

# PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

A Presentation in the Series  
“A Conversation about Gay Unions”

*April 24, 2005*

Chapel of the Cross  
*An Episcopal parish in Chapel Hill, NC*

*Stephen Elkins-Williams, Rector*

Dear Parishioner,

I am sending you a copy of my remarks (with some editing) from our recent series, “A Conversation about Gay Unions,” so that the whole parish can be a part of this discussion. As I have said before, while this is not the most crucial moral issue facing the Church and our society, it currently is the most divisive. It is important that we face it as honestly and as lovingly and with as much attentiveness to the Holy Spirit as we can. I want you to know my reflections, and I encourage you to share yours with me and with

other parishioners. Thank you for your time and effort and for your commitment to serving God through your participation at the Chapel of the Cross.

Faithfully,

Stephen Elkins-Williams  
Rector

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

I want to begin by thanking all of you for your participation in this series. It is not just the numbers who have turned out, both in the morning and the evening that have been encouraging and gratifying to me, but the spirit with which you have engaged the speakers and one another. One manifestation of actually being the Church is trying to speak the truth to one another in love and trying to hear that from one another without even seeming to “lord it over one other,” as Jesus urged his followers not to do. You have been doing that very well, and I am grateful.

I have titled my presentation this evening simply “Pastoral Reflections”. The general nature of that title was intentional because I waited to put these thoughts together until I heard the conversation of the first two weeks to be able to respond to areas not covered and to questions that have been expressed. But I also chose the word “pastoral” specifically because I do come at this not only as a pastor who will have been ordained a priest 30 years this June, but as your pastor, assuming that you worship here at the Chapel of the Cross. I do not claim to be a scholar or an author, as our first two distinguished presenters were, and so I will approach things somewhat differently. These pastoral reflections will be very personal and I hope particularly pertinent to us here as a parish community.

Like Dr. Pfaff and Mr. Temple, I have divided my presentation into three parts and will be glad to have responses after each section. In the first section, I will try to articulate my own perspective on homosexuality from a Christian viewpoint. How does that fit into my larger view of the Christian faith, and how have I arrived at that approach? In the second section I will try to lay out the wider perspective for our discussion. What did General Convention do? What has been the wider response? What have our bishop and the bishops together and the Primates said? In the final section, I will try to lead us in seeing where we go from here. What is God calling us to be and to do in the midst of all this? If you will then, the personal, the wider perspective, the call.

## A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Like probably most of you, I grew up thinking that anything to do with homosexuality was a sin. It was a taboo subject, a shameful subject, one that rarely surfaced except for accusative derogatory terms used by insecure adolescent boys to disparage other insecure adolescent boys' manhood. I was as guilty as anyone of that – to the extent that teenagers are responsible for their actions. (My mother-in-law defined adolescence as a prolonged period of temporary insanity!) You could not insult anyone more than to call him a faggot or a pervert – such vicious terms. Homosexuals sometimes appeared in books and movies, almost always as fatally flawed individuals, and of course they were featured very frequently in off-color jokes, which were grossly disparaging to this small number (we thought) of peculiar, “queer” people.

But then as a Jesuit seminarian and later a priest, I began to meet other people, who after a long period of trust-building had taken place, slowly let me know that in one significant way we were different. They did not respond to the opposite sex in the same way that I did and that I had assumed all others did. They responded to their own gender. Some of these were classmates, and some were people I met through the exercise of ministry. All of them, then, were faithful Christians, trying to lead lives of integrity and obedience and love and generosity, sometimes succeeding and sometimes needing forgiveness, as we all were (and do). None of them were “on the make”. None of them were frivolous and flamboyant. None of them were self-loathing, desperate people. None of them fit any of the stereotypes of the media or of the whole culture I had grown up in.

There was a common thread to their stories, however. From a fairly early age they had each sensed a significant difference about themselves. That early awareness, sometimes just on the verge of consciousness, seemed universal. What was unique to each one was the length of time they had denied this intuition and how long they had struggled to deceive themselves and others about this reality – sometimes even after years of marriage. Who can blame them given the enormous consequences for their lives and their very vulnerable place in society? Ultimately each one had eventually given in to the truth and accepted their full identity as persons, which included their homosexuality. As one wag has said, “The truth shall set you free, but first it will make you miserable!” None of them had “chosen” it, as if they had some other real option. I do think it is very difficult for those of us who are not gay or lesbian to comprehend how painful that struggle to accept reality is, given such strong societal expectations and norms.

At any rate, I began to question whether these new friends and colleagues were any bigger sinners than I was. Did God look at them with any less favor? Did the Lord any less “make his face to shine upon [them] and be gracious to [them]?”

I began to do some reading, especially of scripture. I was surprised to find out that Jesus is recorded as not having addressed this subject and that the Gospels – the Good News of God in Christ, our most revered scriptures, for which we stand to hear proclaimed in the Eucharist out of special reverence – made no mention of it. Maybe it was not as central to Christianity as I had thought. There were other passages in the Old Testament and in several Epistles, although not that many, compared e.g. to the frequency of those about how often and how we are to pray to God, how we are to use our money, how we are to be humble, how much we are to care for those in need, etc. The familiar Sodom and Gomorrah story, which has been cited as a condemnation of homosexuality, seems much more about gang violence and abuse of God's messengers – an extreme violation of hospitality, not about sexuality per se. Jesus confirms this interpretation by referring to it when sending out the further seventy-two. “If any will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town” (Matt. 10:14-15). If Jesus' messengers are

not received hospitably, that sin, he says, is worse than the sin (against hospitality) of Sodom and Gomorrah. Otherwise Jesus is mixing apples and oranges in his example.

I won't go specifically into the other scripture passages, since both our other presentations did, but suffice it to say that what is condemned is behavior, not people – a point on which I think there is now strong consensus in the Church, except for the lunatic fringe like the “God Hates Fags” protestors out of Kansas, who are unfortunately protesting on May 6 at Duke and at seven Durham churches, including St. Luke's. That family-dominated group's words and actions are so venomous and debasing and so clearly antithetical to Christian teaching; I am sorry they have returned to the area. But most Christians would agree that orientation in itself is not sinful. I would also say that given the cultural context of these other passages and even their possible connection at that time with cultic worship and therefore idolatry, a major sin, a legitimate interpretation is that they now serve as a healthy limit and boundary for us heterosexuals, for whom homosexual behavior would be a denial of and sin against our identity and integrity. But what about for homosexuals?

Our stance in the Church until recently has been that people who are gay or lesbian have two choices: change or be celibate. That of course is very much easier said than done. The crux of many disagreements is whether change is possible. There are several organized ministries, most headed by “ex-gays”, who purport to be able to change a person's orientation. I would never want to deny the revealed truth that “All things are possible with God,” but I have never personally known any who succeeded at this. My experience is not the limit of our inquiry, of course, but I suspect that those who say they have changed, have been more “situational” homosexuals, i.e. people in a limited and unique environment, like a prison, or those actually choosing homosexual behavior (but without a true orientation) to rebel against their parents or out of hurt from a former heterosexual partner or for some other reason, perhaps unknown even to them. I have talked to psychotherapists who say they have counseled gays who thought they had really changed and were now “poster children” and even fund raisers and leaders in their movements and then had ultimately realized they were living a lie and had to try and deal with the personal damage. Even if some true gay people do genuinely change, and for me that is a big “if”, it does not follow that all these millions of people, across all cultures and all ages, could or should change this critical element of their identity.

Chastity is surely another option, and I believe that some gay people are called to be single, just as some heterosexual people are. We have all known loving, generous single people for whom that seems to be their life-giving vocation. But most of us, now and throughout history, seemed to be called to lifelong companionship. That is a primary way for many of us to grow beyond ourselves, to learn to love another sacrificially, to allow ourselves to realize some sense of God's love for us, and to be able to contribute to building up the community

For us as a predominantly straight Church and society to insist that those who find themselves with a genuine homosexual orientation either change or remain celibate, strikes me as deserving of Jesus' comment about the scribes and Pharisees, “They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger” (Matt. 23:4). Jesus did not admonish the “identified sinners” of his day. In fact he ate with them, sought their company, and told the religious leaders that the tax collectors and prostitutes were going to heaven before them! Imagine! But he often chastised the apparently righteous as straining at the gnat and swallowing the camel, worshipping God with their lips but not with their hearts, refusing to help someone in need on the Sabbath, observing the letter of the law but not the spirit, exalting themselves as not being like the rest of men and putting others down as sinners

or born in sin, and the list goes on and on. I believe that these are the scripture passages that we should be paying much more attention to, that suffuse the Gospels and are at the core of the life-giving, loving, generous, passionate-for-justice-and-for-all-his-creation God, whom Jesus reveals to us.

This ‘thoroughly divine and best of the human’ approach to scripture and to faith and to living lives of humble integrity and dedication to others does not divide us into so called conservatives and liberals. We are all called to these high ideals and to live the fullness of the lives God graces us with. We may differ on exactly the best expression of these divine qualities, which we who are created in God’s image, are called to manifest. But let us all be clear in our insistence that it is the selfless love of God and the genuine love of our neighbors as ourselves and the magnanimity of heart and the greatness of mind and the generosity of soul that go with that, that lie at the core of all that it means to be a Christian. On this particular issue, if we are demanding that others take on burdens that we are not willing to take on ourselves or would not honestly be willing to if we found ourselves in their position, let us hear Jesus’ words to the scribes and Pharisees. We who so easily overlook Jesus’ specific admonition against divorce, for example, because we more personally understand the need of our family member or our friend or ourselves to remarry, need to honestly evaluate our reluctance to cut the same slack to those we may not love and understand as well, but whose need for lifelong companionship is no less great and no less legitimate.

It would be a mistake, however, only to come at this issue from the needs and rights of the individuals involved, as important those are. I have tried to articulate here what it might mean as well for those of us who are heterosexual Christians to benefit from growing personally through this fresher approach to the role of gays and lesbians in our Church and our society. But perhaps more importantly, how might gay unions fulfill one of the traditional purposes of marriage, i.e. to help build up the community? Again, we may have legitimate different opinions about this, but it seems clear to me from the gay couples whom I have known, including those in this parish, that through their relationships, “characterized [in the words of General Convention] by 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,” they are building up the community. If they were all living singly, the Church and society would be the poorer for it. Let me just cite one example, and to avoid any showing of special favor, I will purposely go outside our parish for it! Several weeks ago after our 7:30 service, at which I had just announced this series, a parishioner from one of our local retirement communities came up to me and said, “You know, we have a gay son.” I replied that I had not known that. “Oh yes,” she said. He has been in a committed relationship for twelve years now in western North Carolina, and he and his partner have adopted two little African-American girls. We are so proud of him.” How moving that was to me, not only to experience this unconditional parental love, but also to hear how fruitful and life-giving this union is. In looking at gay unions, I think we should not only approach it from the perspective of justice to the individuals involved but from that of the good of community. In just this country, where the divorce rate approaches 50%, where the number of heterosexual couples living together without benefit of marriage has increased tenfold since 1960, and where there are well over four million single parents, might not the strengthening of gay unions benefit, not hurt, the Church and our society?

Let me finish this section with two closing thoughts. The first is an acknowledgment that part of the deep concern raised by the issue of homo-sexuality is that many see this as a boundary issue. If this goes, that means that anything goes, so there go all limits. It is important for us to realize that no faithful Christian is advocating that. Many behaviors

are still regarded as sinful, as offenses against God and our neighbor and ourselves: promiscuity, abuse of any kind, adultery, unfaithfulness, homosexual behavior for heterosexual people, etc. – including the opposite of those Gospel moral and spiritual teachings clearly articulated by General Convention: fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, etc. We have carefully nuanced, for example, the biblical imperative not to kill, and we are still in that process. Most would agree self defense is legitimate and the defense of others. There are still disagreements about just wars and capital punishment and when abortion is sinful. But we do not consider that process of defining where the limits are as throwing out all limits. Neither, I would contend, does this discussion.

The final thought is to reiterate what I first responded before General Convention met in the summer of 2003. That is that many of these moral dilemmas tend to be resolved by putting a human face on them, as it has happened in this instance for me and, I presume, for the mother I mentioned from our early service. As a country, we finally ended the Viet Nam War when enough of us had been personally touched by its tragedy. Women priests ceased to be an abstract, thorny issue for most when they experienced this woman and that woman mediating the priestly presence of Christ. Divorce, as I mentioned earlier, was no longer a stigma and a block to church participation, especially to ordained ministries, when each of us sensed the pain of particular people, including priests and bishops, and their need to move on with their lives. This is incarnational Christian theology, I believe, seeing Christ in the face of another and opening our hearts to them in love. As gay and lesbian people are given more support and encouragement to be honest about themselves with others, we will all be changed and grow more fully into the loving children of God we are all called to be.

## THE WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Let's move on to the wider situation in the Church. What has General Convention said and what has been the response? Before we look at the 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention in 2003, let's set that in perspective, because this has been an issue for almost thirty years. The first legislation passed in this regard was in 1976. "Resolved, that it is the sense of this General Convention passed that homosexual persons are children of God and have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church." Much of what has happened in the last several decades has been struggling with the meaning and vision of this historic resolution. Perhaps even more radical for its time was another resolution at that Convention which expressed the conviction "that homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens, and calls upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality."

In 1994 in Indianapolis, the Convention passed two canonical changes first proposed nine years earlier: "No person shall be denied rights, status, or an equal place in the life, worship, and governance of this church because of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, disabilities or age, except as otherwise specified by Canon 1.17.5", the other one using the same language for the selection process for ordination. Three years later in Philadelphia, a resolution was presented directing the Standing Liturgical Commission to develop "a rite or rites for the blessing of committed relationships of persons of the same sex" to be presented to the next Convention for inclusion in the Book of Occasional Services. That vote in the House of Deputies failed by one deputation (out of over a hundred). Again in 2000 in Denver, a

similar directive failed narrowly, but a significant resolution did pass overwhelmingly that acknowledged the existence of couples living in life-long committed relationships outside of marriage and expressed the expectation that “such relationships will be characterized by 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” and denouncing “promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members.”

Then in 2003 back in Minneapolis, as you know, the 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention did two things in this regard. The first was to affirm the election of Gene Robinson as the Bishop of New Hampshire, roughly by a 60-40 vote in both houses. A resolution that called on the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to prepare for study by the 75th General Convention rites for “possible inclusion” in *Enriching Our Worship* for supporting the blessing of same-sex relationships “with the permission of the ecclesiastical authority” was replaced by an amendment calling instead for continued prayer, study, and discernment, but also acknowledging differences among us about how best to care pastorally for homosexual persons in monogamous unions, reiterating the expectations of such unions articulated in Denver, and also stating that “local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessings same-sex unions.” That provision was seen by some as protecting officiants at such blessings from presentment and ecclesiastical trial; others saw it as opening the door for local option.

Both of those actions evoked some strong reactions both within the Episcopal Church and in the wider Anglican Communion from those opposed to them. The issues listed were defined in a number of different ways: as an abandonment of the authority of scripture, as revisionist theology, as a defiance of the mind of the Anglican Communion as expressed by the previous Lambeth Conference in 1998, etc. The Archbishop of Canterbury called a special session of the Primates of the 38 national churches which constitute the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion is a loose confederation of churches which stemmed from the Church of England. There are four visible means of unity: the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose role is not unlike the Queen’s for England – a figurehead looked to for unity and leadership, but without significant power; the Lambeth Conference, a meeting of all the Anglican bishops in Canterbury every ten years – 2008 will be the next one; the Primates, who meet for mutual consultation; and the Anglican Consultative Council (the ACC!), comprised of an elected bishop, priest, and lay person from each of the communions, who meet every three years – June 2005 is the next meeting. We will hear more about it in a moment.

Out of that Primates meeting in October of 2003 came the appointment of one more Eames’ Commission, headed by the Primate of Ireland, Archbishop Robin Eames. It was to report back in October of 2004, not so much on the issue of homosexuality, but on the means of union, especially amidst this crisis and turmoil. The commission was asked to address not only the decisions of General Convention and of the Westminster Diocese of Canada, but also the issue of bishops of other countries who have been acting as bishops for laity and clergy beyond their jurisdictions. Their findings were called the Windsor Report, a rather lengthy document divided into four sections: “The Purposes and Benefits of Communion,” “Fundamental Principles,” “Our Future Life Together,” and “The Maintenance of Communion.” In very brief, the process of inter-communion consultation around the question of women’s ordination thirty years ago was held up as a model that was not followed in this controversy. Both the Episcopal Church and the bishops that have intervened in others’ jurisdictions were invited to express regret for the hurt they have caused and the consequences of their actions, to affirm their desire to remain in the Communion, and to effect a moratorium for the former both ordaining

bishops living in same sex unions and authorizing public rites of blessing for same sex unions, and for the latter undertaking any further interventions.

More recently, the Primates met again to discuss the report. They additionally asked the Episcopal Church voluntarily to withdraw their three representatives from the next meeting of the ACC, but to send others to articulate the theological underpinnings of these decisions of General Convention. Just last month, the House of Bishops met in Texas and by near unanimous vote passed a Covenant Statement. Given its timeliness and importance in this dialogue, I want to read it to you.

*We have received the Windsor Report as a helpful contribution to our relationships with Anglican brothers and sisters across the world. We recognize its recommendations as coming from a broadly representative commission inclusive of bishops, clergy, and laity and as an attempt to speak as equals to equals. We experience it as being in the best tradition of autonomy within communion and as helpful in our efforts to live into communion. Likewise, we appreciate receiving the communiqué from the February meeting of the Primates and take seriously the perspectives and convictions stated therein.*

*It is our heartfelt desire to be responsive and attentive to the conversation we have already begun and to which we are being called and as a body offer the following points.*

*1. We reaffirm our commitment to the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 and each of its individual points. We reaffirm our earnest desire to serve Christ in communion with the other provinces of the Anglican family. We reaffirm our continuing commitment to remain in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury and to participate fully in the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference, and the Primates' Meeting, and we earnestly reaffirm our desire to participate in the individual relationships, partnerships, and ministries that we share with other Anglicans, which provide substance to our experience of what it is to be in communion.*

*2. We express our own deep regret for the pain that others have experienced with respect to our actions at the General Convention of 2003 and we offer our sincerest apology and repentance for having breached our bonds of affection by any failure to consult adequately with our Anglican partners before taking those actions.*

*3. The Windsor Report has invited the Episcopal Church "to effect a moratorium on the election and consent to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate who is living in a same gender union until some new consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges" (Windsor Report, para. 134). Our polity, as affirmed both in the Windsor Report and the Primates' Communiqué, does not give us the authority to impose on the dioceses of our church moratoria based on matters of suitability beyond the well-articulated criteria of our canons and ordinal. Nevertheless, this extraordinary moment in our common life offers the opportunity for extraordinary action. In order to make the fullest possible response to the larger communion and to re-claim and strengthen our common bonds of affection, this House of Bishops takes the following provisional measure to contribute to a time for healing and for the educational process called for in the Windsor Report. Those of us having jurisdiction pledge to withhold consent to the consecration of any person elected to the episcopate after the date hereof until the General Convention of 2006, and we encourage the dioceses of our church to delay episcopal elections accordingly. We believe that Christian community requires us to share the burdens of such forbearance; thus it must pertain to all elections of bishops in*

*the Episcopal Church. We recognize that this will cause hardship in some dioceses, and we commit to making ourselves available to those dioceses needing episcopal ministry.*

*4. In response to the invitation in the Windsor Report that we effect a moratorium on public rites of blessing for same sex unions, it is important that we clarify that the Episcopal Church has not authorized any such liturgies, nor has General Convention requested the development of such rites. The Primates, in their communiqué "assure homosexual people that they are children of God, loved and valued by him, and deserving of the best we can give of pastoral care and friendship" (Primates' Communiqué, para. 6). Some in our church hold such "pastoral care" to include the blessing of same sex relationships. Others hold that it does not. Nevertheless, we pledge not to authorize any public rites for the blessing of same sex unions, and we will not bless any such unions, at least until the General Convention of 2006.*

*5. We pledge ourselves not to cross diocesan boundaries to provide episcopal ministry in violation of our own canons and we will hold ourselves accordingly accountable. We will also hold bishops and clergy canonically resident in other provinces likewise accountable. We request that our Anglican partners "effect a moratorium on any further interventions" (Windsor Report, para. 155; see also 1988 Lambeth Conference Resolution 72 and 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution III.2) and work with us to find more creative solutions, such as the initiation of companion diocese relationships, to help us meet the legitimate needs of our own people and still maintain our integrity.*

*6. As a body, we recognize the intentionality and seriousness of the Primates' invitation to the Episcopal Church to refrain voluntarily from having its delegates participate in the Anglican Consultative Council meetings until the Lambeth Conference of 2008. Although we lack the authority in our polity to make such a decision, we defer to the Anglican Consultative Council and the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church to deliberate seriously on that issue. [Note: The Executive Council and the Presiding Bishop did in a letter to the chair of the ACC agree to withdraw the three representatives from official participation in the June meeting in Nottingham, but asked to have them present to listen to the dialogue.]*

*The bonds of affection are not ends in themselves but foundations for mission. Therefore, we re-commit ourselves to work together throughout the communion to eradicate HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and to address the other efforts mentioned by the Primates' Communiqué (para. 20). We dedicate ourselves to full and open dialogue in every available venue through invitations for mutual visitation, intentional exploration of the theological perspectives and spiritual gifts that our diverse cultures offer, and collaborative partnerships for the purpose of shared mission in Christ.*

A look at the situation in our own diocese, and then we will have some discussion. In July of 2004, a year after the 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention and prior to the release of the Windsor Report, Bishop Curry issued a Pastoral Statement to the clergy of the diocese. After grounding the ministry of the Church in its mission to restore all people to the reconciling love of God, he stated his perspective that "the blessing of the committed life long unions of persons of the same gender is one way our community can live the Gospels through faithful and loving pastoral care and spiritual support for each other." While stressing the importance of this pastoral care and spiritual support, he acknowledged that for some congregations that will involve the blessing of unions of persons of the same gender and for some it will not. For those who do sense such a call, he asked that certain guidelines be observed, including consulting the Bishop and keeping

him informed of the process, responding to clear and specific pastoral needs within the congregation, a decision by the rector arrived at “after wide and extended prayer, conversation and education in the parish and in consultation with the vestry, the articulation of pastoral guidelines and spiritual expectations, and emphasizing again the moral and spiritual values expected of such relationships by the last two General Conventions. Bishop Curry spoke to us at the clergy retreat last month, and he distinguished between these pastoral guidelines and the moratorium asked for by the Windsor Report and agreed to by the House of Bishops on approving public rites of same sex blessing. Since we are a Church of the Prayer Book and whatever is publicly approved expresses what we believe, he and the other bishops are in agreement that the Church is not yet ready to do that. But he emphasizes that his guidelines are a pastoral directive, not an approval of a public rite. As far as I know, thus far only St. Phillip’s, Durham and possibly one other parish in this diocese, have implemented these guidelines.

## WHAT GOD CALLS US TO BE AND DO

I have chosen as a heading for this last section the same question that we as a parish have been asking these past several years through the long range planning process: What is God calling us to be and do? It is a lifelong question, of course, and always the right one to be asking. It is not, “What do I want or you want?” or “What is the easiest?” or “What’s in it for me?” or “What might upset the least number of people?” What does God call us to, the God who loves us more than we love ourselves, the God who always us calls us to new life beyond whatever death we face?

What does God call us to be and do? That is a purposeful order. The first question is in some sense easier. God calls us to be God’s children, to claim our identity as created in the image of God, to be brothers and sisters to all God’s children, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, as we promise in our Baptismal Covenant. God calls us to be the Church, to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,” to open our doors and our hearts to all people, not simply to band together as like-minded people, but to seek our unity beyond ourselves and even our convictions in the love and the grace of God. As the Body of Christ, we are not to say to others who disagree with us, “I have no need of you.” In fact I want to speak directly to two specific parts of the Body of Christ here in our parish. I want to recognize how difficult it must be for those of you who are gay to participate in this process. In fact I cannot imagine what it must be like for you to sit here in this group and let heterosexual people, predominantly, talk about you. Thank you for carrying that burden and for your presence among us, not only in general, but specifically in this conversation. I also want to thank those of you who strongly oppose the actions of General Convention. I know you feel like a minority in this parish, and that is probably true. That is never an easy position to be in, especially when your rector comes to different conclusions than you do. But I want you to know how valued your presence is here and continues to be desired, and how much I think we all are to know our profound need for one another and through struggling to be the Church to show forth the reconciling love of God to the world. That is who God calls us to be.

Out of that identity, then, what does God call us to do here at the Chapel of the Cross? We are part of a conflicted Church and a conflicted communion. How do we live within that conflict? When I say “we”, I mean all of us who make up this parish, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, young and old, Rite I and Rite II, Carolina fans and Duke fans(!), and any other way we may tend to separate ourselves. We begin, I

think, by recognizing our common identity, not only with one another here in this parish, but with others in our Church and in our Anglican Communion. Then we build on our common desire to be the Church and to mediate God's love to others. On this particular issue, we start, not with our differences, but with our common understanding, which I am going to presume comes at least from the first resolution passed by General Convention in 1976 "that homosexual persons are children of God and have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church." We have a pretty good record of making that love and acceptance real at the Chapel of the Cross; at least I hope that gay and lesbian parishioners have felt that growing, not only from individuals but in a corporate way. We ought to be clear and specific, for example, that homosexual persons can and do serve in any capacity in our various parish ministries, that partners can appear together in the pictorial directory or be prayed for publicly on their anniversary, or listed as a partner when appropriate in "In Your Prayers" in the bulletin.

Whether that full and equal claim within the Church involves the blessing of a union is a matter we continue as the Church to discern. You know my thoughts about the theology and morality of gay unions, and if I were Pope Benedict XVII, there would be some changes made! But we have a different Church polity, neither Roman Catholic nor congregational. There are pleas all around us, from General Convention, from our bishops, from the Primates, for further prayer, study, and discernment. I think this is more than just biding time until the dust settles. There are legitimate questions to be clarified: What are we really doing when we bless a union? Are we declaring it indissoluble? Do we say, "What God has joined together, let no one put asunder?" Would homosexual couples indicate their desire to live into the Gospel spiritual and moral values articulated by General Convention by signing, for example, a Declaration of Intention similar to that required by national canons of those aspiring to be married? How does this relate, if at all, to the state, assuming that state laws continue to change? And how do we really understand "local option" as building up the Church at a time when there is great division not only within parishes and dioceses, but across national and international jurisdictions?

When I wrote in my Cross Roads letter in September that "ecclesiastically I do not believe that now is the time for individual parishes to begin to engage in blessing same sex unions," this is what I was trying to address. I say that deeply aware of the desire of at least some gay couples among us to have the Church's blessing as soon as possible on what is for them a serious, sacred, and life-giving commitment. I am grateful both for your patience and for the struggles with conscience of those who see this as incompatible with Christian morals and teaching. Will we come to some acceptance in the wider Church and in this parish of the fruitfulness of blessing gay unions? I think quite likely we will; out of my personal convictions, I hope and pray that we do. I do not know, of course, what a timetable might be. The Anglican Consultative Council meets to discuss theology in June. Our bishops have pledged their moratorium until at least the next General Convention in the summer of 2006. I am gratified that we have begun this conversation in our parish, and I am going to ask the Liturgical Advisory Committee to be of assistance in wrestling with the questions I have just listed. I look forward, not to trying to "solve this problem" confronting us, but to trying to live into the challenge calling us to listen more closely to God's Spirit and to embracing our identity as God's children and as the Church.