

Unity in Mission Policy 2015

In 2011 I wrote, “The Diocese of Texas has an opportunity to respond to the challenge of liturgical change within the life of our Church in a manner that safeguards our unity and remains faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” As I read over my 2012 *Unity in Mission* paper, I remind myself that we have known this moment of change regarding marriage was coming. Moreover, as we look into the next triennium, we see the reality of prayer book revision on the horizon. In a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, we in the Diocese of Texas must continue to lead. We are called to lead by offering a model of unity in mission guided by clarity of vision, agility and one that is tempered by understanding and love of one another.

The Diocese of Texas follows God in Christ Jesus. God’s mission of reconciliation is our mission. We are unified as One Church within the Anglican Communion and The Episcopal Church in order to undertake this mission. We are unified because God, through Christ Jesus, reconciles us. God gives us the work of reconciliation.

Reconciliation means to heal history, live with difference while celebrating diversity and building a peaceful commons. Therefore, with mutual love and respect, we undertake God’s mission of reconciliation through evangelism and service. We believe we are called to build up the Kingdom of God together.

My goal has been to form the Diocese of Texas into a space of peace through the vision of unity in mission where the Kingdom can thrive. We seek to model for ourselves a sense of understanding whereby we live together despite our disagreements. We have clarity about the goals of our work in terms of mission amplification. We intend to grow our congregations, plant 25 new churches, and 50 missional communities. We are clear about serving as a good neighbor in our communities. We are becoming more agile with more grants and funding for service and reaching out.

Accomplishing the work God has given us is no easy task, and it will take all of our attention to work together for the common goal of living out the work of Christ Jesus and sharing the Good News of Salvation.

The *Unity in Mission* paper was designed to help guide us through this time. It was effective in 2012. Today the paper and study guide still provide resources that will help each rector and parish to faithfully respond to the events at General Convention 2015 and beyond. The Episcopal Church has approved rites for same-

sex marriage and it will move to place these within the context of a new *Book of Common Prayer* in the future.

From the very beginning it was clear that a process should exist for each rector and their parish to faithfully identify and decide whether or not to offer marriages for same-sex couples.¹ This privilege is memorialized in our Episcopal Church canons and in the actions of General Convention.

Traditional parishes and their priests need to have resources at their disposal that will help them feel secure in their relationship with the bishop, the diocese and the wider church. They have asked for, and desire a way in which they can take action that will enable them to feel that changes in liturgy and theology that conflict with their conscience won't create an impasse to a healthy relationship with the rest of the diocese.

Progressive priests and their congregations feel a similar need to respond to gay and lesbian people who seek a pastoral blessing of the Church in order to live faithful lives. These clergy should be allowed to officiate at the marriage of same-sex couples if they choose. Congregations that wish to create a safe space for these marriages need a process by which they can prepare and discern their communal response to requests from their members.

Meanwhile, as bishop, I wish to shepherd my flock and help every Christian who is seeking a way in which to make their faithful pilgrim journey. I am a bishop, and I love the people whom God has given me. I love those who are straight, gay or lesbian, conservative, traditional, moderate, liberal, progressive, black, brown or white. I feel the call to care for each and help each become the Christian that God desires and embraces. My hope is that progressives and conservatives alike will cherish the dignity of each other and see with the eyes of Christ and call one another brother and sister. I hope we may, as Christ unites the heaven with the earth, ourselves be united in mission as One Church under Jesus Christ for the glory of God.

Currently our polity provides that each clergy be given the discretion to decline or to solemnize any marriage. The same ability must be protected for those who do and those who do not wish to officiate at a same-sex marriage. Our polity provides that parishes (in conversation with the bishop) are able to call the clergy they wish to have. Our polity also allows for the bishop (in conversation with the Commission on Ministry) to send to seminary and ordain those he/she sees fit. We want to protect the ability for traditional and progressive congregations alike to be served by like-minded clergy who are able to focus on the mission of the Church.

¹ Given the 2015 Supreme Court ruling, and General Convention canonical changes, I have chosen to use the term *same-sex marriage* rather than *blessing* as this now is both a legal and canonical term. Traditional clergy may not wish to call it *marriage* in order to differentiate themselves and their theological beliefs. I understand this desire. For the sake of clarity, transparency, and continuity with the Episcopal Church rites and terms I have chosen to use the canonical and legal language.

Allowing rectors and individual parishes to decide for themselves how to respond to General Convention and using resources found in *Unity in Mission* or online is not a move towards congregationalism; it is what we have always done as Episcopalians in the Diocese of Texas. In our polity, the final decision on marriage and clergy belongs in the parish and in conversation between rector and people. We do this while maintaining our unity for mission and thereby walk the middle way together with our diverse opinions on sexuality set aside. This comprehensiveness is good for the traditionalist and the progressive in a changing world and church.

I encourage the people of the diocese to prayerfully seek to walk the *via media* and to honor our Anglican heritage of making new decisions in new contexts for the sake of common mission. As Richard Hooker, a 16th century English theologian and architect of the *via media*, wrote, “When the best things are not possible, the best may be made of those that are.” Mordecai urged Esther: “You have been chosen for such a time as this.” (Ester, 4) This is our time, our moment to come together for the sake of the one who loved us and died for us that we might be coworkers in the heavenly vineyards of God.

I rely on our polity, canons and structure, which already make room for clergy to have local liturgical freedom and for parishes to self-differentiate given their local mission contexts.

Living with a breadth of catholicity and difference is difficult if we are not having conversations. Such unity as we aspire to in the Diocese of Texas is always based upon the health of our relationships and our ability to speak openly and honestly, but gently and respectfully with one another. This is the kindness and tenderheartedness Paul encourages in his letter to the Ephesians. Such unity is impossible without mutual respect for the convictions of all and thoughtful processes for individual congregations to self-identify.

In 2011, I called a Task Force on Unity and Mission and, under my direction, the Task Force prayerfully discussed the best way to set up processes, which will allow individual parishes to act in accordance with their conscience around the issue of sexuality. The process we adopted was consistent with our polity, catholicity and Anglican heritage. The Task Force helped me to hear the concerns of our diverse diocese and to offer leadership and a way forward for all of us.

Through that process, as well as my own thoughts in the Unity and Mission paper, and years of prayer and listening to people of the diocese after General Conventions 2012 and 2015, I have come to understand that unity for the sake of mission requires a humble spirit. As we place our opinions on human sexuality where they belong—behind our common commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ and to the mission of his Church – let us aspire to do so in humility.

Bishop Diocesan

As Bishop Diocesan I will continue in relationship with the wider Anglican Communion. I will remain in The Episcopal Church. I will continue to follow and to uphold its doctrine and its discipline when I agree and when I don't agree with it.

I will work to engage in healthy and transparent relationships with all leaders of our Church, local and abroad. I will accomplish this by continuing to work with people across the Communion with whom I have healthy relationships. In accordance with my statements in 2012, I voted and have acted faithfully. I will continue to vote as my prayers and conscience dictate. Just as our congregations and clergy must have the freedom to choose and act, so our bishops must also have the freedom to act as their consciences guide them.

I will not limit my relationship building and common ministry with fellow bishops in the House of Bishops. I will continue to support our mutual ministry, regardless of any one bishop's place along the theological spectrum, their gender or their sexuality.

Part of the plan in 2012 was to put forward my thinking on the subject of our division, which I have done in the paper *Unity In Mission*. In that paper, I hoped to offer the people of the diocese a picture of the theology of marriage. A new edition of *Unity in Mission* is available online via amazon.com. Further reading on our tradition and history may also be found through the General Convention website and the liturgical materials created in 2012 and re-edited in 2015.

I want the reader to see how we, the Church, have developed our understanding of marriage over time. And, I wanted you to see that the Church has made room in our understanding of traditional marriage to include remarriage and that we made this change in the midst of debate in our culture. My intent is to give the reader some theological and scriptural background for the expansion of marriage to include same-sex couples. I want the reader to be able to see the division within the theological community on the issue of marriage and the differing views that people hold across the Anglican Communion regarding same-sex marriage. I also want to provide primary documents that are important keys to understanding where various members of the Church stand on the issues before the Church. Post General Convention 2015, I updated the document. It includes an updated forward from Secretary James A. Baker III, reaffirming the importance of the idea. Because of requests from across the Anglican Communion I have rewritten it to include a broader sense of reconciliation on these issues.

In the 2015 version I tried to offer you a view of where I am now and how I will lead. More importantly, I want to provide you with an understanding of the things within our Church that unite us and to place marriage in its proper perspective, not as a unifying, or necessary element, for unity within our Church but as one of the sacraments. I wanted you to see how we have added remarriage to our

understanding and how today, The Episcopal Church is on the verge of including as a separate liturgy—the blessing of same-sex marriage. In the end I want the reader to deepen their understanding of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ as portrayed in the unified mission of the Anglican and Episcopal Church. I want you to see the place of marriage in that discourse. Most of all, I want you to come to an understanding of where you find yourself in the midst of a very diverse community in Texas, The Episcopal Church and the global Anglican Communion. No matter where you are on this debate you are not alone.

This plan rests purely on the authority vested in me as your bishop. Therefore, this strategy does not ask for further debate or require our Diocesan Council to approve my leadership on the issue. I have not asked for people to change their positions or even to like the plan that I am setting before us.

I am asking that the people of the Diocese of Texas choose unity over division for the sake of the Gospel of Salvation and the proclamation of God in Christ Jesus. By the power vested in the office of Episcopal Bishop, in this Church, and in this diocese, I will allow clergy and congregations in the Diocese of Texas to choose liturgically how to live out their conscience and theological understanding regarding marriage.

A Traditional Option

Congregations and rectors need to be able to respond to concerns by their parishioners following General Convention 2015's action on same-sex marriage. Out of my pastoral concern for everyone, I will allow traditional congregations to state their preference and position through resolutions or congregational bylaw changes. The rector is required to request permission from the Bishop Diocesan prior to proceeding so that we may be in conversation on a common strategy and process. The vestry will be asked to study and undertake the work after being fully informed. I will suggest that they read *Unity in Mission* so that they can understand fully the decision that they are making.

A resolution or bylaws may be changed to read:

This Episcopal congregation declares itself to be committed to the primacy and authority of Holy Scripture, as written in the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible. In keeping therewith, neither the Vestry nor the Clergy of this congregation shall:

- A) *Conduct or participate in rites, services or ceremonies for the Holy matrimony or blessing of the union of persons of the same gender;*
- B) *Sponsor for ordination or employ any priest or other clergy who is engaged in a non---celibate relationship outside of Holy matrimony between a man and a*

*woman, or be required to participate in any liturgy where such a non---
celibate person is in leadership; or*

- c) *Offer any liturgies or promote any teachings inconsistent with those contained in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.*

The vestry may also at this time choose to affirm the articles of the Windsor Report and the Anglican Communion Covenant if they have not done so already. At any time in the future the priests and congregations may choose to change their position. I will not treat congregations that choose this option any differently.

I recognize that not all congregations in the diocese are pleased with allowing for same-sex marriage, and I wish to pastorally respond to what they may consider feelings of being sacramentally out of communion with my office. I recognize that it is possible that such pain may exist that a congregation will wish to have alternative pastoral oversight. I am proposing that we begin with a year hiatus by inviting a visiting bishop to do confirmations. I have already visited with bishops beyond this diocese should this be the case and we can respond easily. Furthermore, I am offering this in advance—that should the rector request and the vestry approve, I will allow for alternative pastoral oversight through the TEC plan called Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight. As of yet we have not had any need for this but I understand that in the future it may be necessary.

A Progressive Option

I will permit clergy desiring to do same-sex marriage to use the new liturgy and materials.

In 2012 the Standing Liturgy and Music Commission proposed a text entitled: *Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You, and You will Be A Blessing, Resources for Blessing Same---Gender Relationships*. This liturgy is to be used until Advent 2015. I am also authorizing *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage V.3*, found on page 87 of the new Liturgical resources found here:

<https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/13068.pdf>

In accordance with the resolutions passed at General Convention in 2015, beginning Advent One of 2015, the new liturgical materials may be used in accordance with their intent. The bishop's permission is an essential ingredient in the proposed rite.

First, to protect the pastoral relationship between the rector, the congregation's leadership and the congregation, I will require that rector and vestry work through a process of preparation. Every leader knows that change is supported when clear communication and formation has taken place. We as Episcopalians have always done this with new liturgical innovations. Both St. David's in Austin and St.

Stephen's in Houston have designed programs to help prepare congregations and their resources may be of help to those exploring this new ministry.

I require clergy who believe celebrating at same-sex marriages is an important part of their ministry to read the documents produced by General Convention 2015 in the Supplemental Materials. Likewise, I recommend that congregations interested in this ministry to have gone through the materials provided in the Liturgical Resources 1 text on same-sex marriage. Therefore, prior to officiating a rite for blessing a same-sex marriage in an Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Texas, a rector will be required to have the congregation complete, in some form, a congregational formation process.

The rector shall affirm to me in writing that the congregation has completed a time of discernment (having used the Liturgical Resources material) and is prepared to participate in blessing same-sex marriages.

I require the Senior Warden write to confirm that this discernment work has been carefully undertaken; and to confirm the vestry's intention to support the rector. This work needs to be done well in advance of conducting any service and not a rushed process.

I will require the preparation of all couples to follow the guidelines as approved in A036 (http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/2015-resolutions/A036/current_english_text) in 2015, and the preparation materials for couples presented in Liturgical Resources 1 2015 (<https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/13068.pdf>). My expectation is that clergy will apply equally expectations they now hold for heterosexual couples regarding preparation to homosexual couples.

Following General Convention 2012, and the publishing of the *Liturgical Resource 1* rites, I allowed one rector from Houston and one rector from Austin to request in permission to conduct such blessings within their respective sanctuaries. After one year we opened that process to others and at each council and clergy conference I have reported the new congregations now approved to use these rites. As of August 2015, the following congregations have finished this work: Christ Church Cathedral, Houston; St. Stephen's, Houston; St. Andrew's, Houston; St. Paul's, Freeport; St. David's, Austin; St. James, Austin; St. Michael's, Austin; St. Francis, Temple.

Not every priest serves a congregation that will be able to support such liturgies. Therefore, I am making provision for clergy in congregations that have not affirmatively opted to refrain from blessing same-sex marriage to be able to use the rites outside of the Church. This should allow access to the rite in places that are not prepared to do this service in their sanctuary or who are adverse to such action. It will allow for a generous pastoral care of members throughout our diocese.

Once the clergy are approved for these rites they may move forward pastorally without requesting permission from my office for each service.

Regarding remarriage in the case of all couples the clergy need to continue to adhere to the guidelines in the clergy manual and on the diocesan website.

As Anglicans and Episcopalians we will do these services well and follow the rubrics. One of the partners must be an Episcopalian who is in good standing in their parish.

At any time in the future clergy and congregations may choose to change their position. I want to give rectors and congregations the opportunity to test the waters and to change their minds. Therefore, just as the traditional congregation may choose to change its mind, so too may a progressive one. It will be up to the vestries and rectors in conversation with me that will help guide this process.

Congregations Wishing To Take No Action

Not every congregation will want to deal with this or even discuss it. I believe that many congregations in the Diocese of Texas will be happy with my provision and also pleased with my transparent position on how to move forward. Therefore, it is possible that many congregations will choose to do nothing; they will choose neither to make a traditional stance nor to do same-sex marriages.