



THE
EPISCOPAL
CHURCH[®]
IN MISSISSIPPI

The Rt. Rev. Brian R. Seage
Bishop

June 3, 2016

Dear Friends,

At Diocesan Council in January, I promised parish resources for discussions on same-sex marriage. Thank you for your patience while I gathered and prepared resources for your use. I promised the resources would be available during the Easter season — I apologize for taking beyond the great 50 days to deliver! I am indebted to a small group of clergy who assisted and advised me in the creation of these materials. Further, I owe a debt of gratitude to clergy and lay leaders who spoke openly with me about the Church's pastoral response, as well as community anxiety related to marriage equality. Time spent on retreat last fall with a diverse group of clergy was also a powerful and formative experience for me.

*With this letter and effective immediately, I give permission to the congregations and clergy of the Diocese of Mississippi, canonically resident or licensed to serve here, to use the liturgies included in *Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be A Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015*. With *The Book of Common Prayer (1979)*, these liturgies permit marriage in church for all couples legally entitled to marry, and are to be used according to the instructions and “rubrics” that accompany them, and for the purposes for which they are intended.*

This significant modification of our former Diocesan policy means that parishes and missions are no longer required to engage in a process of discernment and study, culminating with formal vestry action and submission to me of a petition requesting approval to perform same-sex weddings. Since the sacrament of marriage occurs within a community of faith, and is an outward and visible sign of the care and support extended to a couple, *I strongly encourage parishes and missions to engage in such discernment and study if that has not already been completed.* The resource page is intended to assist parishes and missions that may want to have conversations on this very important matter.

This next statement is important: While General Convention 2015 made multiple changes to the Marriage Canon, one part of the Canon did not change: **“It shall be within the discretion of any member of the clergy of this Church to decline to solemnize or bless any marriage (Canon I.18.7).”** Clergy have always had the discretion to marry, or not marry, any specific couple for any reason — this continues to be the case. While individuals or the vestry of a congregation may offer wisdom, influence and other concerns, I want to emphasize the decision remains with the priest in charge of the parish. The LGBT community does not want to be a “lightning rod” for conflict within their church home! It is critical for you to understand your parish's ability to respond when asked if they will support this couple in their new life in Christ.

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It is my responsibility as bishop to provide access to the marriage liturgies approved for trial use by General Convention 2015. I realize that some of our clergy are willing to officiate and solemnize the marriage of same sex couples while others are not. I respect the faith and ministry of anyone who is unable *“to solemnize the marriages of same sex couples, because of their own conscience or because of their determination that to do so would cause irreparable harm to the unity of the congregation they serve. All clergy have my support, and will not face any disciplinary measures simply because of their personal theological position (Skirving - 2015).”* My only request is that you refer, to me, any same sex couple seeking marriage, so arrangements can be made to offer these services of the church.

While these changes are beyond what we spoke of at Council in Biloxi, I believe that the changes are warranted in order to provide pastoral and spiritual support for everyone in our Diocese. I am aware that any change brings anxiety, but I’m also aware of the grace-filled way our church has walked together and supported the differing viewpoints that exist. I’m calling on all of us to be pastors to each other.

While discerning this call to the episcopate, I spoke openly and honestly at the diocesan “walk-about” and other venues about my support for marriage equality and full inclusion for the LGBT community. I did not get to this point in my faith journey “lightly or unadvisedly.” I arrived here after a lot of prayer and discernment, as well as engagement with Holy Scripture, the traditions of the Church and human reason.

In these initial two years of my Episcopate, I’ve learned a great deal from men and women who do not share my opinion on this subject. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me while patiently sharing your concerns. I have emerged from those conversations enlightened by your faith and commitment to Christ. Further, you have clearly and carefully showed how your opinions are grounded, like mine, in discernment, prayer and study. We both hold divergent, yet strongly held, religious beliefs. Our Anglican history is very important to me as I know it is to you. I believe in the “via media” we represent and further believe that it is possible for scripture, tradition, and reason to support differing theological viewpoints. I know that differing viewpoints can create great discomfort. I’m certain there are many who agree with me. I’m also certain there are many who disagree with me. Further, I’m certain there are faithful individuals on both sides of the issue who have already left the church.

I pray that our Diocese will do what it does best, by ***being one church***. Specifically, we must continue to be a place of welcome to all people and a community centered in Christ, while affirming and nurturing the theological diversity of all people. I believe we can be a Church that promotes unity among its membership while simultaneously reaching out, in the name of Christ, to the world at large. Our baptismal covenant calls each of us to welcome, respect, and value those who are different, or hold different opinions, from us while expecting the same in return.

I continue to use the hashtag #being1church, yet, I am very aware of the variety of divergent opinions in this area. I pray that this letter and the attached resources will provide a way for our congregations to be together in spite of the well-constructed theological differences that exist. I am confident that our clergy and vestries will exercise the sort of leadership that will allow congregations to honor and respect all of their members, even across significant differences.

I humbly ask the LGBT community to continue to have patience with me and our Church. Your sacrifices through the years have been a ministry above and beyond the selfless giving you offer your faith communities. Please know that even if you have worshiped in a specific church for years, and are active in their ministry, there remains the possibility that the church and priest

may be unable to officiate at your wedding. Please find a way to be patient with them as they work with me to find a priest willing to solemnize your marriage. Remember that I have committed to making these services available to all members of the church.

Allow me to close by simply saying I'm sorry to all who are hurt by these actions as well as past action or inaction of the church. I suspect the list is long and includes people on both sides of this issue. I strongly believe that we are a church that can live as part of the *via media*. I strongly believe that we can still be *One Church* in spite of significant differences of opinion. As I've said before, whether clergy or lay we are called to live into our baptismal covenant ... respecting the dignity of every human being. I am confident that the Diocese of Mississippi can do that in spite of differences of opinion and thought. Please call on me if you have any questions but be patient — I suspect my inbox and voicemail will be quite full for a little while.

On the diocesan webpage (www.dioms.org) you can now find a *Marriages and Blessings* resource page under the drop-down menu entitled *Resources*. The links provided offer the assistance of which I spoke; please feel free to adapt these as necessary for your use. We intentionally tried to offer balanced material offering a comprehensive approach to any discussion. In particular, I commend to you the material *I Will Bless You and You Will be a Blessing*, which contains excellent essays written by people on both sides of the issues at hand.

Thank you for your ministry — May the Peace of the Lord be always with you,

+Brian R. Seage (signed)

The Rt. Rev. Brian R. Seage
Bishop of Mississippi