

## **Remarks by Bishop Jack Iker, Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth RENEW Network Luncheon, April 26, 2008**

One thing we have in common as Methodists and Episcopalians is that both of our churches are being challenged and pressured to change the Church's historic teaching on sexuality. Some are promoting a new teaching that they say is just another way of interpreting the Bible. We strongly disagree with that spin, and we must say so. We must say that the promotion of homosexual behavior is contrary to the Holy Scriptures and to the clear moral teaching of the Church. The proponents of these changes in Church doctrine and practice would have us believe that the Church has been wrong all these years about what we understand the Bible to say about homosexuality. One bishop during the debate on this matter in our Church actually went so far as to say, "Those passages of the New Testament that condemn homosexual behavior in fact are directed at heterosexual men who are tempted in that way, but not at those who are of a homosexual orientation." This is a baseless claim, if ever I heard one! He would have us believe that the Church has gotten it wrong all these years, you see, and now must be corrected in its misinterpretation by a majority vote of a Church convention in the U.S.! In a recent article on this subject by Dr. Andrew Starkie, he makes the point that it is a wrong to think ... "that the teaching of the New Testament which condemns sodomy was culturally conditioned. This is clearly not the case. Sodomy was an accepted part of some societies in classical antiquity; it was condemned unambiguously by the Christian Church nevertheless. The New Testament's teaching went against the prevailing social conditions, not with them." ("New Directions" magazine, September 2003)

The unbroken and constant teaching of the Bible and of the Apostolic Church is this: sexual intercourse, physical sexual intimacy, is appropriate only in the union of a man and a woman in marriage. This means absolute faithfulness in marriage and sexual abstinence apart from marriage. The Church cannot condone premarital sexual relations, adultery or serial marriages. The Church cannot condone fornication or sexual relationships between members of the same sex. For this reason, it is wrong for the Church to ordain a practicing homosexual, or any person who is engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage. We have adopted a Canon in this Diocese that states: "All members of the clergy... shall be under the obligation to model in their own lives the received teaching of the Church that all its members are to abstain from sexual relations outside Holy Matrimony." (Canon 42)

We must declare that there are clear standards and Biblical norms of sexual moral behavior for Christians, which we cannot change. They are given by God as His moral law for His people and are a significant part of our revealed religion. They are not up for a vote at a Church convention. They are not open to revision to suit the times. There is not one sexual ethic for American Episcopalians or Methodists and another standard for Christians in other parts of the world. At the same time, there are clear Biblical teachings about repentance, forgiveness, grace and love. The Bible teaches that all of us are sinners and that all of us are called to repentance, conversion and amendment of life. By grace, we are called to a life of sanctification and holiness, helped and aided by the power of the Holy Spirit to live a new life in Jesus Christ. There is no conflict between clear Biblical teaching and sensitive pastoral care. There are no limits to the love and forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ, for all of us, no matter how many or how great or the nature of our sins. So in upholding the Apostolic Teaching of the Church, we must also declare God's love and compassion for homosexual and lesbian persons. All people who are seeking a deeper knowledge of God in

Christ are welcome in our churches. All people, regardless of their passions and lusts, their desires and sexual tendencies, their weaknesses and moral failures, are loved by God and called by Jesus to share in the power of His resurrection, through repentance and conversion. This is the Good News, and it is for all people.

It must also be said, then, that the teaching of the Church is to condemn the hatred of people and the abuse of any person. Christians must speak against the hatefulness and physical violence and persecution that is sometimes aimed at homosexuals, and we must offer to them the sensitive pastoral care of the Church. But to say that the Church opposes the blessing of same-sex relations is not a hateful thing; it is speaking the truth in love. When the Church offers clear moral guidelines in today's world of sexual confusion and promiscuity, She is often attacked and criticized. But we must not be intimidated or silenced when it comes to proclaiming, with patience and love, the God given design and order for sexual behavior. Homosexuals are people, not an issue, and we must minister to them with compassion as persons loved by God.

Among the hundreds of letters and e-mails that I have received about this controversy, many have been from homosexual and lesbian members of our Church. One that particularly touched me was from a woman who said this:

“I was not celibate when I returned to the church four years ago. Although I live in one of the most liberal dioceses in the country, I was shut out by two churches because I am openly gay. I finally found a priest who would minister to me, and with that support in the church I was able to explore the many questions that came out of my conversion and to grow in my relationship with God. In that context, I finally repented and became celibate. It was a great spiritual gift and truly a salvational moment in my life. This is the purpose of the church - to lead sinners to God.”

She went on to urge me to provide (in her words):

“...true ministry to homosexuals, which is to uphold our dignity as human beings, teach parishes to truly welcome us in the name of Christ, educate people about the abusiveness of stereotypes and name calling, and reaffirm the church's teaching on sexual morality.”

I am indeed grateful for her witness and for her advice. I thank God for others like her in our fellowship.

In closing, I want to thank each one of you for your witness and for your willingness to take a stand on the difficult issues that confront us. I regret that others have forced upon us the necessity of voting on these matters. However, we cannot remain silent. We cannot acquiesce. We must speak up and be heard. Both the Church and the secular society around us need to hear the message that we proclaim. May God grant us the courage to speak the truth in love, as we uphold the authority and witness of Holy Scripture and the Apostolic Teaching of the Church. As Paul wrote to young Timothy, so I say to you: “Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed.” (II Timothy 3:14) Best wishes, and God bless you all.