

λ INTEGRITY, INC.

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ON BLESSING OF SAME GENDER RELATIONSHIPS

On Blessings of Same-Gender Relationships

- Integrity International

**After all, a blessing isn't a prayer.
It's a statement of what is.
The reason for blessing people is
to remind them that they already are!
- Garrison Keillor**

The gay and lesbian members of Integrity and their families and friends present to the Church an issue very dear to their life in the Christian community. It is both a study document and a position paper on the blessings of homosexual couples in the Church. Much of the paper contains a compilation of what has already been said in the Church on the subject of homosexuality and/or the blessing of homosexual commitments. Integrity celebrates the affirmation of the Church in regard to its homosexual members beginning with the historical and substantial resolves of the 1976 General Convention and reaffirmed in each succeeding General Convention.

RESOLVED, the House of Bishops concurring, that it is the sense of this General Convention that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church.

RESOLVED, the House of Bishops concurring, that the General Convention expresses its conviction that homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens, and calls upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality.

Integrity also wholeheartedly rejoices in the words of Edmond Browning, our Presiding Bishop, who had said at the time of his election in 1985, "In this Church there will be no outcasts." The men and women of Integrity have increasingly felt more positive in their growing and sustained service to the Church.

Blessings of same-gender couples and other extraordinary pastoral situations dealing with relationships outside of legal marriage have become a widely discussed and studied topic in the Church in recent times. At the core of these discussions the subject of the "Christian sexual ethic" almost always comes to the fore. Bishop Browning in his pastoral letter to the House of Bishops raises this essential question:

The Christian sexual ethic is hard, but it has been the experience of Christians that only when human

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love participates in something of the divine, unconditional love, can the yearning of the human heart be satisfied. Many people do settle for relationships and sexual intimacy outside the Church's teaching. The question before us is how does the Church minister to those within, and those outside, the Christian community who engage in sexual intimacy outside the marriage state.

A noteworthy response to Bishop Browning's question is offered in the following words which come out of the Report of the Task Force on Changing Patterns of Sexuality and Family Life of the Diocese of Newark:

The choice of celibacy or estrangement from the Church for such persons who choose not to marry is not consonant with the Church's hope of wholeness for all persons in the Realm of God. Our understanding of the Church is one of inclusiveness. As we struggle to understand what the Church is called to in our time, one of our goals is inclusion in the Christian body of persons who have thoughtfully chosen lifestyles different from that of the mainstream.

In the matter of choice, there is little left to decide upon when it comes to the psychological realities of homosexual orientation. Experts in the human behavior sciences are almost unanimous in their conclusion that the homosexual orientation is a given condition and certainly one that is not chosen by homosexual persons. This presents a difficult if not impossible situation to the homosexual person who seeks a lasting and substantial relationship with one significant person and knows authentically that he or she is not called upon by God to lead a life of celibacy.

In being truly authentic, the celibate vocation celebrates a very special evangelical status because it is a vocation that is freely offered by God and freely accepted by one who chooses that status in service of God and the Church. For the Church to require all homosexual persons to lead a life of celibacy would not be fair to homosexuals and would be to misunderstand the real spiritual character of celibacy as a freely chosen vocation. It is fair to say that most homosexual and heterosexual persons have not been so freely called upon by God to choose that particular evangelical state of life. However, human behavior does demonstrate the fact that most persons, be they heterosexual or homosexual, seek substantial, loving, and intimate relationships to more ably live a fuller and emotionally healthy life.

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Many notable names in the recent history of human behavior overwhelmingly conclude that there is a basic need for human intimacy and relationship in order to maintain a more full and healthy mental well-being. Abraham Maslow says that we all have an essential inner nature which is intrinsic; given, and, "natural." No psychological health is possible unless this essential core of the person is fundamentally accepted, loved and respected by others and by oneself. Erik Erikson writes that in loving and being loved, people give themselves over, at least for brief periods, to intensely moving experiences through which they achieve new awareness of self and others. Love can make possible periods of crystallization or reformulation of the self and the self's relationship to the world. Beliefs about love permeate people's hopes for themselves, their evaluations of experience, and their sense of achievement in the world.

Gordon Allport says simply that "the truest statement that can be made of a normal person is that he never feels that he can love or be loved enough." Allport, who has contributed much to religious and psychological thought, says that "one reason why religion is an almost universal attachment of mankind is that religion maintains the basic love relationship of the individual with some embracing principle." Carl Rogers, who was himself a divinity student, makes a strong case for education about healthy human interaction from which he feels our society falls woefully short. Although his excellent book, "Becoming Partners," focuses principally on heterosexual couples, Rogers has other pertinent things to say in regard to same-gender feelings and love between persons in significant relationships. Regarding relationships, he observes: "We still hold that tradition and religious sanctions, and codes of morality taken from the past must never be broken, and woe to the person whose values, discoveries, and ways of living violate these sanctions." Theodor Reik, while not recognized as a theologian, touches the human spirit in his frank and insightful teachings on love: "Simple self-observation proves that there is another quality in the happy state of feeling tenderness and that of being the object of affection. To love satisfies a craving, a desire to give tenderness; being loved fulfills another need, the individual wish to be wanted and appreciated. If loving is a special kind of achievement, being loved is the reward given to it." At rarer times in our lives, loving and being loved will occur in a more intensely reciprocal experience with one special person.

Even though for the most part the aforementioned clinicians concentrated their writings and research on heterosexual development and relationships, their ideas today can also be applied to same-gender and certain other non-marital relationships. The writings and research of the general membership of the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Association for Marital and Family Therapy overwhelmingly support that conclusion. Those persons in the human sciences field, such as psychiatrists, psychologists,

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and marital and family therapists, are people who in many ways are committed to probing the mystery of God whose handiwork is pervasive throughout humanity. Many of those persons are Christian and see in their professional work a gift of ministry which continually celebrates the mystery of Christ made incarnate in the many and diverse ways that we are called to be in human relationships.

The Church needs to consider the large number of people whose lives are directly involved with homosexual persons. One soon realizes that the homosexual is not an "outsider" but a member of the Church family. The homosexual person may, indeed, be a life-long Episcopal communicant, an acolyte, a choir member, a vestryperson, a rector, or a bishop. A significant number of parish family members must deal directly with the homosexual condition of a son or daughter, brother or sister, and even a husband or wife. The Church's Commission on Human Affairs and Health makes this striking comment in their interim report to the House of Bishops' meeting in September, 1987:

Informed estimates suggest that as many as one in ten males (and a slightly lesser percentage of females) are primarily homosexual in orientation. If this is true, this means that the mathematical probability is that twelve to fifteen of the members of this House of Bishops have discovered themselves to be homosexual persons. Perhaps as many as 1,200 of our clergy and two to three hundred thousand members of our Church are homosexual. This would further suggest that four hundred thousand of our members are directly involved as parents of homosexual children.

In terms of Christian justice and fairness, it is hard to imagine that so many persons of homosexual orientation would be given no other choice but to remain single and celibate. We must with good reason and faith probe our consciences and courageously ask the question in Christian terms as to what is fair and just for us all in intimate human relationships. To be sure, a Christian approach must be at the center of all biblical, theological, clinical-pastoral, and ecclesiastical responses to the question of intimate human relationships. Integral to that question is human sexuality. Professor David A. Scott of Virginia Theological Seminary, in a booklet entitled A Christian Response to Human Sexuality, presses the Church with the question, "How should sexual standards be based on Jesus' teaching and ministry?" Professor Scott answers:

The New Testament and traditional orthodox Christianity makes a radical connection between Jesus Christ and our moral life. A believer's moral choices, his or her acts of service and obedience, are the work of Christ's Holy Spirit in the believer. The moral life is a sharing in and a showing forth of God's love in Christ. The life of love of God and neighbor is letting the very nature of God, creator, covenant-maker, and self-communicator, shape one's own life.

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On Blessings of Same-Gender Relationships -- 5

This gets to the "heart of the matter" as Professor Scott continues with this theologically substantial question on the matter of sexuality:

Our 'good works,' including our sexual being and actions, can now be a medium for participating in and witnessing to God the creator, God the covenant-maker, God the self-communicator.

From this perspective the right question to ask regarding sexuality is this: What forms of sexual identity, sexual behavior and sexual relations have the greatest potential to share in and show forth this God, the God revealed in Christ and the Spirit, God the Creator, Reconciler, Communicator? This puts God at the Center of a sexual ethic.

In historical response to Scott's challenging question, there have been volumes of theological papers written, numerous debates and discussions, and a host of church resolves and guidelines. In more recent times, the report of the Task Force on Changing Patterns of Sexuality and Family Life in the Diocese of Newark offers this challenging response:

The challenge to the Church to respond creatively to changing patterns of sexuality and family life in America must be seen as an instance of the Holy Spirit leading us to respond to the blessing and claim of the Realm of God foreshadowed and made continually present by the life of Christ Jesus. In his death Jesus exemplifies sacrificial love that is faithful to his vision of the Realm of God. In the resurrection we know God's ultimate faithfulness and sovereignty.

It is in response to this central example and teaching of Jesus regarding the Realm of God that we attempt to discern what should be the Church's response to changing patterns of sexuality and family life. We discover in the actions and parables of Jesus that the Realm of God manifests grace unfettered by legalistic obligation to tradition and 'the law.' When the choice is between observance of the law, or active, inclusive love, Jesus embodies and teaches love. It is in the light of this fundamental principle of God's active reconciling love that any religious law or dogma, social or economic arrangement is to be assessed.

It is certainly a greater challenge to take both what David Scott and the Diocese of Newark's task force have said and to move that commentary on to the subject of blessing same-gender and other "non-marital" relationships. However, the substance of all that is said and will be said ought to be based on the person of Jesus Christ. The Diocese of Rochester has offered a Christian response to the matter of same-gender blessings in Christ:

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For centuries the Church has blessed many things and many occasions. Notable missionary endeavors and congregations of people who have pledged their life to God have been blessed. So also the Church blesses friendships, families and any two individuals who wish to commit their lives to each other and to Jesus Christ. The Church acts appropriately in the best interests of the faith when it confers a blessing of commitment upon two individuals of the same gender when they seek to share a life together and to grow in the grace of God. Whether in Matrimony or in the blessing of a particular couple's commitment, the Church doesn't specifically bless an orientation or a particular mode of sexual behavior. The Church, however, blesses persons, regardless of orientation, who claim Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior and who commit themselves as individuals or as couples to the fellowship of the Church.

The men and women of Integrity have maintained a special focus on the specific issue of Church blessings of same-gender relationships. They do so because they love the Church and have steadfastly served the Church. Like other committed Christians, they have also claimed Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior. Integrity does not propose a radical departure from a Christian norm of sexual responsibility in committed relationships; nor does Integrity propose a "new" and extraneous theological posture on the blessings of same-gender couples. Integrity does, however, support an expanded and faithful understanding of scripture and theology based on reason and contemporary scholarship. That kind of scholarship is well demonstrated in the following commentary by James B. Nelson in his book, Embodiment:

A symbolic interactionist interpretation of sexuality is a congenial tool and companion for a Christian sexual theology. It is compatible with important biblical perspectives on human nature. Our human nature, in the dominant biblical view, is not static and fixed. It is not merely read off our biological constitution. Rather, as human beings we are human becomings, historical and dynamic. So, too, our body meanings, while dependent upon biological foundations, are never automatically given by our physical constitutions. The process by which we become sexual seems to be less a natural unfolding of biological tendencies than a social learning process through which we come to affirm certain sexual meanings in our interaction with significant others.

God's own interaction in salvation history is not static or fixed but wonderfully dynamic. It is the Lord God who says, "Behold! I am making all things new!" (Rev. 21:5), and it is the Lord God who instructed Peter saying, "It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean" (Acts 10:15). The men and women of Integrity rejoice with God the Creator in celebrating with God that which already exists, that which is new, and that which is counted clean. The people of Integrity in the words

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On Blessings of Same-Gender Relationships -- 7

of Garrison Keillor simply and faithfully remind the Church that we already are, and in the love of God, we ask the Church to bless that which already exists. Bless us your sons and daughters; bless our families and our children; bless our commitments with those whom we specially love in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Respectfully submitted for Integrity
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References, page 2

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