



The Rev. Paul J. Stephens, Rector

The Rev. Dr. Billy Walton, Deacon

June 17, 2016

Dear Friends,

In his June 3 letter (available on the All Saints' webpage), Bishop Seage authorized priests in the Diocese of Mississippi to use the liturgies approved by General Convention to marry "all couples legally entitled to marry." I want to share information with you about how All Saints' will respond to the new diocesan policy. But first, a preliminary word.

In my view, the most significant paragraph in Bishop Seage's letter spoke of "being one 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.

As Anglicans we value comprehensiveness and believe that truth is to be found in the tension between two opposing viewpoints, which William James once described as "yoking of incompatibles." Part of our ethos then is our willingness to discuss different sides of an issue while remaining united in and with Christ.

All Saints' has a long tradition of welcoming and incorporating all who come through our doors while valuing the thoughts, opinions and theological leanings of every individual. That's why we're a "church of formers:" former Methodists, former Southern Baptists, former Presbyterians, former Roman Catholics, former Unitarian Universalists, to name just a few of the former denominations represented in our midst (we'll be even more diverse when Christ the King members begin worshipping with us in early July). I'm certain our parish, and all in it, will continue this long tradition of welcome and inclusion as we strive to live into our baptismal covenant to "respect the dignity of every human being."

Sometimes respecting others or others' beliefs is difficult, especially when they don't see things the same way we do. That's when we need to constantly remind ourselves and one another

that it's not about us or our personal agendas; rather, it's about Christ, the one who makes each of us worthy to stand before God. Our job then as Christians is to live, by word and example, the message of love, redemption and reconciliation which Christ patterned for us, both inside this parish and as we engage the community beyond our walls. When we pattern our lives on Christ's life and teaching, the anxiety and uncertainty that arise out of change (and the fear of change) are minimized, if not swept away; the advancement of personal agendas becomes secondary; and individual and community-wide expectations align with current realities.

We know that the single most important thing one can do to ease worry and minimize the potential for it is to strengthen one's ties of connectedness to community, in this case our parish family. This means living more intentionally in relationship with others. Theologically, we are inherently relational creatures and, as Christians, we are called to live in a particular kind of connectedness to other people and to God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it this way: "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer" (*Life Together*, p. 19). Thus it continues to be important, indeed essential, for our community to gather around God's table on Sundays and other times to celebrate our connectedness to God and to one another. After all, God is the one in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

The All Saints' Wedding Customary, which sets forth the liturgical policies and practices utilized by our parish when two persons desire to be married, has now been amended and updated to reflect Bishop Seage's announcement of the change in diocesan policy and the actions of the 2015 General Convention. (The revised Wedding Customary is found on the parish webpage in the "Schedules, Forms and Resources" section under the "About Us" drop down tab). We will continue the long-standing policy that to be married at All Saints' at least one member of the couple to be married must have a connection to our parish. (See the Wedding Customary at pp. 3-4 for the requirements). All Saints' will not become a "wedding chapel" for just anyone wanting to be married.

Bishop Seage made it clear in his letter that "clergy have always had the discretion to marry, or not marry, any specific couple for any reason – this continues to be the case." As Rector of All Saints' I will continue to prayerfully and carefully exercise that discretion given the particular circumstances presented. Because I sincerely believe that same-sex couples' relationships may be grounded in love and characterized as unconditional, mutual, exclusive, faithful, lifelong and joy-filled and because I sincerely believe same-sex couples should have full and equal access to the sacraments of the church, I will not decline to solemnize a marriage *solely* because the couple seeking to be married is of the same sex.

I am certain that within our parish the changes made in diocesan policy and my decision to implement them will be greeted with a host of feelings and emotions, including anger and frustration, joy and delight. For some, the Bishop's decision has increased their anxiety, while others

view his decision in a different light. Moreover, my decision to marry same-sex couples may be met by resistance in some quarters and excitement about new possibilities in others.

Change often is accompanied by major disruptions in expectations. In turn, major disruptions in expectations often lead to conflict. Conflict is handled in healthy and not-so-healthy ways. I hope that as we live into being one church we will respond to differences of opinion in healthy ways and avoid altogether, or at least minimize, unhealthy responses.

One unhealthy response to conflict has been labeled “silent termination.” Silent termination occurs when people experience conflict and rather than talk about it, work through it, deal with it, process it, they simply and silently terminate their involvement in the organization, or in our case the church. When asked about their absence from worship, activities or programs of the church, their answers might include responses like “it wasn’t a good fit” or “I wish we’d go back to the way things used to be.” Often people who silently terminate their relationship with the church won’t give you a straight answer about why they are no longer involved. Churches experience this behavior more often than you’d think.

Whether we agree or not, I hope that we’ll be able to discuss openly and honestly what we are thinking and feeling about same-sex marriage as we strive to “restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” (BCP, 855). With God’s help, may we always be willing to have the difficult conversations. I and other parish leaders will continue to strive to create healthy spaces where people may fully express their concerns and listen to the concerns of others.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our parish and its work in the world. I cherish your thoughts and opinions and want you to share them with me. Let me know if you want to visit about these matters.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul J. Stephens" with a small cross symbol at the end of the signature.

(The Rev.) Paul J. Stephens
Rector