

## A Conversation about Marriage – footnotes version

### **About marriage in this country:**

1) In the US marriage has been traditionally understood as a lifelong, monogamous covenant between a man and a woman (undertaken by the couple on their own behalf). The definition has been true for both church and state, and the clergy of this country have presided on behalf of both church and state, as the couple exchanged vows, and then signed the license and offered God's blessing upon the couple.

2) Both church and state recognize all marriages as essentially equivalent. No matter the circumstances, or the country, marriages are acknowledged as equal – whether a couple was married in the Vatican or on the strip at Las Vegas, or on a cruise ship, they are not asked to be married again.

3) So while we acknowledge marriages to be equal, they can be very different, and we as a country accept these marriages as valid.

### **The place of gay and lesbian persons in the life of the church:**

For the last 30 years, our church has been involved in this conversation about this. As you know, there has been substantial disagreement about the propriety of partnered persons serving as bishops, priests and deacons in the church, and about marriage of same sex couples.

### **What we've agreed upon:**

- 1) The church has repeatedly affirmed the full civil rights of gay and lesbian persons and their full participation as baptized persons in the life of the church.
- 2) We have acknowledged that gay and lesbian persons have long served in Holy Orders and every lay leadership position in congregations.
- 3) We have acknowledged that the baptized membership of The Episcopal Church includes same sex couples living in lifelong committed relationships "characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God" (2000-D039).

### **Where we are now:**

The presence of gay and lesbian persons in Holy Orders and the consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire have led to significant strains within the Anglican Communion.

- 1) Some Provinces have felt called to sever relationships with The Episcopal Church.
- 2) Within our church, four seated diocesan bishops have left The Episcopal Church and many clergy and lay people have followed.
- 3) Over the past decade, The Episcopal Church has worked tirelessly to remain in communion with the rest of the Anglican Communion while keeping faith with our gay and lesbian members.

### **Outside the walls of the church:**

The conversation about the place of gay and lesbian persons has also gone on in American society.

- 1) Companies have changed their health insurance and benefit policies to include same sex partners.
- 2) Courts have struck down laws discriminating against same sex partners. Legislation has been adopted in some states redefining marriage as a commitment between “two adults.”

A) The changing landscape regarding marriage means that there are now differing definitions of marriage.

- 1) The majority of states still describe marriage as a commitment between a man and a woman.
- 2) A few states now recognize marriage between two adults. And there are other “equivalent” relationships (unions, partnerships, etc.) in other states.

B) Second, there are now questions as to whether or not all marriages are equivalent. Some states say they will only recognize marriages that fit their definition. Others recognize marriage as it is defined by any state.

### **Where we are in terms of marriage in the church:**

Some history about Marriage through the lens of the church –

Our understanding of marriage has evolved over time:

Examples:

Polygamy: marriage included one man with more than one woman

Leverite marriage: upon the death of the older brother, his bride is handed down to the next brother

Later understandings (still in the Hebrew Scriptures) wherein both of these practices are no longer considered legal.

There are places in Scripture in which divorce is recognized as a legal option for a man, which Jesus refutes directly.

All this to say that in a Scriptural throw-down, both sides of almost any conversation on marriage would have some ammunition. Because our understanding of the practice of marriage has changed over time.

So whether or not we're comfortable with this conversation, it's true to our heritage to be in it, to be evaluating and re-evaluating our understanding of this social contract in the context of our society.

### **Where we are now:**

That really depends on where we are.

Anglican Communion:

Several understandings of marriage:

- 1) There are African Anglicans who practice Polygamy

- 2) Anglicans in other cultures in which marriages are contracts between a man and the bride's father.
- 3) There are place in our Communion where divorce is not allowed.  
(our second marriages aren't recognized by the church)

In The Episcopal Church, USA:

The Church's understanding of marriage as defined by the Book of Common Prayer is clearly stated in the rubrics (written rules, instructions) for marriage:

“Christian marriage is a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God. In the Episcopal Church it is required that one, at least, of the parties must be a baptized Christian; that the ceremony be attested by at least two witnesses; and that the marriage conform to the laws of the State and the canons of this Church.” (BCP, 423)

**More recently:**

At General Convention 2009, the bishops of the six states where there is civil marriage for same sex couples asked the General Convention for pastoral generosity in dealing with such marriages.

The Convention approved generous discretion for the bishops in these six states, but admitted that we are all challenged by the differing definitions of marriage.

The General Convention declined to allow the definition of marriage in the Prayer Book to be amended by resolution, but through the normal process of prayer book revision. The Convention did not grant permission to adapt The Book of Common Prayer for same gender marriages, but asked the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to begin gathering rites for review and evaluation.

**What does this all mean for us?**

- 1) The theology of marriage has evolved in our tradition over time, and continues to be in conversation with our cultural understanding of what constitutes a healthy and life-giving relationship.
- 2) In the Anglican Communion we hold a breadth of understanding when it comes to marriage, and will continue to represent a vast range of Christian marriage.
- 3) In The Episcopal Church, USA, we also hold a wide variety of understandings about marriage (and a host of other issues), and will continue to do so, though there are six states in which these questions are being pushed to the front burner as the laws of the land have changed significantly.
- 4) In our diocese, our bishop has spoken out in favor of same gender marriage, and in opposition to the referendum on the ballot this November.
- 5) The majority of the clergy in this diocese support same sex marriage, though there are those who do not.

And our disagreement while remaining in communion and in conversation with one another is true to the core of Anglican Identity.

### **Our History:**

We are a church that arose out of the bitter fighting between radical Protestants and Roman Catholics in England. While some would tell you that we were formed when Henry defied the Pope, the truth is that was the moment that the church went from Roman to British.

The Anglican church was truly formed and shaped and created under Elizabeth, as she sought a way to stop the bloodshed and the radical swinging from radical Protestant to unyielding Catholic and back again. Each swing would put a huge group in position of giving up their Religion or losing their lives.

Elizabeth sought a middle way between the radical extremes of either group, allowing each side some of what it needed:

the Protestants got their Bible in English, accessible to all  
and the Catholics were allowed the decorative worship spaces and elegant liturgy

Both views of the Eucharist were brought together,  
it was understood as both the Protestant memorial meal,  
and the Catholic actual body and blood of Christ....

I'm over simplifying a truly remarkable melding of two very different understandings of Christianity, that took generations to craft. But the foundation upon which this incredible church is built is the **wide middle way**.

An acceptance of a breadth of opinion and understanding of any issue,  
wherein we could actually disagree about some really important ideas,  
and remain in communion with one another.

A place where Scripture, Tradition and Reason  
form the three legged stool of our understanding of theology,  
and because everyone brings something different to that reason piece,  
we allow one another the grace to disagree with each other.

From this foundation we can have this conversation faithfully and in confidence that we are safe. We can express our own understanding without having to change the opinions of others, without someone having to be 'right,' without feeling threatened by any other opinion that is expressed.

As long as we are in that wide middle place, allowing for those who differ from us to be in that place with us, we're 'in' the church.

### **Where are we at St. Bart's?**

As individuals, where are we on this issue? What are we struggling with? What about same sex marriage makes us uncomfortable? What do we think will be lost, or what will be gained?