



St. Mark's Episcopal Church

315 East Pecan St. • San Antonio, TX 78205-1819

Tuesday, March 8, 2016

Re: Update on Diocesan Policy for Same-Sex Marriage and for St. Mark's

Dear People of St. Mark's,

I am writing to convey some very important information and update you related to our Diocesan Policy for Same-Sex Marriage and its impact on the community of St. Mark's. Because of the significance of this issue for our common life with one another, I am going to spend some time reviewing what has transpired since last summer's meeting of the General Convention (the legislative body of the national Episcopal Church, which meets every three years). Some of you have followed this process with much attention, while others of you may not even be aware of the changes that have been taking place in our national church. If after reading this letter, you wish to review additional background, our website has letters from me immediately following General Convention in July, a second letter reflecting on the Diocesan Policy that followed, and correspondence from Bishops Lillibridge and Reed on the subject. (Visit www.stmarks-sa.org. Click on Audio&News/News.)

Recent Changes in Civil Law and National Church Policy

Church polity is complex and its intersection with civil law can create even more confusion. The concurrence of both the Supreme Court ruling this summer legalizing same sex marriage, along with actions of the national church, have changed the conversation across the country, in our diocese, and in our parish. In summary, General Convention passed legislation (resolutions A054 and A036) authorizing the use of liturgies for same-sex marriage in the Episcopal Church. Knowing that we had members in our parish who had already requested access to these liturgies approved by the national church, I invited Bishop Lillibridge to be with us for a presentation on September 30, 2015.

We had a strong turnout for Bishop Lillibridge's session with us. If you were not able to be with us, I highly encourage you to listen to the audio recording, available on our website. In it, the Bishop does a good job of sharing with us the process of General Convention, its governing patterns, and, specifically, the discussion of the two resolutions regarding same-sex marriage that passed in the summer of 2015. He also gave the outline of a policy for how this will be addressed in our diocese.

As I stated in my letter to the congregation of July 2, 2015, and reiterated in my letter of November 4, 2015, we have been waiting to hear from our Bishops about what implementation of these resolutions will look like. Bishops Lillibridge and Reed issued that policy in October to the clergy, and I have shared it with the Vestry. It is helpful to remember that our polity in the Episcopal Church is primarily centered at the diocesan level. While the General Convention passes resolutions, there is typically a good deal of discretion left to diocesan bishops as to how resolutions are implemented. This is the case as it relates to resolutions A054 and A036, passed in the summer of 2015. These resolutions have made liturgies to bless same-sex marriage available for

trial usage in the national Episcopal Church to those who request them. Here on the local diocesan level, Bishops Lillibridge and Reed spent several additional months formulating their policy for our Diocese. The community of St. Mark's has now come to an important point in this process of community discernment.

Request by St. Mark's Parishioners to Access Liturgies for Same-Sex Marriage

Several of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ at St. Mark's have requested access to the Episcopal Church liturgies for same-sex marriage. Under the provisions recently set out by our bishops, St. Mark's may grant them access to these liturgies in one of only two ways. We can (1) make these liturgies available at St. Mark's with the approval of the clergy and vestry, only after the entire congregation has engaged in a mandatory "process of parish-wide study, prayer, teaching, and conversation" on the topics of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, followed by a petition to the bishop to allow these liturgies to take place at St. Mark's; or we can (2) refer our gay and lesbian members to another Episcopal Church which will agree to make these Episcopal liturgical rites available to them.

The vestry, including those most recently elected in our parish meeting, met for a day-long retreat in November with the Reverend Dr. John Lewis and me to discern what might be the most appropriate next step for our parish to respond to these requests by our members. Our consensus was that St. Mark's is ready to enter a time of serious study, teaching, and conversation on this topic. That was the only question we answered and does not presuppose an answer as to whether or not St. Mark's should or should not petition the Bishops for permission to use these liturgies. We felt it was important to seek broad and transparent input from the community to discern what our response should be.

Parish-Wide Process of "Study, Prayer, Teaching, and Conversation"

The Reverend Dr. John Lewis, and our wardens from the past year, Dr. Carl Leafstedt and Suzy Tackett, have been working closely with me to design a process that will allow for broad participation by all members of our parish. This process is intended to provide the crucial input to the vestry so that we can discern how the Spirit is calling our community to respond to these requests from within our parish family.

In addition to the study already undertaken by the vestry, we have begun inviting other representatives from the parish to undergo a similar process of study in small groups. It is our hope that these committed St. Mark's parishioners, selected from diverse experiences and theological positions, will serve as conversation facilitators at three parish-wide meetings. The parish-wide meetings will give us an opportunity to study and discern with one another. The parish-wide meetings will include teaching by me and John Lewis on the theological and scriptural issues related to this issue and how communities of faith are called to respond in love to one another on issues of significant importance when consensus on the particular issue is not present. It will also include time for individual reflection and a guided process to give direct input to the vestry about St. Mark's next steps.

It is very important to state what these parish wide meetings are not designed to accomplish. Our Bishops have not asked us to debate the rightness or wrongness of same sex marriage. There is not unanimity of opinion on this issue in the Episcopal Church, in this diocese, or in our beloved parish. One of the characteristics I was most drawn to in my own discernment of calling to this place was its respect for theological diversity of opinion, strongly grounded in the Good News of Jesus Christ. We have spent the past 18 months reflecting with one another about what it means to be One Body with Many Members, and this has only confirmed this important aspect of our community life. In our culture, a place where people can commit to love of one another and God despite deeply held difference is increasingly rare.

While rare, I believe we are called to be a community where we do engage our differences with love and respect. We make this commitment by virtue of our baptism and it is how we live out the image of the Kingdom of God clearly articulated by Jesus Christ.

I believe St. Mark's has a very important role to play in the diocese. We are leaders who value our diversity of opinion that is firmly rooted in the unity we find in Jesus Christ. I have every confidence that we are so well grounded in that unity, that we can have conversations with one another that are not possible in many areas of our society. We know how to engage our relationships with one another in respect. This is only possible through the mutual love and care we share through grace.

This process will only work if there is broad participation in this important work as a community. I am asking you to prayerfully discern and consider attending one of these sessions. We have selected three dates with the hopes that everyone will be able to attend a gathering. The dates are:

Monday, April 11, 2016 6:00 - 8:30 pm
Saturday, April 16, 2016 9:00 - 11:30 am
Saturday, May 21, 2016 9:00 - 11:30 am

Please know I am personally available to all of you, regardless of your opinion on this issue. The clergy and vestry care deeply for St. Mark's, and we will engage this issue with prayerful discernment and all the care that it deserves. Do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions about this process. I am profoundly grateful for the generous and discerning spirit of this place. We are centered on our identity as redeemed children of God. I trust in the power of the Spirit to guide us, and I encourage all of us to continue to pray for our beloved community.

In Christ,



The Reverend Elizabeth C Knowlton
Rector, St. Mark's Episcopal Church