

The seal of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont is a large, faint watermark in the background. It features a shield with three crosses, topped by a mitre and flanked by two crossed keys. The words "DIOCESE OF VERMONT" are inscribed around the shield.

A Report to the Bishop and People of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont

from the

Task Force on the Blessing of
Persons Living in Same-Gender
Relationships

June 8, 2004

Part IV

Theological Considerations

The journey toward understanding intimate human relationships, and particularly those between persons of the same gender, will continue well into the foreseeable future. Much wrestling with the issues must still be done. But at this moment in our history, we think it is crucial for us to examine honestly some of the realities that underlie the current controversy surrounding same-gender relationships in the church and in our society.

One reality we want to highlight is the fact that many people often have a visceral response to same-gender relationships but cloak that response with intellectual or sentimental language. “Head” and “heart” language attempts to disguise what the “gut” is saying.

Let us be honest about our gut reactions. Ours is a culture in which people have widely divergent views about human sexuality and human intimacy. Mixed messages are common, and we internalize these mixed messages in varying degrees as we grow up. The culture both glorifies sexuality and conditions us to see sexual activity as “unclean” unless confined to particular circumstances. For some, any sexual intimacy evokes an “ick response.” For many, sexual intimacy between persons of the same gender evokes an “ick response.” However, there are some among us who find their most essential, God-given identities fulfilled in an intimate relationship with a person of the same gender. The “ick response” to sexual intimacy comes less from the head and heart and more from the gut; it involuntarily occurs within us. We believe that together we can find ways to address such gut reactions that build up, and do not tear down, the Body of Christ.

Another reality is that the Bible has been commonly understood to be unrelentingly opposed to same-sex sexual activity. We acknowledge that today there is genuine disagreement on these matters among faithful Christians who hold scripture in the highest regard. Our Anglican reliance on tradition and reason as means of informing our interpreta-

tion of scripture offers a way to bring head, heart and gut into fruitful and respectful conversation. Below, we outline the principles of interpretation that underlie the conclusions of this report.

Still another reality is that many of us have genuine fears about the prospect of openly embracing gay men and women in our midst. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, may be misunderstood or violated in some way by lesbians or gay men. Gay men and lesbians among us fear violence from strangers and rejection by those we love if we tell the truth about ourselves. Many of us fear conversations that touch on issues of sexuality. And some of us have dreams for ourselves, for others, and for our church that may or may not come to fruition if we welcome gay people into our midst. There is a great deal of fear among us.

If, as the scriptures tell us, “perfect love casts out fear,” then we should be able to address our fears and gut reactions in the redeeming light of Christ. We invite all to embark with us on a Spirit-led journey to examine our reactions and fears, as uncomfortable as it is to do so. This journey involves walking with, and listening to, those people whose experiences and identities are profoundly affected by the decisions and actions we take. Many of “those people” are “us.” And many of them are seeking Christ along with us.

We believe that, in our midst, we will discover many persons upon whom God has chosen to bestow the riches of God’s glory as they live out their lives as openly gay men and lesbians. Some of these sisters and brothers will seek the help of our congregations as they fall in love and endeavor to establish households that reflect the love of Christ. We genuinely wish to celebrate their faithfulness.

We may also discover that some of our members have experienced same-sex attractions in the past or present and have chosen to live as celibate persons or as married heterosexuals. We celebrate the faithfulness of these brothers and sisters as well.

Above all, we believe that, should there be disagreement about how God is calling us to act at this time, this is not an issue that should lead to schism. Our Anglican tradition has allowed us to remain together, not because we are always like-minded, but because we endeavor to be open-hearted. We are all indebted to God's grace, and we believe that, as long as we keep our hearts bound to that grace, we can keep our lives in communion with each other, no matter how sharp our disagreements.

We are therefore confident that, like the disciples on the way to Emmaus, we will find that Jesus himself has come near even now and is walking with us in this journey of faith and discovery. Even in the confusion of our current events, just as in the confusion surrounding the events those early disciples experienced, we believe that the Risen One will reveal himself as he opens the scriptures to us and as we break bread together. As we all walk together with Christ in our midst, we are confident that we are moving ever closer to where God is leading us.

How Anglicans do theology

Roles of scripture, tradition and reason

Richard Hooker, writing his *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, articulated a theology for the Church of England that responded both to the Roman Catholicism from which the English Church had only recently separated and to the criticisms of some Puritans who wished for even greater reform. The English church appealed to scripture as a primary source of authority for its theology and practice in matters of salvation, but Hooker believed human reason was necessary to the understanding of scripture. Where scripture was not clear, or even silent, the church was to look to the work of the ecumenical councils and theologians of the first five centuries of the early church, viewed, again, through the lens of human reason (which for Hooker included humanity's intuitive capacities). Hooker thus gave us what is now called the Anglican three-legged stool of theological method: scripture, tradition and reason.

For Hooker, and for most Anglican theologians to follow him, tradition is not fixed but grows through an ongoing process of discernment. As one

who wrote in a time of significant tension, Hooker stressed the need for unity in those aspects that could be defined as essential to Christian faith and for the acceptance of diversity in non-essentials. The Church of England and now the Anglican Communion have, since then, demonstrated a remarkable capacity to discern and unite around key elements considered essential to faith and order and to live with the messiness of creative tension around the rest.

The statement adopted by the Episcopal House of Bishops in 1886, and by the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops in 1888—the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral—outlines the elements the Anglican Communion understands to be “essential” for Christian unity: 1) the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the revealed Word of God; 2) the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian Faith; 3) the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist; and 4) the historic episcopate, locally adapted.

Whereas churches of the Protestant Reformation on the continent developed confessional statements (for example, the Lutheran Augsburg Confession and the Presbyterian Westminster Confession) that distinguish their members, the Anglican Communion has avoided adopting statements of belief that go beyond those of the ancient creeds of the universal church. Thus we are a creedal church, not a confessing church, joined in Christian community by common creeds and common prayer rather than by common belief on all questions.

How Anglicans pray has often led to the articulation of theological understanding rather than the other way around. Anglican theology has its roots in practice, in prayer and sacrament, and it has taken more than one direction.

Putting it perhaps too simply, one strand of Anglicanism—the evangelical tradition—has emphasized the authority of scripture, and some, but not all, among them have insisted on a more literalist reading of the Bible. Another strand—the Anglo-Catholic tradition—has emphasized the authority of the early church, and some, but not all, of them have resisted subsequent development of doctrine and practice. Many other strands lying between these two have looked to reason—including to a greater or lesser extent, experience—to mediate

scripture and the tradition in light of the learning of science and culture.

All these strands, or traditions, of Christian living and believing have been embraced within Anglicanism, and they have remained in a lively tension, informing, enriching, and sometimes conflicting with one another. Each has had times or places in which it held greater influence than the others, but none has been able to claim that it was *the* tradition, exclusive of the others. We speak of “Anglican comprehensiveness,” or Anglicanism as the “via media,” not because we are wishy-washy or overly inclined to compromise basic principles, but because we value the ultimate goal of Christian unity and St. Paul’s understanding of the Body of Christ, in which no part may say to the other, “I have no need of you.”

“Doing” Anglican theology means taking Holy Scripture seriously as the primary source of our understanding of Christian faith. It means being consistent with the major creedal and doctrinal conclusions of the early church. It means honoring our liturgical tradition. And it means using our human capacity to learn about our world and to bring that learning into conversation with scripture and theological and liturgical tradition. We believe this is a dynamic and ongoing process in which we must always seek to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Some principles for interpreting Holy Scripture

The Rt. Rev. Maurice Benitez, retired Bishop of Texas, was quoted in a March 14, 2004, press release from the American Anglican Council (“Senior Bishops Cross Diocesan Lines: Confirm 110 at Unprecedented Service”) as saying, “We want to emphasize that the heart of the matter is not sexuality or sexual orientation but rather the authority of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church.” Bishop Benitez is among those who believe that scripture is unequivocal in its condemnation of same-sex sexual behavior and that therefore the Church should not ordain or bless anyone who engages in such behavior. This group argues that their approach to scripture is the only acceptable approach. We acknowledge that this approach falls within the broad embrace of Anglican tradition, but we believe it is far from the only way to read scripture.

The issue, as we see it, is not whether Holy Scripture has authority in the life of the Church, for we believe it does, but how scripture is interpreted. With Richard Hooker and many Anglican theologians through the last five centuries, we believe scripture is brought to life for contemporary believers through interpretation. We are suspicious of claims that there can be any one right reading, for all readers see through the lenses of their own backgrounds and cultural circumstances. We understand the genius of scripture to lie not in a “clear meaning” that is the same throughout history but rather in its ability to speak holy wisdom to peoples of differing cultures over the passage of centuries, a wisdom discerned through a process of faithful engagement guided by the Holy Spirit.

In 2002, the Diocese of New York published *Let the Reader Understand: Principles of Scriptural Interpretation*, written by a nine-member hermeneutics study group charged “to outline as clearly as possible the means by which many of us, in our particular part of the Anglican Tradition, understand, interpret, and apply the Holy Scriptures.” The group offered thirteen principles that we believe provide a solid basis for interpretation. Below are highlights that point to how we have considered the scripture passages addressing same-sex sexual activity. [The complete document is available on the Diocese of Vermont web site at www.dioceseofvermont.org/Orgs/TFonBlessings.html.]

- ❖ The Holy Scriptures are “the Word of God” and “contain all things necessary to salvation,” but they are not the literal words of God, nor are all things in scripture necessary to salvation. As the writers of the biblical texts were inspired by God through the Holy Spirit, so is the church community inspired in its continual process of interpretation.
- ❖ The Holy Scriptures represent a variety of forms of expression, written over an extensive period of time by a variety of authors. Each reflects its own cultural and historical context.
- ❖ Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God to whom the New Testament bears witness. For Christians, the revelation of God in Christ is the key to the Church’s understanding of the scriptures as a whole.

- ❖ Individual texts must not, therefore, be isolated and made to mean something at odds with the tenor or trajectory of the scriptures as a whole.
- ❖ For the Church's judgment of the morality of actions and dispositions to be authoritative, it is insufficient simply to condemn those things that are condemned somewhere in scripture, or to approve those things that are somewhere approved.
- ❖ Faithful interpretation requires the Church to use the gifts of "memory, reason, and skill" to find the sense of the scriptural text and to locate it in its time and place. The Church must then seek the text's present significance in light of the whole economy of salvation.
- ❖ Chief among the guiding principles by which the Church interprets the sacred texts is the congruence of its interpretation with Christ's summary of the law (Matthew 22:37-40), the new commandment (John 13:34) and the creeds.
- ❖ Because the Church's members are human, their reading of scripture is contingent and fallible, even in matters of faith and morals. In reading its scriptures, the historical Church remains always a wayfaring community using discernment, conversation, and argument to find its way.

Through the life of the Christian community, the Church has changed its interpretation of scripture in a number of areas, even some in which the texts in question seem quite clear. Usury, or the lending of money at interest, is prohibited in both testaments, yet today we think nothing of loaning or borrowing money. Slavery seems to be supported, particularly in the New Testament, and former Vermont Bishop John Henry Hopkins defended slavery based on his reading of scripture. Today, we find that hard to imagine. Polygamy is prominent in the Old Testament, but today we insist on monogamy in most parts of the Anglican Communion. Throughout scripture, women and children are considered to be the property of men, yet in our society, the movement has been in the direction of equality of women with men and respect for the rights and dignity of children.

Here in Vermont, we have long celebrated the ministry of women priests, and we elected the first woman bishop diocesan in the Episcopal Church. Yet many even today claim scripture to offer no warrant for the ordination of women. We believe the Church should, and will, come to an understanding that the few passages that seem to address same-sex sexual activity do not speak to the reality of faithful, loving relationships between persons of the same gender who identify as gay or lesbian.

How Anglican theology informs the discussion about same-gender unions

As noted above, the Anglican theological tradition is not monolithic, and it is not our intention in this section to represent all points of view. We do believe that what follows is representative of a broad spectrum of that tradition, from Richard Hooker (1554-1600) through such Anglican theologians as Benjamin Whichcote (1609-1683), Joseph Butler (1692-1752), F. D. Maurice (1805-1872), Charles Gore (1853-1932), William Temple (1881-1944), Michael Ramsey (1904-1988), John Maquarrie (1919-), Desmond Tutu (1931-), Ellen Wondra (1950-, Bexley Hall Seminary), Sallie McFague (Vanderbilt Divinity School), Rowan Williams (1950-, current Archbishop of Canterbury), and Kathryn Tanner (University of Chicago Divinity School).

Incarnation, relation, sin and redemption

Anglican theology, as it has developed from its earliest expression in the first Book of Common Prayer, is deeply rooted in an incarnational image of God as known to us in Jesus Christ and in a trinitarian understanding of God as profoundly relational. Our prayers and collects speak of a deep intimacy with God through Jesus Christ and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

Key to this incarnational and relational theology is the belief that all humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that this gives humankind a potential for relationship with, participation in, or union with God. This claim, however, raises the question, for the writers of Genesis to those of the present day, of how to explain human imperfection, human sin. Genesis relates the story

of “the fall” of the human creatures. St. Augustine’s notion of “original sin” became a dominant theme, and subsequent explanations focused on the degree to which original sin affects the image of God in humankind.

The major theologians of the continental Reformation and their followers in England—represented today by the evangelical strand in Anglicanism—tended to see original sin as virtually obliterating the image of God in humans, making us sinners by nature and inheritance, as well as by our deeds. The trend flowing from Richard Hooker was to see original sin as an obstacle to full realization of the image of God rather than the cause of its disappearance. And beginning with Whichcote in the seventeenth century, there is a shift away from the notion of original sin as historical fact and as something inherited through procreation. He saw the fall as symbolic. For some contemporary theologians, the explanation does not lie in an original sin—historical or symbolic—that separates humanity from divinity, but in the nature of creation itself, a creation that is finite and, in the case of humans, fallible, capable in their freedom of sin.

Regardless of where one falls on the theological spectrum, Jesus, as the incarnation of God in the world, is the true image of God, and he restores the divine image to humanity. For those of a more evangelical perspective, this restoration comes solely through Jesus’ sacrificial act of atonement for human sin through his death on the cross. For Richard Hooker and much of the Anglican theological tradition, Jesus’ incarnation is also a key aspect of redemption. Like the tradition of the Greek Church, this view sees the Incarnation itself as a primary act of salvation, a salvation available to and intended for all of humanity, because all are in God’s image. James Carpenter notes in *Nature and Grace* (Crossroad, 1988, p. 18) how this inseparably ties the grace of creation to the grace and redemption that comes through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Why does this matter to the discussion of blessing same-gender couples?

We believe the differing conclusions about human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, are closely related to differing views of human being, sin and redemption. Admittedly, the

brief nature of this report leads to some oversimplification, but we hope also to some insight.

The strand of the tradition that emphasizes the predominance of original sin tends to see a radical separation between humanity and divinity, between creation and redemption, to see God as wholly other and transcendent. It tends, in other words, towards the sort of dualism that separates embodiment from spirituality and locates sexuality in an embodiment that is the bearer of original sin. This strand is inclined to focus on issues of sexual purity and is most concerned to confine the expression of sexuality to the marital relationship, one it understands to be ordained by God. Procreation is understood as the primary purpose of marriage between a man and a woman, and any expression of sexuality outside the bond of marriage is considered sinful. This is the strand of Anglican theological tradition that has found a home in many non-western parts of the Anglican Communion.

We believe the trend in western Anglican theology—beginning with Hooker—is away from dualisms and toward a theology that balances, and holds in unifying tension, notions of God as transcendent and God as immanent in the Incarnation, notions of creation and redemption, notions of body and spirit. The tendency is to describe the presence of the image of God in human beings less as a *quality* of being than as a *way* of being—in other words, in dynamic terms. F.D. Maurice, for example, saw it as the power of related love. For him, as well as many others, this capacity for loving relatedness is key to their theologies of humanity and divinity.

In this view, sexuality can be understood as gift, as one means of expressing profound connection between two human beings. If it is given, in the words of the marriage service, “for mutual joy,” and not simply to permit procreation, then, we must ask, why should its expression be denied to two persons of the same gender who love one another?

We cannot in this report rehearse all the arguments surrounding questions of sexual identity and choice. Even within the diversity of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, the question of choice generates varied responses. We accept the experience of the many who identify themselves as gay or lesbian because, as stated above, they find

their most essential, God-given identities fulfilled in an intimate relationship with a person of the same gender. We believe that for such persons, sexual expression is something entirely different from that condemned by a few verses of Holy Scripture.

How do we understand sin today?

Those who do accept scripture's apparent condemnation of same-gender sexual expression understand the action itself, the behavior, to be inherently sinful. We hear the phrase, "love the sinner [for we are all sinners], hate the sin." The sin, in this view, is not in a gay or lesbian sexual orientation, but rather in acting out that orientation. Sin has to do with a breach of right behavior. Because opposite-gender sexual behavior has an accepted place in marriage, opposite gender couples are not precluded from acting on their sexual orientation. Same-sex couples have no option but abstinence. They cannot live their identities but are counseled to seek change.

Finding this sort of dualism to be problematic, we follow a different trend in Anglican theology, one that understands sin as a breach of right relationship with God, with one's community, or with another individual. In this light, both opposite-gender and same-gender sex can be either life-giving or destructive of relationship. The sin lies not in the specific action but in the context and intention with which it is performed and received. This is not to diminish in any way the power of sin in human life and human sexual relationships, but to situate it in its affect on right relationship rather than particular behaviors.

How are humans expected to relate to one another?

Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself," and to "respect the dignity of every human person." For us, this does not mean placing any qualifiers on the dignity of persons who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. We believe, with the several General Conventions of the Episcopal Church, that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all others persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church."

In the Diocese of Vermont, we believe the "pastoral concern and care of the Church" should

include the opportunity for all couples to enter into covenanted relationships that express the values of the church and to have those relationships receive the support and blessing of the faith community.

What are those values? Resolution D039sa of the 2000 General Convention outlined them as, "fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God." The resolution denounced "promiscuity, exploitation and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members," and it stated the intention that the church should "hold all its members accountable to these values, and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them."

What do we mean by blessing?

At ordination, Episcopal priests receive the authority to "pronounce God's blessing." To do so is not to be the agent of blessing, but it is to recognize and name that which already shows forth as a sign of God's grace and presence—or it is to ask for God's grace and presence. Blessing is thus profoundly relational, for it is asking God to be in a relationship of grace with a person or persons.

In Holy Matrimony

Title I, Canon 18, Section 2(b) states that "Holy Matrimony is a physical and spiritual union of a man and a woman, entered into within the community of faith, by mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, and with the intent that it be lifelong." In offering to a couple the rite of Holy Matrimony, the church is recognizing in their relationship the presence of a deep love that is analogous to the radical love God has for each of us, or, in the words of the Prayer Book, "the mystery of the union between Christ and his church." The church therefore publicly pronounces God's blessing on the couple and asks for God's continued blessing on the covenant they make with one another. It is important to remember that the church does not marry the couple. They marry each other. The church witnesses the marriage and offers the support of the community to the couple in their effort to manifest God's blessing in a life of love, fidelity, monogamy and mutual

respect and affection. The covenant of marriage is one of mutual accountability, of the couple with one another, with God and with the community.

In Holy Union

The Rt. Rev. Paul Marshall, Bishop of Bethlehem, in his 2003 book, *Same Sex Unions: An Inquiry*, said the question to be considered about the blessing of persons in same-gender relationships is, “Can the relationship between two people giving themselves to each other for life participate in and convey to others the love of the self-giving Christ?” We believe the answer is no different for same-gender couples who seek the blessing of their covenanted relationships within the community of faith than for opposite-gender couples. What is blessed is the same. What is asked of the couple is the same. What is asked of the community is the same love and support, yet in this case, it is perhaps more profound, because the community is asked to stand with the couple in the context of a church and culture that are often blind—and sometimes even hostile—to the grace they manifest.

In offering to bless those making a covenant of Holy Union, the church is not blessing a sexual relationship or particular sexual behavior. It is blessing a couple who manifest in their life together the grace of God. Paul Marshall says, “To bless a union is to ask God to make it an experience of the kind and intensity of Christ’s love, both for the couple and also for all who are touched by their life together. Thus blessing a union is not to wish it good fortune or merely to give thanks for it, although both certainly occur; it is to set it aside for a holy use, to perceive it to be grace-bearing, to expect God to use it” (43).

Conclusions

We believe these reflections offer a sound basis to continue the pastoral ministry of blessing couples living in covenanted same-gender relationships in the Diocese of Vermont. We acknowledge that this conclusion is not one that can be embraced by all in the diocese, in the Episcopal Church or in the greater Anglican Communion. But our history of conversation around this issue, the legal reality of civil unions, and our experience lead us to conclude that we need to move forward. Several of our congregations, and many same-gender couples, have had very positive experiences with the blessing of Holy Unions since the passage of the civil union legislation in 2000. We believe the next step in our ongoing conversation is to regularize our practice with a policy and with trial liturgies.

This report is not in any way intended to represent the end of the conversation, but rather to serve as an invitation for all in the Diocese of Vermont to engage more deeply. For some, that may mean starting at the beginning. For others it may mean considering for the first time the possibility of opening a congregation to the blessing of a Holy Union. For others, it may mean living with new restrictions on practice and liturgical expression. We call us all to seek ways to live together-in-difference as a people of common prayer committed to love of God and love of neighbor, open both to the message of the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, and to the working in us of the Holy Spirit.

[Appendix C is a list of some of the resources consulted in drafting Part IV.]