THE DIOCESE OF EAST TENNESSEE
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November 17, 2015

Dear members of the Episcopal Church in East Tennessee,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

As you are all very aware, same sex marriage is now legal in Tennessee, and The Episcopal Church, in its 78th General Convention in the summer of 2015, has authorized liturgies to celebrate and bless the marriages of same sex couples. This came as a shock to some, a relief and celebration to some, and an expected result to others.

This was the fifth General Convention in which I have served. The respect and even admiration towards one another from people who have very different beliefs and stances on issues of sexuality was incredible. We are a church that accepts and welcomes all people. We are also a church committed to all people, and committed to justice, and that results in disagreements among people of good faith. This section of one of the enabling resolutions (A054) makes this clear:

Resolved, That this convention honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality; and that no bishop, priest, deacon or lay person should be coerced or penalized in any manner, nor suffer any canonical disabilities, as a result of his or her theological objection to or support for the 78th General Convention's action contained in this resolution.

We honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality – as well as many other matters.

My hope and prayer is that one of the great gifts of our church – the diversity of people, opinions, stances, beliefs, and practices – is not only accepted, but strongly embraced as that which enables us to be the faithful community of followers of Jesus that we strive to be.

Three years ago, when The Episcopal Church authorized the use of liturgies for blessing same sex unions, we undertook a process with a task force to discuss how we as a diocese would implement this. That process seems to have worked very well, so as I have stated in various settings – post-General Convention gatherings, Clergy Conference, Bishop and Council meetings, and Standing Committee meetings, my intention is for us to use a very similar process to implement the use of liturgies to celebrate and bless same sex marriages.

Therefore, after extensive prayer, conversation, and with hope for the future, I approve the provisional use of the liturgies authorized for same sex marriage in the Diocese of East Tennessee beginning the First

Sunday of Advent – November 29, 2015 – under the following basic conditions:

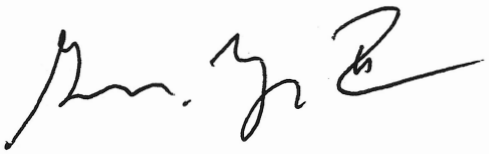
- Parishes which want to offer the marriage liturgy will begin with engaging in a prayerful conversation between clergy and vestry. When the rector wants to proceed and the vestry is in support of this desire, the rector and wardens will send a letter signed by them to me requesting my permission to do so. When permission is granted, an announcement to the congregation of this intention shall be made before a service using the marriage rite takes place.
- At least one member of the couple shall be a baptized member of a parish in the Diocese of East Tennessee, and the couple will participate in appropriate preparation with the clergy well ahead of the celebration of the liturgy.
- Permission shall be requested at least 30 days ahead of the service.
- When either or both people have been divorced, the normal petition for remarriage process will be used.
- Clergy generally act as agents of their parish when officiating the marriage rite. When there is a desire to officiate in a context outside of the parish one is serving, those arrangements will be discussed individually with one's bishop.

Therefore:

- I am neither requiring its use, nor requiring any clergy and vestry to consider its use.
- No parish, no vestry, no member of the clergy will be required to use the liturgy.
- I do encourage each parish's clergy and vestry to set aside some period of time and meeting together for thoughtful discussion about the best way forward for their congregation at this time.
- Though I am very grateful for the availability of its use in the parishes that so desire, I am not promoting its use in those parishes that are not so inclined at this point.

This step is another step in a long, careful, prayerful process in our church, and I bid the prayers and discernment of each of us as we continue to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our communal life together. Thank you, each and every one, for your prayers and witness, and I pray we – individually and corporately – continue to faithfully follow Jesus together, into the neighborhood, traveling lightly. God bless you.

Peace in Christ,



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Links to relevant canons and resolutions:

C017: http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/2015-resolutions/C017/current_english_text
A036: http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/2015-resolutions/A036/current_english_text
A054: http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/2015-resolutions/A054/current_english_text
A037: http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/2015-resolutions/A037/current_english_text

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December 9, 2015

Dear members of the Episcopal Church in East Tennessee,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

Following feedback and further conversation, I have re-examined the second condition outlined in my November 17, 2015 letter on Same Sex Marriage – that at least one of the members of the couple shall be a baptized member of a parish in the Diocese of East Tennessee.

The primary reason for reconsidering this is that several parishes want to have a unified policy about weddings in their parish. That is, the guidelines for weddings in the parish will be the same for all couples. This seems to me an excellent idea.

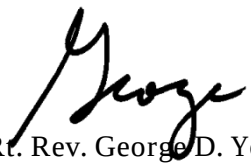
It also leads me to encourage the leadership of parishes to carefully consider their wedding policies. Many parishes are very limited in who is allowed to have weddings there. This likely rises out of practical concerns, as it does require time and effort on the part of many people. But there is a larger issue – that of hospitality. I had the experience in a parish I was serving where we stopped to consider the message we were communicating as we regularly turned people away from hosting their weddings. It was clearly not a message of hospitality and community embrace. We then very much opened up who could celebrate a wedding at the parish, keeping the guidelines about premarital preparation, using the Book of Common Prayer, and having a tasteful liturgy. We found that people were very willing and eager to follow our guidelines, and it was a helpful and graceful embrace of our local community. This move gave the clergy and people of the parish unique opportunities to build relationships – at a very intimate level – with people not previously closely engaged with the parish. A great thing!

In light of these points:

- I am removing the condition that one of the members of a couple to be married shall be a baptized member of that particular parish. Continuing with the canonical guideline long in place, at least one member of the couple shall be a baptized person;
- I am encouraging parishes to seek to have a unified wedding policy, so that the same rules and guidelines apply to every couple; and
- I am strongly encouraging the leadership of parishes to carefully examine their overall wedding policies, seeking to proactively welcome those who are not presently closely in relationship with the parish community.

Thank you, God bless you, and happy Advent!

Peace in the coming Christ,



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