

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

1833 Regent St.
Madison, WI 53726
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The Very Rev. Andrew B. Jones Rector

Established 1913

December 11, 2013

The Very Rev. Kevin Carroll
President, Standing Committee
Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee
804 East Juneau Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202

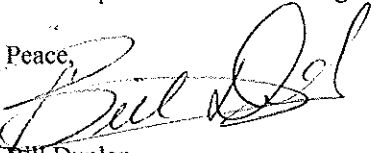
Dear Fr. Carroll,

The vestry and parishioners of St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Madison are responding to your letter dated October 17, 2013 requesting data from the parishes of the Diocese of Milwaukee. You asked for input from the vestry of each parish in the diocese about the current state of affairs regarding the General Convention's decision to authorize a provisional rite for the blessing of same-gender relationships, as well as Bishop Miller's position not to allow the use of this rite within the Diocese of Milwaukee. We pray that the feedback collected during these sessions will assist the Standing Committee in understanding the mind of the diocese on these matters as you serve as advisors to the Bishop.

On November 20, 2013 our parish vestry held a special meeting in accordance with our by-laws to gather the data requested by the Standing Committee. The meeting was facilitated by our CDI graduates. The meeting was announced prior in accordance with our bylaws. It was attended by the vestry and members of the parish. There were 28 attendees and we divided into three smaller groups to gather the data requested. We have attached the consolidated responses to the four questions asked by the Standing Committee. At the suggestion of our CDI graduates, we have attached a simple survey of how the individuals attending the meeting felt about the blessing of same-gender relationships.

We would like to thank the Standing Committee for the opportunity to provide our input on the blessing of same-gender relationships. We appreciate the openness and willingness to listen expressed in your request. At the close of our vestry meetings we solicit input on the conduct of the meeting by asking our likes, learnings and wishes. One wish from this meeting was that we as a parish might conduct sessions like this on other topics that face our church, our community and our faith. The Standing Committee may wish to consider similar requests for input in the future to solicit input on the issues facing our church and our communities.

Peace,



Bill Dunlop
Senior Warden
St. Andrews Episcopal Church, Madison

Encl.

Discussion on the Blessing of Same-Gender Relationships
Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee
Vestry Response

Name of Parish: St. Andrew's

City or Town: Madison

No. of People Attending: 28

No. of Vestry Members: 11

Questions for Conversation

1. What pastoral issues does the ability / inability to bless same-gender relationships raise in your community?

- The inability to offer the blessing creates "outsiders." We say that "we are all at the table together," but in reality we aren't.
- The inability limits our ability to be 'inclusive of all' and creates 'winners and losers.'
- Does not disallowing same sex blessing puts clergy in the position of treating some parishioners more favorably than other parishioners? How are clergy supposed to explain to gay couples that the church doesn't value them as much as straight couples?
- Does not the prohibition of same sex blessing also prohibit clergy from welcoming equally same sex couples into the Episcopal Church?
- Several individuals wondered how the church could withhold any blessing? That it wasn't right to withhold the grace of God.
- The current status across the broader church creates confusion about what Episcopalians believe and represent (e.g., some dioceses offer the blessing; others do not and the rationale for either choice is muddled).
- If it's okay to go to Chicago for a same sex blessing, or go to Iowa to get married, how can clergy tell same sex couples that it's not okay to get blessed or married in their own church?
- Same sex couples wishing to get married want to do so in the community they belong to and which will pledge to support them.
- There is a perceived openness, but may not be reality.

2. What theological questions does it raise?

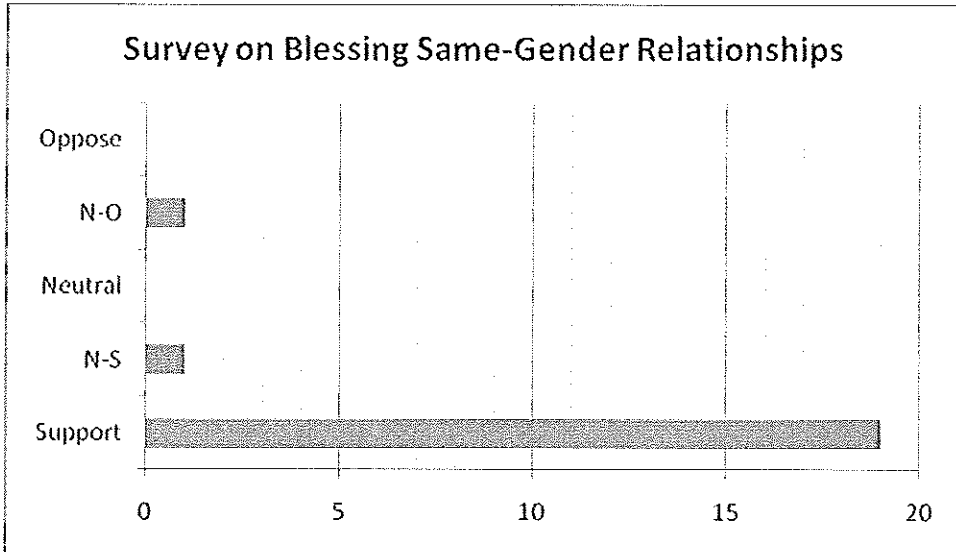
- How we – collectively and individually – interpret scripture. How we understand scripture within the current culture, environment and time.
- The Episcopal Church is known for being open to questioning / pondering / wonderments. The current position seems to contradict this openness.
- Do our actions reflect what we truly believe?

- How do we incorporate our own perspectives / experiences / background / personal relationships with same-gender couples in the context of the current position and our own understanding of the scripture?
- What would Jesus do?
- As Christians, we depend on and trust the Church to help us answer theological questions, to guide us on our journey. Some think the Church has missed this one.
- If we are to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” how do we reconcile the current position? What is God saying in this text?
- It is hard to believe that God would create people in love and then deny them the blessing of loving relationships.
- This is essentially about "what is a human being?" A CHRISTIAN human being? This is a very consequential shift in our historic understanding, requiring deep reflection and deference to tradition. I am unpersuaded by both sides and note dissent on the issue among gays themselves.
- Scripture should not be taken out of context. There are no stand-alone verses.
- Is not a contemporary reading of scripture favorable toward gay and lesbian couples—toward all peoples? Are not most interpretations of scriptures that purport to show homosexuality as a sin misguided? Are not those passages taken out of context?
- Same sex blessings just aren't justified by my understanding of the fundamentals of historic church teaching.
- For blessing, but that is very different from what I believe marriage is--for children, their raising and future.
- God gave us the freedom to think and reason. We should look at the spirit of the message.
- The bishop has stated his “belief that the right to a civil marriage should be available to all people, regardless of sexual orientation” and that he “would support those seeking to overturn the ban on same-gender marriage in Wisconsin.” Furthermore, the Bishop permits “partnered gay clergy to preside within the diocese.” Why does his support for the former differ from the latter?
- In his June 2013 letter, the bishop wrote that he “simply cannot come to a place where [he] can agree that A049 is a theologically sound development.” On what theological basis has the bishop come to this conclusion? Would it not help Episcopalians in the Milwaukee diocese decide whether they agree with the bishop if he were to write a detailed (as opposed to a letter or a blog post) analysis of his theological opposition to same sex blessing? Though Episcopalians have the prerogative to agree or disagree with the Bishop, it is his prerogative to tell us why he thinks things or not. We as a flock, would be shepherded better if he told us why so that we can (1) learn, (2) understand and (3) put our faith in an understanding of God, not the Bishop.
- Who in the Episcopal Church interprets scripture and decides what is true? From where does the Bishop draw his conclusions? What books should we read, what interpretations, what traditions? All of these shape theology and beliefs. Can you provide a document with the diocesan interpretation of why he does not allow same gender blessing (not a personal opinion, but his theological interpretation)? And why is it different from the national / international one?
- In the Episcopal Church, we bless vestments, boats, tartans, haggis, and pets. What theology allows for those blessings but not the blessing (as opposed to a marriage sacrament) of same sex relationships?
- Since some Episcopal dioceses do bless same sex relationships, what is the theology that lets those dioceses bless same sex relationships but prohibit the Milwaukee diocese from doing the same?

3. What challenges does the issue of same-gender blessings and the ability / inability to bless same-gender relationships pose to evangelism and church growth in your context?
- By focusing the church's time, energy, and resources on the issue of same sex blessings, what other issues are we ignoring? Doesn't focusing on this issue—which many believe should be a non-issue because St. Andrew's already lovingly welcomes same sex couples into the church—distract us from doing other important work?
 - This issue is receiving too much attention. There isn't a need for same sex blessings. I am very opposed to any discrimination against LGBTs and think they make an important contribution to our community, but we have much bigger issues and this is "navel-gazing".
 - The ability to offer the blessing may increase growth; the inability may slow our growth. The inability creates a barrier to both evangelism and growth.
 - Evangelism should result in a big win and a bigger 'family' open to all.
 - How do people come to the church? What do they see when they come? Do we really care about all? How do we make the church comfortable for all?
 - The church must be a safe place for everyone.
 - We need to be vulnerable; to let go of control.
 - We need to continue to evolve.
 - If we allow this issue to define us then it handicaps our evangelism on both sides.
 - It's hard to welcome new members into the tent when inside we're bickering and divided.
 - There are different definitions of evangelism – inside the church and externally as individual Christians. We appear to be have a split personality on this issue – externally many have close relationships with same-gender couples; within the church, we refuse to recognize / acknowledge these special relationships.
 - This issue will not make or break St. Andrew's.
 - Not allowing same sex blessings in Madison is a real problem. Madison in general, and St. Andrew's in particular, welcomes gay people. Even if we are welcoming, why would gay people want to join a church in which they aren't treated as equals? To an outsider looking to join a church, the diocesan policy against same sex blessing might lead one to believe that St. Andrew's is against same sex blessing, which isn't true. Again, the EC in WI is sending mixed messages.
 - If we can't treat same sex couples as equals, how can we truly evangelize to them? Why would we want to limit ourselves?
 - Being against same sex blessing furthers the stereotype that churches are intolerant and rigid, which generally isn't the case at St. Andrew's.
 - Ordaining Gene Robinson already caused some people to leave the Episcopal Church. Why antagonize those who stayed, or those who might join, by forbidding the blessing of same sex relationships? Vacillating on this issue doesn't help current or potential members or those who might be sympathetic to our causes.
 - Some members (e.g., ex-Catholics, ex-Seventh Day Adventists) were attracted to the Episcopal Church for its flexibility—for the ability to raise questions and be accepting of gray areas. Not allowing same sex blessing goes against the spirit of flexibility that drew such members in.
 - The attitude among young people—a demographic for which the Episcopal church often expresses interest in growing and retaining—is that church shouldn't tell them who they should be with. Young people don't understand why we're having this conversation when they already accept same sex couples for who they are.

- Many parishioners want to raise their children in an environment free of prejudice against gay people. If the Episcopal Church does not approve of same sex blessings (i.e., do not treat gay people as equals), how can we invite those families into the Episcopal Church? How can we retain those families if someone in their family is gay?
4. With respect to the issue of blessing same-gender relationships, what voices within your parish and within this diocese do you believe are not being heard?
- Individuals who don't think the blessing is a good idea.
 - Those who agree with the Bishop.
 - Women's voices in the diocese.
 - Individuals who aren't comfortable talking about same-gender relationships or gays / lesbians in general.
 - People who are at different places on their spiritual journey.
 - May be a lot more people than we think.
 - Those in favor / who support same sex blessings may be too loud; may discourage others from speaking. We can agree to disagree but not be disagreeable.
 - In Madison, people who are not sure about or against same sex blessings may not be comfortable expressing their opinions since St. Andrew's is perceived as decidedly for same sex blessings. (several expressed this view)
 - People who, for whatever reason, were not able to attend one meeting, on a cold, raining Wednesday night in November.
 - People for whom same sex blessings is not a big deal—as in, St. Andrew's is already so accepting of same sex couples, why even have a discussion about something we already know we support.
 - Why have a discussion about something the Episcopal Church has already approved? Why not just do it?
 - Children's voices. By not allowing same sex blessings, what will this eventually say to any child / youth in our church now who later might discover that he or she is gay?

Participants were asked to complete a simple, anonymous survey on where they fell on the continuum between supporting same-sex blessings and opposing. The results are below.



Support	19
N-S	1
Neutral	0
N-O	1
Oppose	0