

\*LGBT Episcopalians meet with their new, inclusive Bishop\*

The meeting was the first with our new Bishop, Scott Benhase, held at Trinity Episcopal Church, Cochran, GA Noon-2PM, last Saturday, July 10th. Thirty five folks traveled from Albany, Augusta, Macon, Martinez, Metter, North Augusta, SC, Savannah, Statesboro, Swainsboro, Tybee Island and Valdosta to attend the meeting, including 4 clergy and 5 first timers. After Noon Day Prayers, the blessing of the food and welcome, a beautiful, handmade Integrity Georgia banner made by Sarah Smith Riggle was dedicated by Bishop Benhase. A diversity stole was presented to Bishop Benhase from the membership, at which time it was also announced that he will be the celebrant and preacher at our tenth anniversary meeting in Nov 2011. Bishop Benhase then spoke with the group in conversation for the remainder of the time, 1 1/2 hrs.

In the course of the conversation, Bishop Benhase spoke of his commitment to the full inclusion of LGBT folk in the life and ministry of the church, while at the same time acknowledging his firm allegiance to the constitution and canons of both the national church and this diocese. Lively discussion centered on moving our diocese toward the goal of full inclusion by our own "faith and practice", by being out, proud and involved in our congregations and communities. As they have at every meeting, members of Integrity offered themselves ready to talk with individuals and congregations working and trying to understand "who we are as LGBT Episcopalians," and what our unique gifts might be.

Bishop Benhase made his support of LGBT folk quite clear in voting for the recent consecration of The Rev'd Mary Glasspool, a partnered lesbian priest, as Bishop Suffragan in the Diocese of Los Angeles. Members of Integrity Georgia are confident that Bishop Benhase will help lead our diocese to the goal of full inclusion at every level of ministry in The Episcopal Church.

Members expressed their desire to bring to our annual diocesan convention a change in our existing diocesan canons that would allow partnered, monogamous LGBT folk to be considered in the discernment process, something that the national church policy already allows and has emphasized at numerous national conventions. All agreed that such a change was not a "whether" but a "when."

Integrity members recommitted to the goal of preparing a listing of welcoming churches/congregations and having it posted on the diocesan web page. Bishop Benhase agreed to write a letter of support to be posted on Integrity Georgia's web page. Bishop Benhase also stated he would like to attend our upcoming November 9<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting.

The priest in charge, the Rev'd Joy Fisher, the Senior and Junior Wardens and several members of Trinity Church Cochran made everyone feel especially welcome and comfortable for this visit. They prepared and served a delicious, homemade healthy lunch of various salads, cookies, beverages, topped off with a blueberry cheesecake made by Integrity member and Albany PFLAG coordinator Margie Roche.

We adjourned promptly at 2PM with a blessing by Bishop Benhase and dismissal by Deacon Eddie Adkins of Tybee Island & St. Luke's Rincon.

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