

A Pastoral Letter Political Voices and Gospel Values

The Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, Bishop of Maryland
October 15, 2012

Dear Friends in Christ:

I write this pastoral letter to you, the clergy and laity of the Diocese of Maryland, because you will be voting on November 6 on a number of issues of great significance for the future of our state. In particular, there are three referenda on the ballot that have caused much controversy as we are inundated with ads on television, radio, and the internet—all seeking to direct our attention to one point of view or another.

In the coming weeks, you may see, read or hear me interviewed in the media about certain issues that our church or diocese has spoken about in convention resolutions or pastoral letters from your bishops. In all of these matters, I want to assure you that The Episcopal Church considers what and who you vote for in an election to be an act of your personal choice, an expression of your responsibilities as a faithful child of God as well as an informed citizen of the state. We have too much respect for you and your conscience to tell you how you should vote; that to us would be an abuse of power that does not honor the way of Jesus.

Instead, I consider the role of bishop in public issues to be that of reminding the church and the public at large of our Christian tradition of 2,000 years of moral and ethical reflection on matters of social concern. In our Anglican way of moral reasoning, we make use of the resources of Holy Scripture, tradition and human reason, and bring them to bear upon the difficult issues of the day. It is in the spirit of **continuing** a dialogue with you—not *silencing, excommunicating or closing off conversation* with you, my brothers and sisters in Christ—that I present this pastoral letter as a communication from me to you, as chief pastor of a diocese seeking to shepherd his flock.

Regarding your role as a voter, I commend to you an excellent resource, the National Council of Churches of the Christ USA's document "[Christian Principles in an Election Year](#)" approved by NCC Executive Committee. (I am now proud to serve the NCC on its board of advisors.) It states categorically that the NCC, the Episcopal Church, and other signatories do not endorse any political party or candidate. But read the principles and download the group study guide for possible parish discussions in preparation for the November elections.

The three issues on the November 6th ballot that I want to call your attention to are the referenda to 1) expand gambling in Maryland, 2) the Dream Act, and 3) marriage equality legislation.

Expanded Gambling

In 2008 our Diocesan Convention overwhelmingly passed a resolution opposing a gambling initiative in that election. Bishop John Rabb and I wrote to you then: “The Catechism answers the question regarding our duty to our neighbor by defining our duty to be honest and fair in our dealings; to seek justice, freedom, and the necessities of life for all people, to resist the temptations to envy, greed, and jealousy. Gambling always has a detrimental impact on low and moderate income individuals and families...Proponents say that state-sponsored slot machine gambling will be used primarily for public education...in truth, it is a regressive tax on the poor.”

Currently, television ads on the Question 7 referendum tell us that jobs and more money for public education will happen if you vote ‘yes.’ But I ask, at what cost? What will be the effect of more gambling on our poor and desperate brothers and sisters seeking to solve their financial problems by “hitting the jackpot?” And do we really want our children’s educations to be funded by means that we know will cause so much hardship to so many families? The debatable good ends will not justify the costly means if this initiative is passed. Thus I will be voicing my opposition to this ballot initiative, citing our [Convention Resolution in 2008](#).

The Maryland Dream Act

Maryland’s Dream Act is designed to level the playing field and broaden opportunities for children who do not have legal status as immigrants but are already contributing to our society.

Concerning aliens (foreign immigrant workers), the Bible is very clear: “*You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.*” (Exodus 22:21) This is one of many passages in Scripture reminding the citizens of Israel how they are to treat the alien in their midst.

You may recall that your bishops issued a pastoral letter, [Welcoming the Stranger](#), in September 2010 laying out our theological foundation for comprehensive immigration reform. In our summary of that letter we wrote: “As to how to respond to immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, our Christian faith tells us that we must treat those who come seeking work and survival not with hostility or slogans, but with minds that seek God’s will and hearts that are open with compassion. All of us are children of God, made in God’s image and blessed by God’s unending love. In a world on the move, we need to learn—as people in every age have been forced to learn—to welcome the stranger, to embrace the ‘other.’” I’m very proud that that letter served as a resource for the statement from the entire Episcopal House of Bishops on the same issue.

The Dream Act was passed by legislators and signed by the governor, but it is now before us for a referendum vote. Bishop Joe Goodwin Burnett and I issued a statement last June when the act was challenged and faced next month’s vote. We said in part:

“We welcome with great joy the passage of the Dream Act in Maryland. We are the eleventh state to acknowledge and codify in law that undocumented immigrant children who were brought here often as infants or toddlers, are entitled to attend Maryland state colleges and universities at in-state tuition rates. These children are American in every sense except being born elsewhere. They often excel in their studies, sometimes even graduating as valedictorians in our high schools. This bill, signed into law on May 10, will allow such students to further their education and thus make an even larger contribution to our state and national economies.”

Maryland’s Dream Act is the strictest in the country. Those who benefit must have completed three years in one of our high schools. They or their parents must have been paying taxes. They must first attend a community college before admittance into a state university, and such admittance will not count against the number reserved to all Maryland residents. Scholarship assistance is denied outright. We hope that anyone having doubts about this law will carefully consider the benefits that can come to us with a more highly educated work force.”

Jesus reminds us what the Torah tells our Jewish sisters and brothers, that we must love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus identifies our “neighbor” as those who are unloved, scorned and unwelcome. What would Jesus say to us about the children in our midst – especially those innocently brought here not of their own doing? Well, what did he *do* in the New Testament? He held a little child in his arms, and said, “*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*” (Mark 9:37)

Marriage Equality

This is a divisive issue in our church as well as in the society at large, and Episcopalians—like all other people of faith—have a wide range of views about how same-gendered couples should be treated. In the church, we are struggling with Christian tradition and how we are to interpret scriptures on matters of sexuality.

We know that our sexuality is a gift from God, and sexual expression is to be celebrated in the context of marriage. We, like our brother bishops in the Roman Catholic Church in the 20th century, have expanded the purpose of marriage to include the mutual joy and love of the couple and not just for procreation—as it had been defined for centuries. Clearly our view of marriage has evolved over thousands of years since the time when women were considered property and men could “own” as many of them as he could afford either as wives or slaves for their enjoyment.

And now we face the question of whether the state should extend marriage benefits to those who find themselves oriented to same-sex relationships. There are fewer than a handful of Bible verses used by those opposed to same-sex relationships, and none spoken by Jesus. What we do know from the life and actions of Jesus is that he practiced a radical inclusion of those who are the “other,” who were marginalized and oppressed. I am one of those who

believe our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers have been treated as second class citizens in our society.

Through the marriage equality legislation, our elected representatives seek to correct past injustices by extending the legal benefits of marriage to all citizens no matter their sexual orientation. This goes to the core of what it means to live in a democratic society, and it is an issue of basic fairness. There are theological and ethical differences about the mystery and gift of human sexuality, to be sure, but for me the bottom line is “*to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.*” (Micah 6:8) Will we do what the Lord requires of us on behalf of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents?

It is imperative for church leaders to speak to this issue because our clergy also act as agents of the state when officiating at weddings. Please remember that under both the law of the State and of the Church, clergy are free to make decisions whether to perform certain marriages or not. Many Episcopal clergy in good conscience cannot perform same gender marriages, but for those who have discerned that such committed relationships can bear the marks of holy matrimony, they would have my permission and encouragement to do so under this legislation.

I know that the whole church around the world will continue to struggle with this issue for years to come, just as it has with all the great moral issues of the last 2,000 years. However, please note that our last Diocesan Convention voted to support the marriage equality law you are now being asked to vote upon, and I see no reason why we who follow Jesus should deny same-sex couples the blessing of God when they enter into faithful, monogamous, lifelong covenant relationships. The Episcopal Church has led the way to having a more compassionate, loving, graceful (and, we believe, “gospel-mandated”) stance toward *all* people—including those who find that they are oriented to the same gender.

The Diocese of Maryland believes that such a compassionate, socially responsible, and spiritually relevant Christianity is the way forward in a culture that is increasingly dismissive of organized religion; could that be one of the reasons that our diocese grew in membership last year?

May the wisdom and blessing of God be upon each of you as ponder these matters in preparation for your voting on these issues in November.

In Christ’s peace,

The Right Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton
Bishop of Maryland