Bishop’s letter to explain vote for same-sex blessing

BY CARLA HINTON  
Religion Editor  
chinton@okpubco.com

Many Episcopalians across Oklahoma will learn Sunday why their bishop recently voted in favor of a liturgical blessing for same-sex relationships.

SEE VOTE, PAGE 3A
The measure, approved this week at the Episcopal Church USA's General Convention in Indianapolis, includes an amendment proposed by Konieczny, which gives bishops oversight on the same-sex blessing in their diocese and also protects clergy from being forced to perform such rites.

Monday, Konieczny voted for "Resolution A040," which allows clergy to use the rites called "The Blessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant." Konieczny was joined by other leaders in the House of Bishops, one of two voting bodies for the denomination, in approving the same-sex rites with a 111-4 vote, with three abstentions.

On Tuesday, the other voting body, the House of Deputies, also voted to authorize the rites. The ritual can be used starting Dec. 2, the first Sunday in Advent.

A difficult decision

In a telephone interview with The Oklahoman, Konieczny said the vote was one of the most difficult decisions he has made in his almost five years as Oklahoma's Episcopal bishop. He also said the denomination's approval of same-sex rites is one that will reverberate within the Episcopal Church USA and the worldwide Anglican Communion of which it is a part.

The denomination's approval sets the stage for a larger debate on marriage and the rights of gay and straight individuals. The vote has reignited the national debate over same-sex marriage and the rights of gays and lesbians.

"It will be seen by many in the Anglican Communion as one more step of departure of the Episcopal Church in the United States from the church itself. Those who are already feeling that we've acted in inappropriate ways and have made decisions without regard for the larger Communion will certainly see this in that light," he said.

"I also think there will be others in the Communion who will see it as something which opens up the opportunity for the church to truly witness and experience committed relationships by gay and lesbian persons and allow us the room to fully discern — beyond just conversation and rhetoric — an actual experience of persons in their life and ministry."

Konieczny said he knew the roll call vote on the resolution would be made public eventually. He said he wanted Oklahoma Episcopalians to hear from him how he voted and why he voted the way he did.

"Please know that my decision was made prayerfully, with full knowledge of the diversity of opinions in our congregations, and grounded in the baptismal covenant we all share, 'to love one another, to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being.'" Konieczny wrote.

Reasons for vote outlined

Konieczny said he supported the same-sex blessing resolution because he thinks:

- It provides that the provisional liturgy only be utilized under the direction and with the permission of diocesan bishops.
- It protects clergy who have made a conscious decision not to provide same-sex blessings.
- It recognizes and honors all the voices of the Episcopal Church.
- It provides a pastoral response to gay and lesbian members within the church.

Konieczny said several aspects of the issue are significant.

He said the same-sex rites have no legal ramifications similar to marriage in places like Oklahoma.

In Oklahoma, where voters passed a constitutional amendment effectively prohibiting same-sex marriage, any pastoral response with gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships will not carry the same legal responsibilities and privileges as marriage, the bishop said.

Also, he said the same-sex rites are provisional liturgies that do not rise to the level of being on track to be implemented as canon law within the Episcopal Church or incorporated in the denomination's Book of Common Prayer.

Konieczny said he is aware that some have criticized the denomination for not making the same-gender rites the same as marriage rites.

"He said that issue is at the heart of the matter. Some people want a generic marriage ceremony that can be used for both heterosexual and homosexual couples, while others prefer a liturgical expression that does not resemble marriage all, but does honor and recognize a committed relationship."

Konieczny said he thinks there will be some Oklahoma Episcopalians who support the same-sex blessings, while others will disagree with the church leaders' decision.

"My hope is that we will respond in a prayerful way, that we will take the time to discern about how we will act as a church and as a diocese in Oklahoma," he said. "I hope we will do that with charity and grace and love for neighbor as we're called to be in our Christian walks."