

Response to the Bishop's Pastoral Direction on Same-Gender Marriage,
from the Rector, Wardens and Vestry of Grace Episcopal Church
Thursday, January 19, 2012

The Rector's Annual Report for 2011 (see Appendix 1, below) summarized the broad spectrum of views within Grace Church's membership on the issue of same-gender marriage. This diversity of views should not come as a surprise; in fact, we see it as a blessing. Grace's membership holds widely and sometimes sharply differing perspectives on many issues of political, social, cultural and religious import, and we treasure this diversity.

Because of this, Grace's leadership has always hesitated to take public positions with which some of our members might, from their own deep-seated and thoughtful convictions, disagree. We prize the "vital center" of Grace's shared commitment to worship and service, and the Episcopal Church's characteristic respect for freedom of conscience on matters on which we may differ. We eschew taking, without extended deliberation and due care, any action which could imperil the "unity in diversity" of our life together.

This said, we believe recent developments constrain us to formulate a policy on same-gender marriage. The District of Columbia Marriage Equality Act permits and recognizes it. More important, the Diocese of Washington, pursuant to decisions of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, now permits clergy to perform such marriages at their discretion, in accordance with Bishop Chane's Pastoral Direction and Addendum (see Appendix 2, below) and, in the case of parish priests, with the consent of the Vestry. Bishop Chane, now retired, helped lead the move to permit same-gender marriage and authorized it in this diocese. Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde has expressed her support for same-gender marriages in the church. Although she certainly may decide to issue her own Pastoral Direction on the subject, we have no reason to believe she will limit or revoke Bishop Chane's permission to solemnize such marriages.

Grace has considered same-gender marriage at length, in ways open to everyone. We offered a two-month Adult Forum series on the subject, in January (theological and Biblical foundations) and May (practical implications) of 2011. Both in Forum gatherings, and in individual conversations with our Rector and also some Vestry members, members of Grace have shared their views (summarized, again, in the Rector's Report mentioned above and appended below). The Rector, Wardens and Vestry remain ready and eager to hear parishioners' concerns and perspectives.

As the Bishop's Pastoral Direction makes clear, no priest is or can be required to perform same-gender marriages nor, by implication, can any Vestry be compelled to authorize, or not to authorize, such, or even to make a decision one way or the other. Neutrality is an option, too. Here we see, again, the Episcopal Church's practice of respecting freedom of conscience.

Still, we are an episcopal church, meaning that we are governed by Bishops and organized in dioceses. The diocese – not the parish – is our primary expression of community, of our participation in the Body of Christ. Our immediate and most deeply-felt loyalties lie, of course, with the parish family. But when our diocese lays before us an option of the sort we now contemplate, we have a sacred obligation to respond. While we honor the decision of some parishes to remain non-committal, based on their own circumstances and sensitivities, and while we have considered taking this path at Grace, we also believe we can only fully discharge our responsibilities as a parish in the Diocese of Washington by voting either to authorize, or not to authorize, the performance of same-gender marriages at Grace.

Further, we believe we should offer a clear “yes” or “no” to persons who contact Grace to inquire as to whether Grace has authorized same-gender marriage.

We recommend that any such authorization be extended, at this time, only to the Rev. John Graham in his capacity as Rector of Grace Church, and limited by the provisions of the Bishop’s Pastoral Direction and Addendum (below). Doing so, we believe, will address the concerns and fears of some, that authorizing same-gender marriage could change the character and composition of Grace. Our goal, should authorization be approved, is to do so in a way that allows as large a segment of our membership as possible to see this decision as, at the very least, acceptable.

Further comments and questions on this matter, for me and / or the Vestry, are welcome – particularly if your perspective is not represented in the summary found in Appendix 1, or if you wish to add your support to one or more of the enumerated perspectives. Individual contact with the Rector and Vestry members is most welcome; also, you can reach all Vestry members by e-mailing vestry@gracedc.org.

We ask that you hold us in your thoughts and prayers.

John Graham, Rector; Margaret Davis, Senior Warden; Paul Alligood, Junior Warden; and the Vestry of Grace Episcopal Church

Appendix 1

EXCERPT FROM THE RECTOR’S 2011 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE PARISH

Same-gender marriage

This subject received considerable attention in the fall of 2010 and the first six months of 2011, both in Adult Forum and in conversations among parishioners and with me. Here’s a summary of the perspectives that received significant support:

- The challenges and blessings of marriage should be made available to same-gender as well as opposite sex couples, and Grace Church should offer the sacramental rite of

marriage to same-gender couples.

- Grace should consider whether offering same-gender marriage services will change the character and composition of Grace, by attracting large numbers of same-gender couples to our church.
- The Vestry should authorize same-gender marriage at Grace, but limit the authorization to the current Rector. The Vestry would have to vote separately as to whether to authorize future Rectors or other Grace clergy to perform such marriages.
- “Just don’t call it marriage”: Grace might consider blessing same-gender unions, but marriage has a separate and distinct status which pertains only to opposite sex couples. Offering something called “marriage” to same-gender couples would dilute or alter the very meaning of the concept.
- Don’t authorize same-gender marriage at Grace yet, till we’ve had a chance to see what effects the legalization of same-gender marriage has on the social fabric, here in DC and elsewhere.
- Don’t authorize it at all, because the prohibitions expressed by the Bible and Christian tradition protect people from inherently exploitative and unhealthy relationships.

Note that clergy may perform same-gender marriages in the District of Columbia only with the consent of the Vestry of the parish where these marriages are performed, and may perform marriage of persons residing outside the geographical boundaries of the District of Columbia only if such persons have been active members of Diocese of Washington parishes for one year.

Appendix 2

BISHOP’S PASTORAL DIRECTION REGARDING THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA’S MARRIAGE EQUALITY ACT: February of 2010

As the Bishop of the Diocese of Washington it is important that I put forward guidelines for clergy of the diocese to follow now that the District’s Marriage Equality Act is law. I do so based on my interpretation of General Convention Resolution CO56, which states that “bishops, particularly in those dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same gender marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church.” I hope that these pastoral guidelines will be helpful to the clergy that I serve as bishop. In the matter of how to engage or not engage in performing, witnessing and blessing same-sex marriages within the District, I respect the pastoral judgment and decisions of the clergy under my pastoral oversight.

1) No priest of this diocese, canonically resident or licensed in accordance with the canons of The Episcopal Church shall be required to act as a licensed agent of the District of Columbia in marrying persons of the same gender; neither shall they be required to bless such civil marriages.

2) Any priest from the diocese, canonically resident or licensed, who has been asked to marry same gender couples according to the Marriage Equality Act must: a) have a valid license from the District government; b) have the support of the vestry if the marriage is to occur in the congregation they serve as rector, assistant, supply priest, priest-in-charge or interim or if in another Episcopal congregation in the District of Columbia, the permission of that rector and vestry; c) notify the bishop at least 30 days prior to the marriage when and where it will take place; d) comply with all the requirements that pertain to heterosexual marriage including those relevant to previous marriages that have ended in divorce. All guidelines for Holy Matrimony currently in effect in the diocese shall be applicable to those persons contemplating civil same-gender marriage within the District. (Marriage guidelines are available at www.edow.org/marriage.)

3) Priests who serve congregations in the four counties of Maryland may marry persons in the District who are residents in the State of Maryland and who are active members of their congregations. They may marry within the District, provided that the couple has a valid DC marriage license and the priest is licensed in the District. All such marriages involving clergy who serve congregations in Maryland and who are entering the District must have the permission of the Bishop of Washington. If the marriage is to occur in an Episcopal congregation within the District, the rector and vestry of that church must give their permission for the use of the church.

4) Episcopal priests from outside the Diocese of Washington are not permitted to enter the diocese to perform, witness and bless same-gender marriages unless they are from a State and diocese that permits same gender marriage.

5) No priest from the Diocese of Washington will be permitted to travel outside of the diocese to perform witness and bless a same-gender marriage in another diocese where such marriage is legal without the written permission of the bishop of that diocese. Priests from the Diocese of Washington who have received permission must also notify the Bishop of Washington of their intent.

6) Persons who reside in other dioceses may not enter the Diocese of Washington to have a same-gender marriage performed, witnessed and blessed by a priest of this diocese or a priest from the diocese in which they reside unless that state legally permits same-gender marriage, and the diocese within that state also permits its clergy to perform, witness and bless same-gender marriages.

7) In the Diocese of Washington, deacons are not permitted to witness and bless marriages

and are also prohibited from performing, witnessing and blessing same-gender marriages under the Marriage equality Act of the District of Columbia.

Addendum to Bishop's Pastoral Direction Regarding The District of Columbia's Marriage Equality Act; March 10, 2010

8) Couples residing outside the geographic boundaries of the Diocese of Washington and seeking civil same-gender marriages in the District of Columbia officiated by Episcopal clergy of this diocese must be active members of a congregation in the Diocese of Washington for a minimum of one year.