



# The Diocese of New Jersey

PROCLAIMING CHRIST IN THE GARDEN STATE

## A Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of New Jersey July 9, 2015

Dear People of the Diocese of New Jersey:

*O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were being cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.*

The 78th General Convention of The Episcopal Church is now over. Without question, it was a historic General Convention. The Holy Spirit appeared to be vibrant, moving, in our midst.

### **The Election of the 27th Presiding Bishop**

On June 27, at the Cathedral of St. Mark in Salt Lake City, following prayer and the singing of hymns, the House of Bishops elected The Right Reverend Michael Curry, Bishop of North Carolina, the 27th Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church. Bishop Curry is the first African-American Presiding Bishop in the history of The Episcopal Church. One of four nominees, Bishop Curry was elected on the first ballot, receiving 121 of the 174 votes cast. His election as Presiding Bishop was overwhelmingly confirmed by the House of Deputies that same day 800 – 12. I am excited at Bishop Curry's election. He is not only Christ-filled, he is joy-filled. An electrifying preacher and teacher, Bishop Curry promises to bring a new, evangelistic spirit to The Episcopal Church.

His investiture as the 27th Presiding Bishop will take place on November 1, 2015 at The Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul (The National Cathedral) in Washington, D.C. Between now and that date, I ask every congregation of the Diocese of New Jersey to include prayers for

Michael, our Presiding-Bishop Elect in addition to your prayers for Katharine, our Presiding Bishop, during the Prayers of the People at all celebrations of the Eucharist.

The 78th General Convention afforded us several opportunities to show our appreciation to The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, the 26th Presiding Bishop. Her election in 2006 as the first female Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church and first female Primate of the Anglican Communion was itself a significant historic event. Bishop Katharine came to office during turbulent times in the life of The Episcopal Church (and as a licensed pilot, she understands turbulence). This church needed her cool judgment, her deep faithfulness, her pastoral sensibility and her strong and steady leadership to bring it through the turmoil. One bishop observed that nearly half the active bishops currently in the House of Bishops have been ordained by Bishop Katharine. I was deeply grateful for her presence as Chief-Consecrator at Trinity Cathedral on November 2, 2013 when I was ordained the 12th Bishop of New Jersey. Even as I look forward to an exciting new era under Bishop Curry, I will miss Bishop Katharine's determination and courage and will always be thankful for her role in my own ministry as well as for her outstanding leadership of our church. I hope we will all keep her and her husband, Richard, in our prayers during this time of transition.

### **Response to Racism**

As events began to unfold at the 78th General Convention, I couldn't help feeling that we who were participating were caught up in a Kairos moment – a moment full of meaning, importance and divine purpose. God appeared to be calling us to confront particular circumstances in our church and in our world, inviting us to see the possibility of a new and divine reality and to act toward the realization of that divine reality. Our General Convention began less than a week after the cold-blooded, racist shootings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. That horrific event, combined with many other acts of violence against people of color in this nation, and especially against members of the black community, confronted us all with the fact that racism continues to plague our nation and our world. In recognition of this, The 78th General Convention passed Resolution C019 which states, in part:

- **Resolved**, the House of Bishops concurring, that the 78th General Convention of The Episcopal Church confesses that, despite repeated efforts at anti-racism training as well as racial justice and racial reconciliation initiatives including the passage of more than 30 General Convention resolutions dating back to 1952, the abomination and sin of racism continue to plague our society and our Church at great cost to human life and human dignity; we formally acknowledge our historic and contemporary participation in this evil and repent of it; and be it further
- **Resolved**, That in the wake of the brutal, overtly racist murders of nine of our Christian brothers and sisters of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015; numerous inexcusable deaths of unarmed black men and youth at the hands of law enforcement personnel; and the moral atrocity of mass incarceration in which a hugely

disproportionate number of persons of color have been unfairly caught in the net of an unjust criminal justice system, the 78th General Convention affirms as a top priority of The Episcopal Church in the upcoming triennium the challenging and difficult work of racial reconciliation through prayer, teaching, engagement, and action; and be it further

- **Resolved**, That the Church understands and affirms that the call to pray and act for racial reconciliation is integral to our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to our living into the demands of our Baptismal Covenant...

As Resolution C019 makes clear, despite all efforts of the past, this original sin of our nation's founding continues to damage us all. Because of this, it is difficult to live up to the national ideals which we celebrated just last week. In the upcoming triennium, The Episcopal Church is making the fight against racism a top priority and committing \$2 million to fight racism in our church, in our nation and in our world.

We, in the Diocese of New Jersey, have been clear in our commitment to this vital work through our actions and through our allocation of resources. It is about justice. I strongly encourage us all to support the work of our Anti-Racism Commission and, if you have not participated in one of the 2½ day trainings, to plan to do so soon. I have also asked the Anti-Racism Commission to begin developing processes whereby churches of different cultural heritages and backgrounds can begin to engage in meaningful and transformative relationships, and work at breaking down the barriers that divide us. I look forward to seeing this work unfold in the not-too-distant future.

### **Marriage Equality**

Lastly, in a momentous and historic act, the 78th General Convention opened the doors to marriage equality in the church. This action came on the heels of the landmark decision by the United States Supreme Court and after nearly 40 years of rigorous conversation in the church about human sexuality and marriage. The two resolutions calling for action on marriage-equality by the 78th General Convention were attached to a Report by the Task Force to Study Marriage. This task force was created by Resolution A050 of the 77th General Convention three years ago. The task force was charged to identify and explore the biblical, theological, historical, liturgical, and canonical dimensions of marriage. Resolution A036 of the 78th General Convention amended The Episcopal Church's Canon I.18, the marriage canon so that canonical language in the marriage canon applies to all couples. Resolution A054 called for the adoption of resources and rites from *Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015*, which includes options for marriage that may now be used by all couples seeking to be married in The Episcopal Church.

As guidelines presented to House of Bishops state, the 78th General Convention (2015) authorized three liturgies for use beginning Advent I 2015.

1. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Life-long Covenant*, authorized for use under the direction and with the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority. This liturgy is only intended for use with **same-sex couples** in jurisdictions where same-sex marriage is **not legal**.
2. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage*, authorized for trial use (per Article X of the Constitution and Canon II.3.6.) under the direction and with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop. This liturgy is intended for use by **all couples** asking to be married in this church.
3. *The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2*, authorized for trial use (per Article X of the Constitution and Canon II.3.6.) under the direction and with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop. This liturgy is intended for use by **all couples** asking to be married in this church.

Until Advent I 2015, the current policies and practices detailed in the joint letter signed by Bishop Cancell and myself on October 13, 2013 remain in force. These allow same-sex marriage in the Diocese of New Jersey.

I rejoice that marriage equality is now the law of the land and authorized by our church. Many of our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community have been waiting a long time for this. Countless numbers have lived lives of faithful commitment and love, longing to have their relationships legally recognized and accepted by society and blessed by the church. That day is now here and for that I give thanks. Even as I rejoice, however, I recognize that there are those who in good conscience and deep faithfulness do not agree with or support the decisions made in Salt Lake City. It should be noted, Canon I.18 as amended states: "It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to solemnize or bless any marriage." This does not represent a change. It has always been the canonical prerogative of any clergy person to refuse to perform a marriage for any reason, including reasons of conscience. This continues to be true. No clergy person will be punished or sanctioned for exercising his or her conscience in this matter. I do direct, however, that, in the event an individual clergy person in the Diocese of Jersey is approached by a same-sex couple who wishes to be married, if that clergy person feels that he or she cannot in good conscience do this, he or she is to refer the couple to a clergy colleague within the diocese who can support the couple in their desire to be married in the church.

In one of the more powerful moments in the House of Bishops at this year's General Convention, 20 bishop colleagues, several of whom are part of the network "Communion Partners" – an affiliation of bishops who wish to maintain ties with traditional Anglicanism while remaining loyal to The Episcopal Church – issued a Minority Report. In their Minority Report, they made clear their strong dissent from the actions of the Convention in passing Resolutions A036 and A054, stating that these resolutions represented "a significant change in the Church's understanding of Christian marriage." Significantly, though they clearly had strong feelings and convictions, in their dissent, these 20 bishops did not disavow their allegiance to

The Episcopal Church. They were clear in their commitment to “Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). As they observed in their report, “The bonds created in baptism are indissoluble, and we share one bread and one cup in the Eucharist.” They affirmed, “We are committed to the Church and its people, even in the midst of painful disagreement.” I believe that these bishops modeled how difference and disagreement within the body of faith should be handled. They were transparent, respectful and collegial. For this I was, and am, grateful. In response to their Minority Report, the House of Bishops passed a “Mind of the House” Resolution titled, “Communion Across Difference.”

In this, we stated:

*We give particular thanks for the steadfast witness of our colleagues in the Communion Partners. We value and rely on their commitment to The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. We recognize that theirs is a minority voice in the House of Bishops in our deliberations with respect to Christian marriage; and we affirm that despite our differences they are an indispensable part of who we are as the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church. Our church needs their witness. Further, we appreciate that each of us will return to dioceses where there will be a variety of responses to Resolutions A054 and A036. The equanimity, generosity, and graciousness with which the Communion Partners have shared their views on Christian marriage and remain in relationship is a model for us and for the lay and ordained leaders in our dioceses to follow. We thank God that in the fullness of the Holy Trinity we can and must remain together as the Body of Christ in our dioceses, in The Episcopal Church, and in our relationships with sisters and brothers in Christ in the Anglican Communion. The bonds created in baptism are indeed indissoluble and we pray that we have the confidence to rely upon the Holy Spirit who will continue to hold us all together as partners in communion through the love of God in Jesus.*

It is my hope and my prayer that all the people of the Diocese of New Jersey, no matter their opinions or views of the actions of General Convention on marriage, or any other issue, will reflect upon both the Minority Report and the Mind of the House Resolution and consider well our connection with each other and most especially the indissolubility of baptism. God has joined us all together as members of the body of Christ. As St. Paul has written: *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body... (1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 16)*

We are all in this together.

I am proud to be an Episcopalian and give thanks for the vital witness of our church at this time in history. We are not perfect and we face many challenges. Nonetheless, I believe it is an exciting time to be The Episcopal Church. Our particular understanding of Jesus Christ and his

kingdom message marked by a generous, expansive and inclusive gospel of love are, I believe, much needed in our world today.

I am grateful for having been called as the 12th Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey and for having had the opportunity to participate in the robust, Spirit-filled, historic 78th General Convention.

Things are, indeed, being made new.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to those who traveled to Salt Lake City and served as Clergy and Lay Deputies and Alternates, as Delegates to the Episcopal Church Women's Triennial Meeting, to Debi Clarke and our Youth Representatives, to those who volunteered or who represented the Diocese of New Jersey in any way at the 78<sup>th</sup> General Convention. Thank you for the gift of your time, talents and treasure.

I pray that God in Christ will continue to bless us as a church and as a diocese as we seek to respond to the Spirit's call to us. I am grateful for each and every one of you, God's beloved, and look forward to continuing God's kingdom work together.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'William H. Stokes' in a cursive script.

The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, D.D.  
Bishop of New Jersey