

Dear Friends in Christ:

As the 74th General Convention of our church meets in Minneapolis July 30–August 8, we will address a myriad of matters pertaining to our life and mission in Christ. Many of the most important things that this council of the church will do will not make the headlines. One that will, as most of us know, is the election of the Bishop Coadjutor of the Diocese of New Hampshire, which will come before the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops for confirmation. The Bishop elect, the Rev. Gene Robinson, is a well-respected priest who has served the Diocese of New Hampshire for more than twenty years. I have known him since we were college students at Sewanee. His election is controversial and has been highly publicized because the Rev. Mr. Robinson is an openly gay man. The question of his confirmation presents the church with difficult issues.

Before I address these issues, as I must as your bishop, I wish to say that I have unequivocal confidence in our diocese to deal with this in a faithful and wise way. You are a spiritually mature diocese, deeply committed to Christ and the Church's mission. I am well aware of the concerns and differences of opinion this circumstance engenders among us, but we would do well to resist the temptation to over-react. As Episcopalians we are no strangers to conflict. It is often through conflict that we grow and deepen in faith. Let us be mindful of Jesus' words to the disciples on the sea during a storm, "why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Since then the church has weathered many a storm and we will weather this one. In spite of us and our human struggles, God is sovereign. So let us "be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The issues with which I struggle in the case of the election in New Hampshire are those of love and order. We are called as the Body of Christ to be a community where all persons are welcome and included - absolutely all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and all other things that make us different and unique. Our church, with many others, has been struggling for years to discern how to minister faithfully to persons who find themselves to be homosexually oriented. The love of Christ compels us to do so.

At the same time, the church must be an ordered community. Our actions must be ordered by our theology and ethics, by the church's faithful interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, by the liturgy, the canons, and the boundaries agreed upon for our common life and ministry. The order of the church enables us to live together in Christ in the face of inevitable differences and self-interest. No one was more passionate than St. Paul about the supremacy of love in the life of the church; no one more eloquent about the freedom of the Gospel. Yet he was quick to insist that "all things be done decently and in order."

Love and order are inseparable for Christian people. Both are necessary in equal measure – lest in our loving we fall into unrooted license and anarchy or in our ordering we fall into legalism and self-righteousness.

The difficulty in the present situation is that in spite of much conversation, debate, and prayer, the church has not found a theological consensus regarding our understanding of homosexual orientation and how fully to minister pastorally to gay and lesbian persons. As the Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, which I am privileged to chair, has said there are different, strongly held theological views among us, which are in serious conflict. For this reason, the report says

we believe it is imperative that the Episcopal Church refrain from any attempt to “settle” the matter legislatively. For a season at least, we must acknowledge and live with the great pain and discomfort of our disagreements. The act of trusting those with whom we disagree intensely bears witness to the reconciling power of God, which is always beyond our imagining. Sensitive restraint and mutual forbearance is needed rather than a vote that might “win” the argument for some and leave others seemingly rejected. “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” (James 1:19-20)

The church’s teaching and order remain that faithfulness in heterosexual marriage or abstinence in singleness are the right ordering of our human sexuality. Some among us have reason to believe that this is inadequate in the light of our emerging understanding of the complexity of human sexual orientation. They conclude that the church needs to find a way to support and bless faithful gay and lesbian persons in monogamous, committed relationships to help them live ordered lives in the love of Christ. Others strongly disagree with such a conclusion.

The difficulty posed by the election in New Hampshire is that to consent to it would be *de facto* to approve a manner of life that the church does not officially sanction. As your bishop I find this to be an untenable position and thus, at this time, I cannot consent to the election. To do so would be to act in contradiction to the common mind of the church.

For some of you this conclusion will be reassuring. Others will be disappointed. But this is where I must stand at this moment.

It is clear to me that the church will continue to struggle with concerns about human sexuality. Anglicans have always wrestled with issues of diversity and unity. Our current debate is a part of this on-going journey.

I believe that there is a way forward, a tested Anglican way with which since the 19th century we have addressed the difficult ethical issues our times have confronted us with, such as birth control, marriage and divorce, and polygamy. It would be to refer our present dilemma to the Lambeth Conference in 2008 for in-depth theological work and consultation. I would urge that the Archbishop of Canterbury appoint a Faith and Order

Commission to undertake sustained theological work on the issues at hand and report to Lambeth in a way that will lead us to find a theological consensus that can ‘bring us to be of one heart and mind within God’s holy Church.’

I am convinced that God is at work in all this ferment. It needs to continue to be in our prayers and our actions as we seek to discern the mind of Christ. For now we need to exercise Godly wisdom and restraint in the service of both love and order. We must remember that “nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In this faith I am assured that, whatever happens at the convention, our diocese will be able to take it in stride and deal with it in a way that builds up the church in love and mission.

We have a very fine deputation of clergy and lay persons representing our diocese in Minneapolis, in addition to Bishop Andrus and myself. Pray for us daily and for the 74th General Convention that Christ will lead us in all things and use us mightily to strengthen us for mission and ministry in the years to come.

Be well. Rejoice often. Serve the Lord and others in all you do.

Faithfully yours,

Henry N. Parsley, Jr.