical and sacramental way for our faith community to provide pastoral care and spiritual support for members of the Church in same-sex relationships.

This sacred ministry should be entered into only after wide and extended communal prayer for discernment; prayerful and thoughtful biblical, theological and pastoral study; holy conversation; and listening to the spiritual needs and voices of the community of faith and of the world. The bishops are always available for consultation as needed.

The ultimate decision – to offer blessings or not to offer blessings for marriages and unions – rests with the rector/vicar in consultation with the vestry. As a result, the vestry must experience a similar process of discernment before engaging the congregation. While the congregational process of discernment is conducted, vestry members must be obviously present and listening and engaging people.\*

I am sorry that I didn't emphasize in my statement last week that this process is not based solely on my discernment, and I do not have the authority to make this decision on my own. Whenever the possibility of a major change is faced in the Episcopal Church, it is important that the vestry and the congregation also engage in a process of discernment. Consistent with Episcopal polity, it is only after discernment by me, the vestry, and the congregation that the bishop will allow the vestry and me to make a decision about whether or not parishioners in same gender relationships may get married at Good Shepherd.†

This past Tuesday, October 21<sup>st</sup>, the vestry expressed its desire to make a decision at its meeting on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Vestry members are currently evaluating a proposal for a congregational discernment process, and they plan to finalize that process at a special meeting this Sunday, October 26<sup>th</sup>. The process will then be distributed to you via email, it will be posted on the website, and hard copies will be made available at the church (if you would like it mailed to you, please contact Tom Parker, our Parish Administrator). Along with the official process, as we engage in discernment please know that you are encouraged to contact me and/or any member of the vestry to share your questions, concerns, and comments.

I pray that as we move through this process God will open all of our ears so we can truly hear one another. To that end, I would ask for restraint in comments about leaving Good Shepherd. One of the gifts of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican tradition is that we've been united by common prayer through Jesus Christ as Lord rather than by shared doctrines. After the Church of England removed itself from papal authority in 1534, common prayer kept Puritans and supporters of the papacy together at the communion table. Likewise, when the church faced disagreements over slavery, integration, the ordination of women, and other contentious issues, people with vastly different views still came together as one church united in prayer. My hope is that no matter what decision is ultimately made at Good Shepherd, all will know that they are valued members of this community and will continue to kneel at the altar rail with those of differing views.

Please pray for me, for your vestry, for our same gender couples, and for all your other fellow parishioners at Good Shepherd. And during this time of discernment I also ask your continued support for our ministries of worship, formation, and outreach, that we may always be nourished by Christ's love and empowered to share that love in the world.

Yours in Christ,



Matt Johnson, *Rector*

**Prayer for the Church (from the *Book of Common Prayer*, page 816)**

Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. Amen.

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\* The complete policy, "Same Sex Marriage Guidelines" is available at <http://www.dionc.org/> under "Resources." If you would like a hard copy, please contact Tom Parker in the church office.

† If marriage equality is approved at Good Shepherd, the same requirements will apply to couples of the same or of opposite gender: the couple must participate in premarital counselling with the rector or other parish clergy, the service must be an official liturgy of the Episcopal Church, and one of the two people wishing to be married here must be a parishioner. (If neither is a parishioner but at least one is an active member at another Episcopal Church,

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and at least one has a connection with Good Shepherd, the couple can ask the rector and wardens for special permission to be married here.)