

## A Pastoral Reflection on Homosexuality from Fr. Mark

July 16, 2009

Dear Friends,

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church is about to adjourn in Anaheim, California. As you probably know, the Convention has been in session for the past nine days. Many people, both members of the Episcopal Church and interested observers, assume that since we are a denomination which cherishes tradition and order, that decisions are somehow made by a 'hierarchy' of clergy. But in fact, we are a very democratic church, and the General Convention represents the ultimate authority in our denomination. Hopefully, the Convention reflects us and our attempt to include all voices.

Every three years, the General Convention meets as one of the largest bicameral legislative bodies in the world. We inevitably draw lots of attention from the press and from other Christians because we both reflect a unique center position between catholic and protestant, and we openly debate and grapple with the issues of the day. At our best, we put "politics" aside, and listen carefully to one another and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. At our best, we maintain a balance in all things. At our best, we are deferential and respectful to each other, even and especially, when we find that we disagree.

Although the General Convention has considered over 400 resolutions, it seems as if the attention and energy has always centered in the past several decades on the emotional and highly important issue of homosexuality. How is God calling us is this time to include, pastorally support, and advocate for gays and lesbians? Or, is homosexuality a sin or some kind of a psychological disorder? In the course of my almost 36 years of ordained ministry, I have come to know scores of fellow clergy and lay people in the pews that have a homosexual orientation. They are among us as our brothers and sisters, our children, sometimes our parents, aunts and uncles, and friends. They often can't tell us of their orientation for fear that they will be rejected or condemned by heterosexual people. This continuing public debate over them and their sexual orientation is the cause of both hope and of fear.

I must say that there is also a part of me which is so weary of this focus. I know that the General Convention has taken action on a host of issues which will have far more and profound effect on our common life in the church. The struggle to understand homosexuality and to affirm gays and lesbians has taken so much of our energy and diverted our mission. Yet, this is an extremely important and difficult issue. It is a divisive issue. And it does deserve our careful, prayerful struggle to discern God's will. I am sure that our discernment will continue well beyond this convention. In time, there will be a consensus of opinion in the Episcopal Church, in the larger Christian Church, and in our society.

Many in our church, in the wider Anglican Communion, and most of the rest of the Christianity, have maintained that homosexuality is a sin. They point to eight passages in the Bible which seem to condemn homosexuality and to the Biblical witness which assumes that the only healthy and moral expression of sexuality is limited to marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman. This has basically been the understanding of sexuality for 2000 years. While I have great respect for this understanding and have long held this position myself, I have come in the past 15 years or so to a different place. I don't believe that homosexuality is a sin. I don't believe that gay and lesbian people chose to be homosexual. I don't believe that they or anyone can change their sexual orientation. I don't believe that they should be asked to be celibate or live alone. I am sure that they deserve to be treated with love and respect and that many have suffered persistent and often horrible discrimination.

The General Convention has taken two major steps with respect to gays and lesbians. First, in overwhelming numbers in both the House of Bishop and the House of Deputies (half clergy and half laity), the "moratorium" on the consecration of gays or lesbians as bishops has been ended. To be sure, the resolution passed has taken care to affirm our respect for others in the Anglican Communion who cannot agree with this or believe this to be sinful and willful. But the Episcopal Church is now on record that we affirm and welcome gays and lesbians into all ministries and that their sexual orientation will not exclude them from ordination. What will happen now? Well, I suspect that many Anglican leaders, especially in Africa, will call for the Episcopal Church to be expelled from the Anglican Communion. Our action will also put further strain on many ecumenical relationships. Yet, I sense that the majority of the Episcopal Church has come to a point where in the words of Martin Luther, "we can do no other".

Second, the Convention has provided for the drafting of a liturgy which can be used to bless the union of two homosexual persons in the church. This does not mean that we are ready to have such services. It will take the next three years to review the proposed services and the theological and pastoral papers which will also be published before a final vote of approval can be taken at the next convention. In the meanwhile, this will be a time of very specific discernment. I personally support this action and believe it is time to seriously consider blessing same gender couples who are willing to make an unconditional commitment to one another and enter into a holy covenant. At the same time, I want to be very clear that from my standpoint, it will be very important that we not in any way undermine Holy Matrimony by providing an alternative "commitment and blessing" liturgy which does not require total and unconditional vows of love and commitment. What we call this new relationship: marriage, union, or whatever is yet to be seen.

I will be very much listening to our bishop for his pastoral guidance and insight. I will also take counsel with gays and lesbians in our congregation and with the members of the SAFE Group at St. John's. In time, the Worship Commission, the Pastoral Ministry Commission and the Vestry will take these matters under advisement. I will be open to listen to anyone who wishes to speak to me concerning this and will respect your opinion, even if I don't agree with you.

This is what I ask each of you, as my friends and as fellow pilgrims: let us be committed to our fellowship and let us put our trust in God's grace. We will always disagree about many things. Our unity in Christ is not about uniformity of opinion or experience. If I and the Episcopal Church are wrong about this, then we will trust in God's mercy as we have tried to be faithful and loving in this great debate. If on the other hand, those who can't agree or accept this affirmation of homosexual persons are wrong, we will trust that God will give them the gift of discernment and change their hearts.

Finally, a word to our friends who are gay and lesbian. Thank you for bearing with us and thanks for your continued struggle to remain part of the church and of this congregation. All of us are struggling to follow Christ and to know his will. You are a vital part of our community. And I call you to moral and faithful personal relationships as you might find companionship and love in another person.

May God grant us all the gift of his good and gracious Spirit in this and in all of our life together.

Faithfully,

Mark+