

Deputies mirror Bishops by adopting study of same gender blessing liturgies by two-thirds majority

By Melodie Woerman

(Episcopal News Service) On the final day of General Convention, the House of Deputies concurred July 17 with an earlier vote by the House of Bishops "to acknowledge changing circumstances" that call forth a renewed pastoral response from the church for considering same-gender blessings.

[Resolution C056](#) authorizes the House of Bishops, in conjunction with the [Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music](#) (SCLM), to devise an open process that will invite church-wide participation in collecting and developing theological resources and liturgies. They are to report their efforts to the next General Convention in 2012.

The vote by orders in the House of Deputies in the lay order was 78 yes, 23 no and 7 divided. In the clergy order the vote was 74 yes, 27 no and 7 divided. A simple majority -- 55 votes among laity and 55 among clergy -- was required for the resolution to pass. Divided votes are counted as "no" votes. The motion carried by more than a two-thirds majority in both orders.

The resolution says that bishops, "particularly those in 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." It also specifically "honor[s] the theological diversity of this church in regard to matters of human sexuality."

The Rev. Sam Candler (Atlanta), chair of the committee that presented the resolution, called it "an elegant blend of theological care, ecclesiastical breadth and pastoral generosity."

He also noted, "Whether you are a first time observer or a veteran to General Convention, you know that the issue of blessing same-gender commitments has been intense and controversial. For a generation, every General Convention has been considering this matter. Surely we know every contrasting argument by now. We have heard all manner of voices -- the progressive and traditional, the shrill and the gentle, the painful and the pastoral."

The Rev. Charles Holt (Central Florida) then asked President of the House of Deputies Bonnie Anderson to rule on the constitutionality and canonicity of the resolution, saying clergy deputies had taken a vow to uphold the prayer book and canons of the church, which define marriage as between a man and a woman.

Anderson called on her chancellor, Sally Johnson (Minnesota), who ruled that the resolution was in order, saying, "There is nothing in the resolution that purports to amend the canons on marriage or to change the rubrics on marriage or the blessing of marriage or the rubrics in the Book of Common Prayer."

In the 35 minutes set aside for debate on the resolution, 30 people spoke -- 17 in favor and 13 opposed.

The Rev. Ian Douglas (Massachusetts) said he would not join with those who would force the Episcopal Church to pick between faithfulness and the Anglican Communion. "We cannot pretend that concurring with C056 will not cause turmoil," he said. "Concurrence with this resolution, I suspect, will be used by groups like the Anglican Church in North America in attempts to marginalize us in the councils of the Anglican Communion and enfranchise them as the genuine expression of American Anglicanism. Yet I will concur with C056 not because it is a justice agenda but because by doing so our church is being faithful to God in Jesus Christ and the leading of the Holy Spirit."

Steven Horst (Connecticut) said that while he appreciated the intent behind the resolution, if the church wants to authorize blessings of same-gender relationships it ought to amend the canons. "This resolution in essence says that bishops who don't want to wait for the church to change its canons on marriage can go ahead and authorize some unspecified range of rites on the basis of their pastoral discretion," he said.

Speakers on both sides of the issue said it would have an effect on church membership. Olivia Adams (Western Michigan) said she was an Episcopalian because the Episcopal Church had welcomed her mother, who is a lesbian, and her partner. "If we all support this resolution," she said, "families like mine will no longer have to hide, and the church will grow."

But the Rev. Brooks Keith (Colorado) said that while he understands some congregations "will be blessed by the passage of this resolution," the church is losing members over issues such as this one. "The true authority, in my opinion, lies in the pews of the church," he said. "They are voting as well. If you read the committee on the report on the state of the church, you'll see that they are voting with their feet, they are voting with their pocketbooks."

The Rev. Richard Swan (Springfield) warned of the consequences the resolution would have throughout the Anglican Communion. "One of the things we need to keep in mind is the ubuntu [relationships] with the larger Anglican Communion. We have already heard that the Archbishop of Canterbury was very distressed with the action we took on [Resolution] D025. If we act favorably on this resolution the nail will be in the coffin on B033 and any semblance of compliance with [the] Windsor [Report]."

But the Rev. Scott Hayashi (Chicago) said this resolution "displays the very best of who we are. It is well-crafted, it is thought out, it is intelligent, it is brave and it is compassionate. It reflects who we are as a people."