

Theological Reflection for the House of Bishops – September 18, 2010 – T. C. Ely

The invitation I'm responding to this morning is to offer a brief theological reflection addressing the question, "What is God up to in our midst regarding same gender relations," from the contextual perspective of the diocese I serve. While there is so much more to the mission and ministry of the Diocese of Vermont than this particular focus, I appreciate very much the opportunity to share my perspective on it because I believe it is part of the Gospel proclamation, part of the Good News of Jesus Christ, being lived out in Vermont and in so many other places around our church and around the world. And I think it is Good News worth telling.

I have never known a time as Bishop of Vermont when gay and lesbian couples **could not** legally be joined in Civil Union or in Civil Marriage. On July 1, 2000, Vermont became the first state in the country to legally recognize civil unions between gay or lesbian couples. On April 28, 2001 I was ordained and consecrated bishop. On April 9, 2009, the Vermont legislature assured marriage equality for all its citizens. During all that time (and even before), the response of both my predecessor and me was to support and provide appropriate pastoral guidelines for the blessing of committed, monogamous, life-long, same gender relationships.

Week after week, I continue to witness the importance of that pastoral ministry in the lives of couples and congregations. Just a few weeks ago at a parish retirement luncheon honoring one of our priests who had served this particular congregation for nearly 30 years, a lesbian couple stood together during the "open mike" session and gave grateful testimony for the welcome they felt from The Episcopal Church, and their congregation in particular, where their marriage had been celebrated and blessed just two weeks earlier.

As you would expect, not all members of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont are "at home" with these measures, and over the course of the past ten years some of those have left The Episcopal Church and moved to other faith communities. However, for the most part there is, and has been, mutual respect for a diversity of conviction, along with continuing education, conversation and pastoral care for all our members, as we seek to hold fast to the biblical understanding that one member of the Body cannot say to another member of the Body, "I have no need of you" (I Cor. 12:21).

It is also true that in the course of these past ten years many people in Vermont, including some who expressed initial reservations to our pastoral response, have come to appreciate the faithful lives and generous contributions of gay and lesbian couples whose Civil Unions or marriages have been blessed in the community of faith, and who in turn have blessed us by their lives, their gifts and their witness. I believe this is because in the spirit of Matthew 7 and Galatians 5 we have seen the fruits of the Spirit manifest in the lives of these Christians among whom we live and work and worship. "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25).

The outcome of our pastoral support of gay and lesbian couples who are members of our congregations, as well as those who are drawn into the life of The Episcopal Church because of our pastoral welcome, is that we are a stronger, more diverse, healthy and vital diocese in which - as Paul invites - the gifts and ministries of all God's people are welcomed, valued, respected and embraced (I Corinthians 12).

It is also an important part of our evangelical witness to the world, and not only to gay and lesbian persons, but to all persons seeking a faith community that is open, welcoming, respectful and embracing of all.

As witnessed in the ministry of our Lord, and in the expansion of God's mission and welcome to the previously marginalized and excluded Gentiles, struggle and controversy is often part of the reality when the status quo is disturbed. And yet, thanks be to God, God finds ways to break through our fear, confusion and disagreements, leading us to new and deeper understandings and expressions of what it means to be "In Christ." Bishop Mark Hanson said it far more eloquently than I can, when referencing II Corinthians 5 on Thursday: Indeed it is the "love of Christ" that both compels us AND transforms us.

In Galatians 3:27-29 we read: "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*" I believe that God has gifted Vermont (among other places) with the responsibility of teaching and modeling and leading the way to this renewed, reconciled, and consecrated Christian community of radical incarnation, welcome, inclusion and witness, in which the love of God is manifest in the life and witness of all its members, and especially in this age and time, in the lives of gay and lesbian persons and couples. Thank you for letting me bear witness to some of our story.