Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray – Diocese of Mississippi

An Example of Good Practice From a Conservative Bishop of the Episcopal Church.

I did not consent to the election of the Revd. Gene Robinson to be bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire. I will not authorise the blessing of same-sex unions in the Diocese of Mississippi where I have been its diocesan bishop for five years. Each of these decisions derives from my belief that the church does not, in Archbishop Williams words, have 'the freedom, on the basis of the Bible, and its historic teachings, to bless homosexual partnerships as a clear expression of God's will.' The church in Mississippi, like the state itself, is largely conservative and traditional in many ways. My actions are generally accepted across the diocese with some notable exceptions.

However, precisely because of these actions I have chosen to take, I believe that I am most particularly called to provide pastoral care and support for gay and lesbian persons within our diocese. I have formed a task force for ministry to and with gay and lesbian persons in Mississippi to help shape the particular models of pastoral care available to me as a bishop. Surveys to diocesan clergy were very helpful in soliciting ways in which I (we) could actively seek out those who may have felt marginalised by decisions I have made.

In addition to ongoing conversations with a task force I have sponsored an annual retreat for spiritual renewal for gay and lesbian persons. My hope is that this retreat at our camp and conference centre will become known as a 'safe place' within the church. That, indeed, has begun to happen and several participants have used coming to this retreat as their very intentional 'coming out' to the church in general, and to me in particular. I have tried to be sensitive to the ambivalence that may accompany my presence at this retreat. Thus, I welcome the participants during the opening session, have conversation over dinner, then excuse myself for the rest of the weekend.

Having heard, both from the gay and lesbian community and diocesan clergy, of the need for some specialised training in pastoral care for non-heterosexuals, we are providing a continuing education event to address such a need. This year we have invited a professor of pastoral care who has written extensively on the subject of care for gay and lesbian persons to lead a workshop to which all diocesan clergy have been invited.

I hope that I have acted with integrity, both theologically and pastorally. I continue to listen to those whose life experience is so very different from mine, and, in return, I have found a more receptive ear from those who could not understand my actions.