

To: Mountain Sky Area of The United Methodist Church

I write to you as a brother in Christ, and a Bishop in the Episcopal Church. I am not a member of your church (although I attended a small Methodist church with my grandmother), so I hope you won't think me presumptuous if I share a few thoughts with you about the upcoming decisions re: Bishop Karen Oliveto.



As a Bishop, I know well the tension between the stewardship of the church and the call of the Gospel. As a Bishop, it is my solemn calling to receive the 2,000 years of teaching and wisdom of the Church, and to ensure that it is passed on intact to the next generation. A second, implied responsibility is preservation of the institution. In my decade of serving as the Bishop of New Hampshire, I learned and came to believe that in order to be faithful to each of those responsibilities, I had to be true to their meaning and intention, rather than their literal words. Often, I found that in order to follow the command to love my neighbor, I had to take some risks with the institution.

Our faith is a living, breathing thing – not an unchanging set of beliefs, unresponsive to what God is teaching us along the way. There was a time when many people in your denomination and mine used Holy Scripture to justify slavery, forbid interracial marriage, and denigrate women as inferior to men. We now look at those expressions of the historic “faith” as cruel misperceptions of God’s will. Jesus’ promise to his disciples at the Last Supper was “I will send the Holy Spirit who will lead you into all truth.” (John 16: 12-13) Sometimes the faith and wisdom of the past gets *revised* before it gets passed along, because we have been led by God into a deeper, more profound understanding of God’s truth.

Could the Church’s painful debate over gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, and their place in the Church and its leadership, be another such time? I believe so.

The Episcopal Church’s 2003 consecration of me – an openly gay, partnered man – as a Bishop was a very painful decision for many. And yes, we lost some 5% of our Church membership because of it. But I suspect that most Episcopalians, if you asked them, would tell you now: The full inclusion of LGBT people into the life and leadership of the Church has been an overwhelmingly positive net gain for us – and, we believe, for the Gospel. In fact, many now wonder what the fuss was all about. And most of them would tell you not to be afraid of doing the right thing. Because in the end, God and God’s love wins.

Karen Oliveto has hit the ground running in her (which is more than 50 times as large as mine!), having already visited some 300 churches in your region. Her commitment to the United Methodist Church and her love of Jesus Christ shine through every word she speaks and every action she takes. And that’s why her ordination has neither caused the end of western civilization as we know it, nor the demise of that part of Christ’s vineyard known as The United Methodist Church. Unless you retreat in fear, your Church will move beyond this difficult time,

as hard as that must be to imagine right now. Episcopalians would also tell you how refreshing and delightful it is to be beyond this issue of our time, and back to spreading the Good News of God's love for us, shown most profoundly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I don't mean to be condescending here, but let me ask you a question: Does anyone think this toothpaste is going to go back into the tube? LGBT people are out and proud. That's a fact. The question that remains is "Will they want to be a part of the United Methodist Church?"

Research data now shows that the Number One reason young people give for leaving their churches is their negative stances about LGBT people – because these young people, if they are not LGBT themselves, all have friends who are, and they know that the terrible things the Church has traditionally said about them is simply not true. In the 13 years since my consecration, I have had literally hundreds of young people tell me that my consecration was the reason they joined or came back to The Episcopal Church.

We know how this is going to end. This will end with the full inclusion and celebration of LGBT people in the Church. The only open question now is "How soon?" I pray that you will be able to answer, "Now. The time has come."

Karen is, of course, under attack from those who disagree. I suffered almost-daily death threats for over two years and at my consecration had to wear a bulletproof vest under my vestments. I can tell you, it takes a terrible toll – and seems especially cruel at a time when all you're trying to do is witness to the power of God's love in your life.

Please understand the particular cross Karen has picked up, in order to follow Christ, and then support her as best you can. I pray for her daily, and now I will add you in my prayers, that you might feel God's Holy Spirit calling you forward into an ever-more-inclusive Church, so that you might make God's love known in a world that so desperately needs it.

Your brother in Christ,

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