

August 15, 2003

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

A little over three years ago, on May 17, 2000, I set foot in the Diocese of Lexington for the very first time in my life as a nominee to be your bishop. Over the next few days, I began to get to know you, and as it turns out, to love you. As part of the process of getting to know each other and listening together to determine whom God was calling to be your next bishop, I had the opportunity to stand in four different meeting rooms at the Holiday Inn in Frankfort and answer any question posed by the nearly one hundred people in each one. In each one of those rooms, the question of homosexuality was raised. My conviction on the issue, and more importantly my conviction on how we live together in the face of this issue, remain the same now as then.

What I said then was that there were four principles that I believed should govern our community life as we worked through the issue of homosexuality. First, the Gospel is intended by God for all people, which means that the doors of the church must be open to all. That includes people of all nations, all races, and all the ways God has created them. It includes people with disabilities. It includes people who speak different languages. And it includes gay and lesbian people. Second, all people in the church are entitled to call upon the pastoral care of the church. We must help each other live our lives of discipleship as best we can. Third, the one thing there is no room for in the church is judgment. The life of the community, as Jesus well knew, cannot tolerate the judgment of one another. "Do not judge," Jesus said, "so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mt. 7:1-2). We in the community of Christ are to treat each other with charity, quite frankly, so that charity may be the measure we receive from God. Christ is equally explicit about the response of God, who is so forbearing toward us, if we are not forbearing with one another (Mt. 18:23-35). Fourth, we will be governed in this diocese by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church. I was specifically asked at the time about the blessing of same sex relationships. I responded that while I was personally in favor of such blessings as a matter of pastoral care, my understanding was that they were not permitted by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the church and so I would not permit them in this diocese unless they were. The clergy later asked me in their first meeting with me as your bishop how I would respond should such a blessing take place, and based on the same principle, I told them unequivocally that I would bring the full disciplinary weight of the church to bear to uphold that doctrine, discipline, and worship, which I believe it my duty as bishop to do.

I am convinced that these four principles remain wise, and it is my intention to continue to live by them. I think, in fact, they have fresh applicability in light of our recently completed General Convention.

First, all are welcome in the church. This includes not only people of all nations, all races, and all the ways God has created them. It includes people of different opinions, including different opinions on the issue of homosexuality. It remains just as true today as it ever has been that there is room at God's table for everyone, absolutely everyone, because the love of God made known in Jesus Christ is big enough for everyone. Differences of opinion have been with us in the church from the very beginning. They always will be. The place of race in the church replaced our disagreement about the place of divorced persons in the church. The place of women in the church replaced our disagreement about the place of race in the church. The place of homosexual persons has replaced our disagreement about the place of women in the church. Something will eventually replace our current disagreement. From the very beginning, we Christians have found a way to love each other through our differences of opinion and even our errors, often in spite of them, despite "no small dissension and debate" (Acts 15:2), and despite even anger (Gal. 2:11-14). The first principle of our common life together is that the church is big enough for all of us. I can state unequivocally that, at least from my perspective, any difference of opinion on this issue will not keep me from being in relationship with anyone as your bishop. I can state with certainty it will not keep me from loving you.

The second principle is that all in the church are entitled to the pastoral care of the church. There are two aspects of that pastoral care on which I need to elaborate. The first one is that I am well aware that some of us are hurting right now over the actions of our recent General Convention because of deep conviction that the Episcopal Church has made a major error with respect to the decision to confirm the election of an openly gay bishop and as to allowing local diocesan option subject to the bishop's oversight with respect to pastoral support of same sex relationships. I can tell you that the atmosphere in the House of Bishops after the approval of the Diocese of New Hampshire's election had been announced was one of grief and pain, not out of a sense among the majority that we had done the wrong thing, but out of a sense that made real the words of St. Paul. "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Cor. 12:26). When some of my brothers and sisters, whom I love, are hurting, I discovered again that I hurt, too. The first pastoral need at the moment is to attend to the hurt. Some of us will need to grieve. Others of us will need to respect that need. We must love each other through both our joy and our grief.

But I also need to explain to you what I believe the need of every person for the pastoral care of the church means for us with respect to homosexual persons. Some of our brothers and sisters in Christ, because of the fact that they are constitutionally oriented to the same sex rather than, as most of us, the opposite sex, cannot enjoy the same spiritual benefits I receive in marriage, spiritual benefits that, in all honesty, I would wish for every person not granted the gift of celibacy as St. Paul describes it (1 Cor. 7:7). That is particularly true with respect to the benefit of companionship and the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity. It is also true with respect to the reality that marriage is what has taught me a great and sometimes difficult lesson, which St. Paul also taught, that love does not insist on its own way (1 Cor. 13:4). And, of course, there are others. Are these not inherent goods that we would wish for all persons and especially for all Christians because of how very important they are in living out lives of faithful discipleship? I confess that I cannot imagine living out my life as a Christian without them.

When I look to the tradition of the church, indeed I find that the church has held these goods to be so important that out of compassion and in fulfillment of its pastoral obligation, it has made them available to people that Scripture seems to say they should not be available to, persons who have been divorced. About divorced persons and the possibility of being remarried, Jesus had some hard words. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mk. 10:11-12). Elsewhere (Mt. 19:9), Jesus makes one small exception for divorce caused by unchastity. Otherwise, however, the witness of Scripture seems to rule out any possibility that Christians, having failed at one marriage, even despite their best efforts and for whatever reason, might ever remarry (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

As to marriage, which is exclusively for heterosexuals, the church has found a way to balance the letter of Scripture, even the words of Christ, with the spirit of Christ by extending pastoral grace to those who need it. Since 1973 throughout the church, and actually since 1946 when we began allowing remarriage after divorce as a matter of local diocesan option, we in the Episcopal Church have attempted to respond to the needs of our social context in a pastoral way and to understand and apply Mark 10, Matthew 19, and 1 Corinthians 7 in light of that context. Few of us, I suspect, would now counsel that we should do otherwise. You may be interested to know that the witness of the Anglican Communion, of which we are only a part, on this subject is quite mixed. The Anglican Church of Canada is now in the process of removing the need for the bishop’s approval before a divorced person can be remarried. The Church of England has only recently allowed remarriage after divorce at all. I do not know the position of any of the African churches on this issue, but I do know that they asked the 1988 Lambeth Conference to offer an opinion on a modification of the church’s teaching against polygamy for the purpose of responding to a pastoral need of their particular social context, the conversion of Muslims who came to Christianity already married to more than one wife.

Our recently completed General Convention, in all honesty, stands in exactly this tradition. I mention this not to say it is something with which you must agree. I mention it to say that it is not fair to say that the General Convention has done something different in kind from what it has already done with respect to heterosexual persons and in an attempt, not to abandon the tradition of the Gospel, but to be true to the spirit of grace, compassion, and pastoral care that underlie it.

The third principle is the one that, in all honesty, causes me the most concern right now. It is that judgment is absolutely forbidden in the community of Christ. This is the one thing that we cannot tolerate—ever. I have enough confidence, sure confidence in Christ, in the mercy of God not to fear for our church for what we have done. I would not have feared for our church if we had taken exactly the opposite actions. I do not fear because I trust that God is still in charge and that God will sort everything out, confirming what has happened if it is good and true and correcting it if it is not. The one and only thing I fear as your bishop is our judgment of one another. I tell you in all candor that there is room for everyone in the church, but there is no room in the church at all for judgment of one another. None.

And if you think about it, I believe you will see that judgment, in the many forms it is expressed, mostly pridefully and willfully, is quite uncalled for. I know that Archbishop Peter Akinola of the Anglican Church of Nigeria is convinced that we have made a mistake. I have

met Archbishop Akinola when he spent time with and spoke to our House of Bishops. I know him to be a faithful, committed, and intelligent man. He has one point of view. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of the Anglican Church of South Africa is convinced that we have not made a mistake. I have also met Archbishop Tutu in the same context and know him likewise to be faithful, committed, intelligent, and equally familiar with his Bible. I do not think for a minute that either of these two great men would disagree about something that were truly simple, plain, or clear, or about which Christians could not in good faith disagree. To judge either as apostate would be quite illegitimate. I know that I worked very hard to bring about a compromise at General Convention on the issue of same sex relationships and authored a resolution to that effect with Bishop Herlong of Tennessee and Bishop Jecko of Florida, both of whom have a very different view of the issue of homosexuality than I do, but both of whom, I know for a fact, are motivated by their understanding of what love requires, no less than am I. It would be terribly wrong to judge them otherwise. The danger we face is not error. It is judgment of one another.

Dearest friends in Christ, it is true that both positions cannot be right. It is also true that both positions are within the boundary of faithful conversation in the body of Christ. It is also true that both positions are held by faithful, committed, and intelligent Christians who read their Bible and who love Christ with all their heart. We will discern, in God's time, which position is right, which we all think we already know of course. We will discern God's will by doing the one thing we all agree to be God's will, which is to love one another through this. What there is no room for, and what we must not allow to infect our souls, is judgment of one another. Judgment is antithetical to love. What is antithetical to love stands opposed to the Gospel of Christ.

The fourth principle to which I continue to hold is that we will be governed by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church. The first thing that means to me is that being part of the church means that I must yield my individual will to the will of the community as to the life of the community. We do not always get our way, but we trust that the community together may know better than any one of us alone. As the chief pastor of this diocese, I want to say to you that insisting on one's own will is the way of alienation and not the way of the cross that leads to eternal life. Our salvation is in the humility of Christ (Phil. 2:5-8) and not in our prideful assertion of ourselves. Up until this point, I have attempted to be true to my position by not allowing the blessing of same sex unions and by bringing the full disciplinary weight of the church to bear on that even though I disagreed. I have trusted the church as a whole to know better than I alone. I have continued to work, give, and pray for the church despite my disagreement with the church. That is, it seems to me, what it means spiritually to take on the mind of Christ. And, I think, it is what it means to be faithful to the promises of my baptism. I have not seen up until now, and I continue not to see, how one could do otherwise without also falling into the trap of judging others. We are in this together. We must work this out together. We must love our way through this together.

I am convening a meeting of our clergy on Tuesday of this week so that we might begin to do just that. That will lead, I hope, to further coming together, which will include the laity in that conversation, loving, reconciling, and healing. We will take counsel together and most importantly we will love each other together. And we will do so not because it is required by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church, but because it is required by the Gospel. The doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church is just the gift God has given us to help us do so.

I appreciate your patience in giving attention to my pastoral thoughts on the issue of sexuality from General Convention. In truth it is not the story of General Convention I really want to be dealing with at all. The story I want to tell you is of the premier of a new video production called "Women of the Table," that features the ministry of women in three dioceses, one of which is the Diocese of Lexington, in which women of our diocese shared their stories about reading camp, prison ministry, music ministry, and their love of the Lord. The story I want to tell you is of the incredibly bright and hopeful youth representatives, one of whom spoke passionately and articulately to the House of Bishops about the importance of youth ministry and all of whom handed out key chains inviting the bishops, deputies, and visitors to the next national gathering of Episcopal Youth, which will be held in the Diocese of Lexington at Berea College in 2005. The story I want to tell you is of one of our youngest deputies, a laywoman from Winchester, who was part of the press briefing team that met with journalists, and her quite remarkable poise and her even more remarkable love for the Episcopal Church. The story I want to tell you is of the convention's sense of the importance of putting our money where our mouth is by finding an extra one million dollars in the budget for the purpose of reaching young people. The story I want to tell is of the convention's commitment that all worship and educational materials of the church be printed in English, Spanish (the second most frequently used language of Episcopalians), and French (the language of what may be the largest diocese of the Episcopal Church and our own companion diocese, the Diocese of Haiti) for reasons of evangelism. The true story of the General Convention was about positioning ourselves for mission. It is my strong intention that that be the story of the Diocese of Lexington as well.

With your help, I have confidence that we will love our way through this. It is what brothers and sisters do. It is what the Gospel requires. It is more than that. It is the Gospel itself.

Faithfully yours,

Stacy F. Sauls
Bishop of Lexington