

October 9, 2013

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Episcopal Church permits our bishops “a generous pastoral response” in those states where there is marriage equality. Massachusetts is one of those states – indeed the first of those states. Today, with joy, I give the clergy of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts permission to officiate at same-sex weddings and permission to sign the marriage license when so doing.

This permission (which is not a command) is given joyfully because I believe the commitment of same-sex couples to a faithful, “covenanted” love is an expression of God’s love in this world, just as is the committed love of heterosexual couples. This permission is given joyfully because our Episcopal Church welcomes all and that welcome to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters has greatly blessed our mission to this world. To welcome them and say “stop” when they ask to be married has always been disconcerting to me, to say nothing of what it does to their spiritual journey. This permission is given with joy because of the happiness it will give those couples who have longed to have their relationships celebrated in their faith communities with full recognition that God is present in and between them. This permission is given with joy because our gay and lesbian church members will no longer have to seek marriage outside the church in order to have their civil rights as a dedicated couple recognized.

This permission is given joyfully because it does not negate the rights of those in our church who see this differently. We are a Church that honors diversity of opinion. There are good people who read their Bible, say their prayers, and live generous lives who agree with marriage equality. There are good people who read their Bible, say their prayers, and live generous lives who believe marriage can only be between a man and a woman. I can offer this permission with a hope based on experience that those who disagree know they have my support and respect. That trust has been our reality ever since last July when Bishop Scruton and I gave permission for the blessing of same-sex unions. For many years I have preached “We are not the Body of Christ because we agree with each other. We are the Body of Christ because we care about each other.” You, the people of Western Massachusetts, have embraced that teaching. I echo the words of my brother Bishop in Rhode Island, Nick Knisely: “As your Bishop I respect and honor your right to disagree with me. A key part of what it means to be a member of the Episcopal Church is that, as long as we all agree that we believe Jesus is our Lord and savior, we can hold varied and diverse opinions and still meet each other in Christ at God’s altar.”

Please click on the link below this letter for the document that gives the details of this “generous pastoral response.” Please read it with care. And let us support one another as we attempt to follow Jesus in his mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Douglas Fisher". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the left of the printed name.

Douglas F. Fisher
Bishop
DJF/ch