

# **St. Paul's Episcopal Church Fayetteville, Arkansas**

## **Our Congregational Process of Conversation about Same-Gender Blessings**

### **The Story of our Process**

#### **Our Story**

In the fall of 2002, a retired priest who served as an associate in our parish said in a sermon that he wished our congregation would honor the commitments of our gay couples who are in life-long loving relationships. He wished we could offer those couples the church's pastoral blessing, to let them experience the support that he and his wife of 43 years had enjoyed. His words created a buzz.

A note about our parish. In 2002 Fayetteville was a town of around 60,000 people. It is a college town, and so it tends to be a bit more progressive than other Arkansas communities. We are culturally influenced by the South with some Midwestern and Western flavors.

Early in 2003 we conducted a parish survey to ask the congregation whether we or not should engage in a conversation about the possibility of offering same-gender blessings. A high percentage of the congregation responded to the question. The results were mixed: 50% said "strongly agree" and another 15% said they "somewhat agree" that we were ready to begin such a conversation. It was obvious that there was a lot of energy in favor of engaging the issue. But a very significant minority of almost 22% said they "strongly disagree" with any proposal to initiate any conversation that might lead to our consideration of same-gender blessings.

Our Vestry decided to honor the voice of that minority, choosing to delay any formal process of discernment. The Vestry asked the clergy to produce some information to help the congregation better understand the theological, ecclesiological and biblical issues. They asked for an informal process of education and reflection.

Through the monthly newsletter we published brief articles from a wide range of perspectives. We traced the church's General Convention resolutions about human sexuality. We offered theological and biblical resources from pro and con positions, including material from the *American Anglican Council*. Since the rector was for blessings, he consulted with his friend the Rev. Kendall Harmon of South Carolina to recommend the best resources we could use to present the argument against blessings. Our curate, a former medical school faculty member, wrote an essay and offered a class about human sexuality from a scientific point of view. Each of our clergy preached on the topic at some point. One of the interesting resources we used was a Biblical study of

homosexuality written by a Southern Baptist minister, *Letter to Louise* (see resources page).

Prior to attending the General Convention in the summer of 2003 the rector preached a sermon articulating his thoughts about the inclusion of gay and lesbian members in the life of the church. (See resources page for that sermon, *Crossing Lines*.)

Our parish followed the events of the 2003 General Convention when Gene Robinson was confirmed as the Episcopal Church's first gay bishop in an open relationship. The 2003 General Convention acknowledged that "we recognize that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions." The convention also reaffirmed the 1999 resolution to calling the church to "continued prayer, study, and discernment on the pastoral care for gay and lesbian persons, ...to facilitate as wide a conversation of discernment as possible throughout the church."

After the 2003 General Convention we offered several venues for study and conversation. Among the most helpful things we did was to recruit a group of parishioners to participate in a reconciliation process written by Bishop Steven Charleston called *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation* (see resources page). We recruited a balanced number of parishioners with strong feelings about same-gender blessings from both sides of the debate. We asked them to go through the *Good News* series of structured conversations focusing on the themes of Justice, Compassion and Reconciliation. At the end of the four sessions, the participants responded enthusiastically about their experience. As one participant said, "No one's mind was changed, but I left loving every one of those people in that room."

The group recommended that the Vestry go through the *Good News* process. We asked members of the first group to facilitate the Vestry's engaging of the *Good News* resource. The exercise gave the Vestry a set of skills for listening with deep respect. They learned how to seek reconciliation within disagreement.

Dean Scott Richardson of St. Paul's Cathedral, San Diego came at the invitation of our McMichael Lecture series to speak on the topic *How Can We Live Together When We Believe Different Things*, reflecting on the New Testament church and on his own experience of serving in conflicted contexts.

In early 2005, the rector gave a two-fold charge to the Vestry. First, he asked them to decide whether or not St. Paul's was ready to engage in a process of discernment that would lead to a decision about our position on same-gender blessings. If the answer was "No," that would end our consideration of any change, at least during his tenure as rector. If the answer was "Yes," then he would ask the Vestry to design a procedure to lead the whole congregation into a corporate discernment process. At the end of that congregational process, the Vestry would come to a decision about our congregation's

position on same-gender blessings. The rector said that the Vestry could work through these two questions without any presumed time constraints. Let it take as long as it takes. He also asked that both decisions from the Vestry be decisions made by consensus (see resource page for the definition of “consensus” we used).

The Vestry made the question public and asked for input from the congregation. In their announcement, they reminded the congregation of our Church’s Values for those living in intimate relationships: *“fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God”* --2000 General Convention resolution Do39. *The Episcopal Church holds all its members accountable to those values in their life-long committed relationships. Further, the church denounces “promiscuity, exploitation and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members.”*

Then the Vestry asked the congregation: “Are we ready to discuss whether or not to offer same-gender blessings?” We published the email addresses and telephone numbers of the Vestry members.

The Vestry set up alternating meetings to hear from both perspectives. One month the Vestry listened to the views of those who supported blessings. The Vestry gave ample time for everyone who came to express themselves. There was no debate, just clarifying questions to make sure that the Vestry understood the perspective of all spoke. The following month the Vestry followed the same procedure listening to those who opposed blessings. We were very clear in expressing our conviction that everyone would be heard, respected and valued. We recognized that this is an issue on which very good people disagree. We vowed to hear one another, agree to disagree when we must, and remain in communion with each other in a spirit of compassion and respect.

Congregational input was energetic. The Vestry e-mail inbox was active. After three months of listening, the Vestry was ready to talk among themselves and decide. Their decision was clear: St. Paul’s was ready for a discernment process. What more information do we need? What process shall we follow?

The Vestry asked that the Bishop come and help clarify how our conversation related to the wider Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. To help educate everyone further, we created an information table with the following resources:

*To Set Our Hope on Christ*, The Episcopal Church’s response to the Windsor Report  
*For Fidelity* by Catherine Wallace a strong defense of sexual fidelity  
(our Lenten study book)

**Against blessings:**

Article: *Without Form and Void* by Kendall Harmon

Short book: *True Union in the Body?* by Archbishop Drexel Gomez

### **For blessings:**

Short book: *This Far by Grace* by Bishop Neil Alexander

(see resources page for links to these)

The Vestry asked the rector to write a definition of blessing and to produce a sample rite of blessing so they would know what we were talking about (see resources page).

The Vestry decided that the heart of the congregational process would be four parish meetings following the *Good News* model for reconciliation. Vestry members would sit at small tables to listen and facilitate conversation. Since we had more participants than we had Vestry to facilitate, we recruited several people with group skills to help guide other tables and to report the conversational content back to the Vestry.

The *Good News* process allows for each person to have a voice and to be heard without being argued with or responded to. It places a high value upon listening and upon participants being self-defined. It creates an atmosphere of community and respect. Nearly all of the evaluations that we received from those who participated were very positive. People felt free to express their honest views in a context of respect and reconciliation. At the final session, the Bishop came to address questions about the implications for the wider church. When the four parish meetings were over, the Vestry had heard the parish, and parishioners had listened to one another.

When the Vestry convened to reflect on what they had learned, there was a great deal of awe and appreciation for what the community had been through. It felt like a holy experience. As the members of the Vestry expressed their own hearts, each speaking one at a time, without debate or argument, every member expressed a belief that offering a pastoral rite of blessing for our committed gay couples was the right thing to do. Each member expressed care and concern for those who would disagree with them. After we had listened to one another, there was a clear consensus.

The final wording of the resolution that the Vestry passed on September 19, 2005 was as follows:

*The Vestry of St. Paul's Episcopal Church expresses its support for our church's offering of a rite of blessing as a resource for pastoral care for our gay and lesbian members who wish to make a lifelong, loving commitment of mutual fidelity as a couple. By this resolution we communicate our position to our clergy, our Bishop and the upcoming General Convention of the Episcopal Church.*

The announcement to the parish include some further elaboration explaining that we would honor the House of Bishop's moratorium, so there would be no blessings performed until after the 2006 General Convention, and only if offering a pastoral rite of blessing would conform to the decisions of the General Convention. Since the Vestry saw this resolution as part of their contribution to the whole church's discussion of pastoral

care for all our members, they mailed a copy of it to each Bishop and emailed it to the House of Deputies.

In their communication with the parish, the Vestry expressed particular concern for our parishioners who would find this decision disappointing and painful. The Vestry reaffirmed its intention to continue the spirit of our parish conversations to promote our willingness to honor one another in our disagreements and to remain in communion with each other, seeking reconciliation through Christ's peace which transcends all our divisions.

Around a half-dozen families or individuals who felt the decision was not one that they could consent to and remain in the parish chose to leave. Earlier in the process, a few others left us. Something between 2 percent and 3 percent of our members left during the entire process and conversation. Some, but not all, of those families have now returned to St. Paul's. The Every Member Canvass that we undertook a few months later was a strong one, resulting in pledges that were 15% above the previous year's giving. Attendance continued to grow as did membership.

Shortly after the General Convention of 2006, our Bishop Larry Maze told St. Paul's that there was nothing decided at the Convention which would prevent our congregation from acting on what we had discerned. He gave us permission to offer rites of pastoral blessing for our committed same-gender couples. We followed a process of preparation for union that was similar to what we used for pre-marital preparation, and we performed our first series of blessings. They were worship services of deep joy and love.

Not long after Bishop Larry Benfield was ordained, he asked that Arkansas congregations offering same-gender blessings refrain from certain liturgical actions in order to distinguish the blessings from the sacrament of marriage – vows, exchange of rings, and joining of hands. We modified our service to conform to the bishop's instruction. (see resources)

Our attendance, program and stewardship have continued to grow. This year our discernment process has been about our need to expand our worship space because we find the church is full for two services on many Sundays. We are also discussing our need for more space in all areas of our ministry. We anticipate the possibility of that we will launch a capital drive to underwrite a major expansion of both worship and program facilities in the foreseeable future.