

A Report to the Bishop of Milwaukee

July 1, 2014

The 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Indianapolis in 2012, approved a provisional rite for blessing a lifelong covenant between persons of the same gender. This was a dramatic step in the life of the church. This act called on the church to consider how to respond to same-gender couples who wish to have their loving, faithful and committed relationships recognized and affirmed by the church. Provisional rites require the permission of the diocesan bishop to be used in his or her diocese. The Right Reverend Steven Miller, the Bishop of Milwaukee issued a **letter** stating that he had misgivings about the rite; and to date has not authorized its use.¹

In June, 2013, Bishop Miller asked the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Milwaukee to initiate a process that would enable the clergy and parishes of the diocese to offer a generous pastoral liturgical response to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered) couples within the diocese. It is one of the canonical roles of a Standing Committee in the Episcopal Church to sit as a council of advice to the Ordinary. We have been acting in that capacity.

Process:

In order to offer good counsel to the Bishop, the Standing Committee decided that it needed to have a clearer, non-anecdotal understanding of the mind of the diocese on this matter. To accomplish this, in October of 2013, the Standing Committee requested that parishes respond to questions about the General Convention's decision to authorize a provisional rite for the blessing of same-gender relationships and Bishop Miller's position not to allow the use of this rite within the Diocese of Milwaukee.

We received responses from 43 parishes, representing about 80% of the diocese. The members of the Standing Committee are grateful to all the parishes that held conversations and issued a response. We were impressed with the prayerful, thoughtful, and respectful ways in which these conversations were held, and the sincerity and openness with which the responses were crafted.

Input from the parishes amounted to well over 500 pages of material. To give each parish's submission the attention it was owed, the Standing Committee divided into three teams with three reviewers on each team. It is worth noting that the Standing Committee consists of lay people and clergy representing parishes that fall on both ends of the spectrum and points in between.

¹ <http://milwaukeebishop.wordpress.com/2012/06/28/yes-to-bless-or-christian-marriage-for-all/>

Each parish's submission was read in depth by each team member. Reviewers sought to assess where the parishes and clergy of the diocese stood on the issues. Each response was assigned a value, ranging from 1 to 5. A 1 represented a strong desire not to see a rite for same-gender blessings authorized for use. A 5 represented a strong desire to see a rite for same-gender blessings approved. Each team reported back to the whole Standing Committee, which used the data to compile this report.

It is clear to members of the Standing Committee that growth has occurred within the diocese around how LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) issues are addressed since the events of 2003, when several parishes witnessed division over the election of the Right Reverend V. Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. The Standing Committee found these responses to be extremely thoughtful, respectful and concerned for people on all sides of these issues. People who were perceived as opposed to the general viewpoint found within their parish indicated that they could express their viewpoints without judgment. Many responses indicated that people were grateful for the opportunity to be asked to share their perspectives as part of a formal process. The work of the Holy Spirit is evident in the communication we received.

The results were not bound by any specific geographical area. While a number of the responses indicating full support for a blessing rite for same-gender relationships came from parishes in the Milwaukee and Madison areas, the Standing Committee received a range of responses from parishes in rural and small town settings. Several parishes and clergy expressed some anxiety about raising the issue of same-gender blessings, but still offered their responses. Three parishes declined to participate in this process.

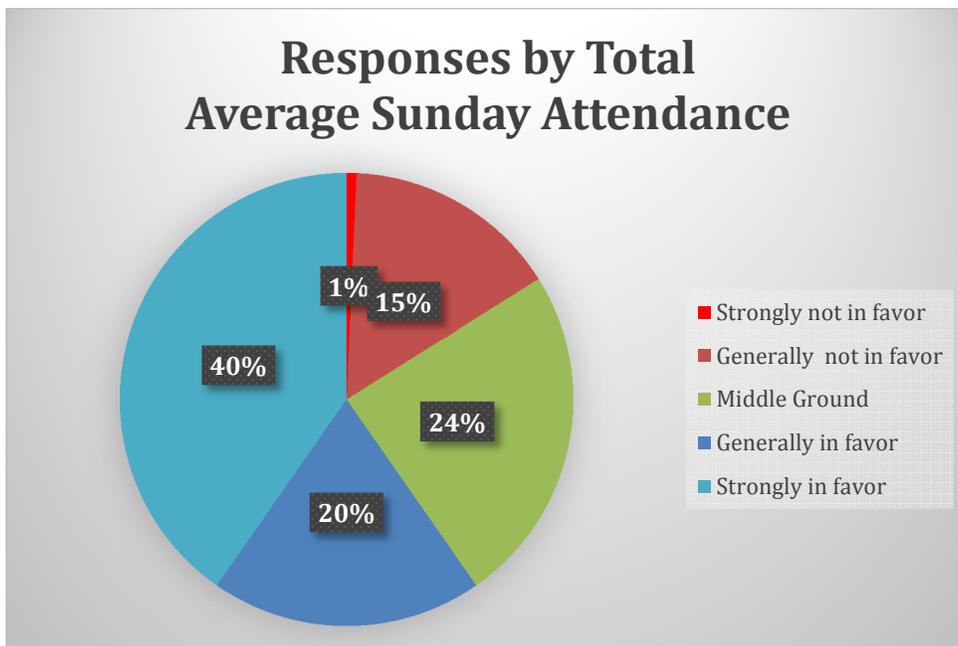
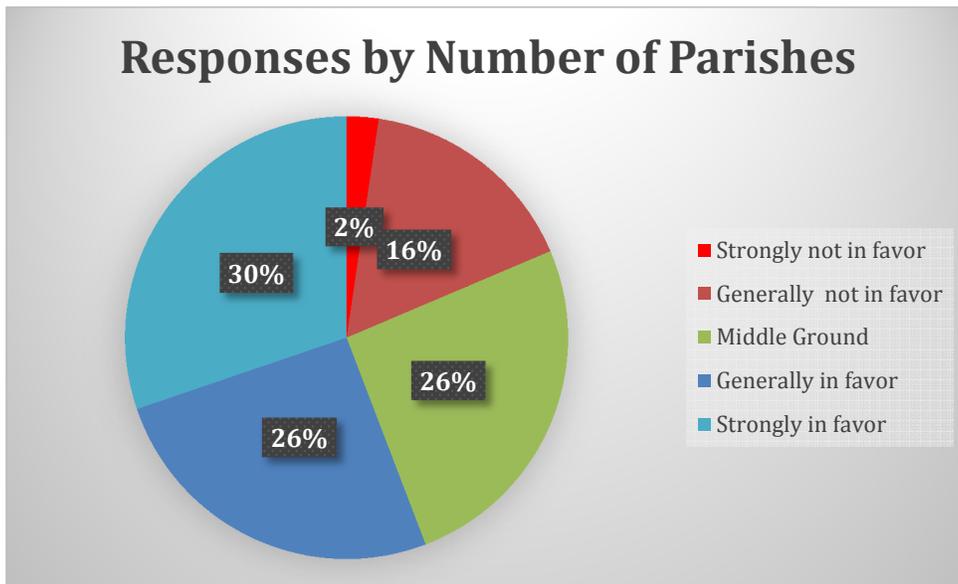
Results:

In seeking to understand the mind of the diocese with respect to these issues, we discovered not one mind, but a diversity of respectful, faithful, and considerate opinions. The vast majority of responses (35 out of 44) indicated some level of support for a rite for same-gender blessings in the Diocese of Milwaukee, with the greatest number of parishes and clergy reporting a strong desire to see such rites available to members of their worshipping communities.

Several parishes, particularly ones outside the metro Milwaukee and Madison areas, made clear that the issue of same-gender blessing simply was not a critical issue within their own communities. Of these parishes, a fair number indicated that the indecision regarding this issue within our diocese is perceived as a stumbling block to building trust and moving forward together in other areas of mission.

While the second highest number of parish replies fell into the middle category of 3, the statements from these parishes were not necessarily neutral on the issue of same-gender blessings. They were well-reasoned responses that considered and presented a range of divergent viewpoints within that parish and reflected well the middle ground on this continuum.

Scale	Rubric	Response by Average Sunday Attendance		Response by Number of Parishes	
		Sun. Attendance	Percentage	Parishes	Percentage
1	Strongly not in favor	23	0.7%	1	2.3%
2	Generally not in favor	503	15.4%	7	16.3%
3	Middle Ground	793	24.2%	11	25.6%
4	Generally in favor	634	19.4%	11	25.6%
5	Strongly in favor	1319	40.3%	13	30.2%
		3272	100.0%	43	100.0%



Recommendation

The Standing Committee recommends that Bishop Miller authorize a local option for a rite of blessing of same-gender couples living in committed, lifelong, covenant relationships. A local option would give permission for individual clergy of the diocese to decide to use the rite or not in his or her own parish.

Rationale:

We offer this advice based on the following:

- 1) We have heard from parishes that there is a generational gap around issues of equality and inclusion of LGBT persons. Here is an opportunity to be on the right side of history. Leaving this issue for youth and young adults to sort out in the future sends a message that they and their views are not welcome now. Ignoring their viewpoints reinforces the fact that youth and young adults hold few positions of power within the church today.
- 2) Some responses reflected concerns about how LGBT persons are treated in our church and society that are akin to issues raised during the Civil Rights movement. The blessing same-gender relationships is a matter of justice for many in our diocese, young and old alike. It is a conviction grounded in deeply held theological principles regarding the nature of Jesus' ministry and the trajectory of the gospel beyond the human constructs surrounding race, gender, class, identity and orientation.
- 3) Many parish responses raised the issue of integrity, and questioned the wisdom of diverging from the witness of the wider Episcopal Church. Parishes falling on the 4/5 end of the spectrum are home to many people who came to the Episcopal Church seeking refuge and welcome around LGBT issues. To continue to limit the ability of such communities to witness and support the blessing of covenant relationships between two persons of the same gender hampers growth and raises concerns about hypocrisy. Our diocese stands firmly within a larger tradition that has discerned the Spirit's leading to the full inclusion of those who have experienced discrimination and exclusion within other branches of Christ's vine.
- 4) The responses indicated that trust has been lost during the Bishop's prolonged weighing of this issue. Clergy and parishes are seeking diocesan leadership, and would like to know what they can and cannot do when it comes to offering a generous pastoral response to same-gender couples within their communities. In addition, the inaction and prolonged attention given to this matter without a decision leading to a liturgical pastoral response has hampered the wider mission of the Diocese of Milwaukee, and has corroded relationships that will need to be tended to as we seek to move forward together.

- 5) A local directive ensures that clergy opposed to the rite are not compelled to offer it. A local option would also provide opportunity for the clergy of the diocese to act in a collegial and pastoral manner to ensure that such rites can be offered to those seeking them. This would allow clergy to refer those seeking the rite in a parish that does not offer it to other parishes within the diocese that offer the rite. This would alleviate the unfair burden placed on same-gender couples who presently must seek blessings in other dioceses where such blessings are already offered. We agree with our bishop that the diocese is truly the smallest unit of the Episcopal Church. Compelling couples to seek a pastoral response outside the boundaries of our diocese represents a failure to live into our common mission.
- 6) Recently over 500 same-gender couples were married in the State of Wisconsin. The greatest share of these occurred in Milwaukee, Waukesha and Dane Counties, all within the Diocese of Milwaukee. We believe that the Bishop's concerns about a two-tiered system of blessing, distinguishing those who can marry from those who cannot, (pending appeal) is no longer an issue within our diocesan boundaries.

Further Recommendations:

We commend to Bishop Miller the **letter** issued by his colleague in the House of Bishops, the Right Reverend Dorsey W.M. McConnell, Bishop of Pittsburg.² Like Bishop Miller, Bishop McConnell expresses some concerns about the provisional rite. In this letter Bishop McConnell states, "I believe I was called to be the bishop of the whole diocese, not merely a part of it." McConnell outlines his own reservations about the blessing rite authorized by General Convention. At the same time he grants permission for local practice, allowing the clergy of the diocese to decide whether or not to use this rite in their respective parishes.

By owning and airing his reservations in such a public fashion, McConnell maintained his personal sense of integrity regarding the rite. By granting a local option, he also demonstrated a degree of flexibility and vulnerability that the faithful seek in the church's leadership. Bishop McConnell states, "This 'local option' would allow each rector or priest-in-charge to minister pastorally according to his or her conscience, while putting none under constraint or duress."

The responses that the Standing Committee received made little mention of the rite adopted in General Convention Resolution A049. The clergy and parishes that responded were less concerned with the particulars of the rite and more concerned with how we as a diocese treat LGBT persons. Given the trajectory of the gospel, and the love shown to persons on the margins by Jesus Christ himself, ministering fully to LGBT persons is integral to our work here in the Kingdom.

We understand that Bishop Miller has misgivings about the blessing rite approved for provisional use by General Convention in 2012. We caution that waiting for a rite that

² <http://www.episcopalpgh.org/docs/PastoralLetter131125-FINAL.pdf>

satisfies all criticisms is not a faithful response to the issue at hand and may never come to fruition. The Episcopal Church has a long tradition of using rites on a trial basis before they are ratified and adopted for semi-permanent use. We urge Bishop Miller, as the vice-chair of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, to use his position on this prestigious church body to continue the important work of revising the rite in the years to come.

Conclusion:

We recognize that the use of this rite is a source of long-awaited inclusion and joy for many people. We also understand that for others it is a source of grave misgivings and a challenge to traditional understandings of marriage in our society and in the church.

The blessing of a same-gender relationship is not a matter of doctrine or creed. Acceptance or rejection of such a rite flows from the prayerful and faithful interpretation of Scripture. This is not the first such matter with which the church has found difficulty in coming to terms—and it will not be the last. This does not have to be an issue that divides the diocese or the broader church.

How we interpret Scripture, and how we live out our common lives of faith within the Anglican tradition, means that we often will disagree with our brothers and sisters. These disagreements may be substantial. This is because our Anglican tradition provides a wide latitude for personal moral and ethical decision making. This latitude also means that we are called to be in community with, and approach the Communion rail with, people who hold divergent opinions.

It is becoming apparent that the Episcopal Church, and society in general, is on a path toward the full inclusion of LGBT persons in all aspects of our common life. As we discern what this future will look like, our Anglican tradition and our baptismal covenant compel us to love each other and to respect the dignity of all.

It is our sincerest hope that, as we continue to hear where God is calling this church, we can demonstrate to the wider community how people of faith and good conscience can disagree on substantial issues, while, at the same time, coming together on matters of absolute truth. The principal truth that we all agree on, regardless of age, race, gender, identity or orientation, is that God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ so that the power of death could be shattered, and all God's faithful people can live into their fullest potential in this world and the next.

In the service of the Church, we are most sincerely yours,

The Standing Committee of the Diocese of Milwaukee.

The Members of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Milwaukee

The Rev. April Berends
St. Mark's-Milwaukee

Mrs. Kada Bush
St. Bartholomew's-Pewaukee

The Very Rev. Kevin C. Carroll (President)
All Saints' Cathedral-Milwaukee

The Very Rev. Anna Doherty
St. Aidan's-Hartford
St. James'-West Bend

The Hon. Phillip Koss
St. John's in the Wilderness-Elkhorn

The Rev. Scott Leannah
St. Mary's-Dousman

Mr. William Robison
Trinity-Wauwatosa

Mr. John Washbush
St. James'-Milwaukee