

# **“Many Waters Cannot Quench Love”**

**A HISTORY AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR THE CELEBRATION AND BLESSING OF MARRIAGE  
BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE OF THE SAME GENDER**

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## PREFACE

Considerable discussion, energy and resources are being spent in the life of the Church today on the question of the status of gay and lesbian Christians and to what extent Christian communities can support and affirm their attempts to express their sexuality and desire for companionship in positive, wholesome and Gospel affirming ways. At the same time, this battle is being carried out in the secular arena — in some ways to greater acceptance and success. This paper will attempt to answer the question, “Can the Church support and bless the attempts of Christians to enter into relationships that generally look like the relationships embraced by heterosexual couples?” If the answer is yes, as this paper will argue, then what will such blessings look like and how shall the Church convey them?

It is felt by the authors that the question of same-gender marriage can truly place the Church in a position to transform culture, rather than to embrace secular culture or stand opposed to secular culture. It is important for contemporary Christians, whether straight or gay, to understand anew that the ability to give and receive love is not just a divine gift given to two people, but a gift given to the entire world. It is in the *witness* of such shared love that the nature of God's relationship to humankind can be revealed, and it is this witness which the theology around the sacrament of marriage has sought to capture.

The argument over whether or not to celebrate and bless marriages of persons of the same gender calls the Church to a renewed examination of Christian marriage and educates us again on the ways of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, this effort is both catechetical and evangelical. In order to frame the discussion, the first part of this paper will examine the history of Christian matrimony. Then, the authors will move towards a discussion of why this tradition can be extended to include same-gender couples. Finally, the paper will conclude with a description of the appended rite that might be used to celebrate such marriages.

## HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN MATRIMONY

In order to understand how same gender marriage might be consistent with a "Christian" understanding of marriage, we will first examine the current understanding of marriage in The Episcopal Church, USA and then trace some of the historical developments in Christian theology and liturgical practice dealing with matrimony.

The Episcopal Church has two main sources in which a theology of marriage may be revealed. The Preface to the "Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" as well as the opening exhortation in the rite in the *Book of Common Prayer* offer one perspective.<sup>1</sup> Title One, Canon 18 of the *Constitution and Canons* offers another perspective by describing rules about solemnizing Holy Matrimony.<sup>2</sup> The Preface describes Christian marriage as a "solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God."<sup>3</sup> The opening exhortation to the liturgy which solemnizes this covenant claims this about marriage:<sup>4</sup>

- 1) Bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation.
- 2) Our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee.
- 3) It signifies the mystery of the union between Christ and His Church and it is to be honored by all.
- 4) The union of the partners in heart, body and mind is intended for their mutual joy, help and comfort given each other in prosperity or

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Common Prayer, (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 422-424. Hereby abbreviated BCP.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution and Canons for the Government of the Protestant Episcopal Church Otherwise Known as The Episcopal Church, (New York: The General Convention, 1994) 49-50.

<sup>3</sup> BCP, 422.

<sup>4</sup> BCP, 423-424.

adversity; and **when it is God's will**, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. (emphasis mine)

- 5) Marriage must be entered into deliberately and reverently.

Furthermore, the *Constitution and Canons* say this to clergy and others who seek counsel about the rules regarding solemnization of Holy Matrimony:<sup>5</sup>

- 1) Every member of the clergy shall conform to the laws of the state and the laws of the Church
- 2) Both parties must have a right to contract a marriage with the state.
- 3) Both parties must understand 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 - with the intent that it be lifelong.
- 4) Free consent is needed.
- 5) One party must be baptized.
- 6) Instruction is needed.
- 7) The parties must sign a declaration which states that marriage is a lifelong union of husband and wife in heart, mind and body, and that it is intended for their mutual joy, help and comfort in prosperity and adversity; and **when it is God's will**, for the procreation and nurture of children ...

The Episcopal Church understands marriage to be a lifelong commitment of two people, a man and a woman, in heart, mind, and body. It is intended for mutual joy, help, and comfort; and only when it is God's will for procreation and nurture of children in the knowledge and love of God. This understanding comes from God's action in creation and it reflects the nature of the mysterious relationship between Christ and the Church. How did

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<sup>5</sup> Title I, Canon 18, Constitution and Canons, pp. 49-50

this understanding originate and how has it been developed generally throughout Christendom?

Marriage is best understood both in Judaism and Christianity by starting with creation. The second account of creation (Genesis 2:4b-25), which can roughly be dated ca. 920-1000 BCE, defines the purpose of relationship between Adam and Eve as partnership intended for the alleviation of loneliness, not for procreation of children.<sup>6</sup> Marriage in Judaism came to be understood primarily in terms of procreation and property.<sup>7</sup> Promiscuity was forbidden in Judaism although concubinage was permitted. By Jesus' time (ca. 3 BCE - 33 CE) marriage was understood more in terms of a duty or vocation in which permanence and fidelity were important.<sup>8</sup> Paul, shortly after Jesus (ca. 40-60 CE), had a more conservative view of marriage and suggested that it was better to remain unmarried if one could be chaste. However, if the unmarried one could not maintain self-control, then it was better to marry than to be a fornicator (1 Cor. 7). The concept of marriage as a remedy for sinful behavior began with Paul.<sup>9</sup>

As the Christian Church became an organized Church in the first three centuries of its existence, it battled the forces of Roman pagan religion and Gnosticism. The Gnostics influenced the Christian understanding of marriage by the propagation of suspicion of the body and disdain for anything dealing with flesh (σάρξ). Roman culture also saw marriage

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<sup>6</sup> S. Dean McBride, Jr., "Biblical Literature In Its Historical Context: The Old Testament," Harper's Bible Commentary, ed. James L. Mays (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988) 15-16, and Charles Bennison, "Some Chronological Benchmarks in the History of Social and Ecclesiastical Opinion Regarding Sexuality and Marriage in the Church and the Society," an unpublished paper at Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 24 June 1993, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, "Christian Marriage and Homosexual Monogamy," ed. Charles Hefling, Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God, (Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1996) 91.

<sup>8</sup> Crysdale, 91, and Bennison, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Roland H. Bainton, What Christianity Says About Sex, Love and Marriage, (New York: Association Press, 1957) 23.

as a family affair and not a liturgical or ecclesiastical event.<sup>10</sup> Paul's preference for celibacy and the Gnostic suspicion of marriage led the Patristic writers to defend the role of marriage. Although not all Patristic theologians supported marriage as the ideal, most defended marriage as legitimate and valuable.<sup>11</sup>

Tertullian praised marriage and spoke of the holiness of the companionability of husband and wife.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Tertullian also condemned marriage as something which would encumber the soldier for Christ. In other words, marriage was a distraction.<sup>13</sup> Overall, the rise of asceticism and martyrdom led to the concept of virginity as the ideal spiritual way of life.<sup>14</sup> During the Constantinian Era, marriage was regulated by the government and was seen as a contract requiring the consent of both parties involved or the consent of their legal guardians.<sup>15</sup> St. Augustine, one of the most important Patristic theologians, claimed that the three goods (or ends) of marriage were; procreation, fidelity (union), and symbol or sacrament.<sup>16</sup> St. Augustine did not see procreation as evil, although he believed that passion was a turning away of the will from God and toward the flesh.<sup>17</sup> Procreation was the most important reason for marriage, followed by a holy union, and followed by the belief that

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<sup>10</sup> Crysdale, 91.

<sup>11</sup> Bainton, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Tertullian, "To His Wife," Ante-Nicene Fathers IV, 48, in Bainton, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, "Exhortation to Chastity," XII, Ante-Nicene Fathers IV, 56, in Bainton, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Crysdale, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Crysdale, 92.

<sup>16</sup> St. Augustine, On Marriage and Concupiscence II, 21, in Crysdale, 92-93; and Continuing the Dialogue: A Pastoral Study Document of the House of Bishops to the Church as the Church Considers Issues of Human Sexuality, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, 1995) 48-49.

<sup>17</sup> For more on St. Augustine's understanding of will see, St. Augustine, The City of God, trans. Henry Bettenson, (London, Penguin Books, 1972) Book XIV, Chapters 1-4, 6.

marriage was a symbol of the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the Church as indicated by the story of the Wedding at Cana of Galilee (John 2: 1-12).

By the Middle Ages, there appeared a shift from understanding marriage as primarily a secular institution related to the government or to familial ordering, to understanding marriage as an ecclesiastical institution.<sup>18</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Medieval Scholastic, understood marriage as the permanent union of one man and one woman, legitimately formed under contract, with a view to a common life and the procreation of offspring. The primary ends of such a marriage were the generation and education of children, while the secondary ends of the marriage were mutual aid and remedy for concupiscence.<sup>19</sup> With the influence of the Germanic tribal invaders into Europe leading to the collapse of the Roman Empire, a problem over definitions of marriage was to be had. The traditional Western Roman understanding of marriage was that marriage was a legal and binding contract by reason of consent between the parties involved or by someone who could legally speak for them. However, the Germanic tribes understood the consent as implying a promise, but that actual consummation by sexual intercourse was necessary for the union to be a marriage.<sup>20</sup> As a result, secret marriages by consent and consummation took place and were recognized de facto. By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century at the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church abolished all secret marriages and declared that a marriage had to take place before a priest and at least two witnesses, with the Banns of Marriage being

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<sup>18</sup> Crysdale, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony L. Ostheimer, The Family, a Thomistic Study in Social Philosophy (1939) as cited in Bainton, 64. The summary of St. Thomas Aquinas' views of marriage is a paraphrase of Ostheimer.

<sup>20</sup> Crysdale, 93.

published in advance of the ceremony.<sup>21</sup> The Council of Trent clearly stated that marriage was a sacrament requiring the Church's blessing.

The Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries reacted strongly to any sacramental concept of marriage and railed against the notion of the Church as having any jurisdiction over what rightly belonged to the civil government. Consequently, marriage came to be seen as a civil ceremony with no sacramental status.<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther's position on marriage may be seen as representative of the Reformation reaction. Luther celebrated "married love" and upheld marriage as a civil institution. He did believe that it was a remedy for promiscuity, but he did not see it as a distraction from the holy life in the way that Tertullian understood marriage. Luther's goods of marriage were progeny, fidelity, and sacrament (symbol); but that did not mean that marriage was a sacrament itself. Luther upheld the symbolic nature of marriage as representing Biblical truths about covenanted relationship, but he denied the Roman Catholic understanding of marriage as a dominical sacrament that conferred some form of grace.<sup>23</sup> Luther firmly upheld the need for marriage to fall under civil jurisdiction.

Anglicanism has embraced an understanding of marriage that is most like the Reformation concept of marriage. There are, however, differences in marriage custom throughout the Anglican Communion due to the different relationships the church has with the state, and also in the case of Africa, differences in cultural understanding of marriage customs. The development of marriage rites in England have most influenced the development of the marriage rite in the Episcopal Church in the United States. The

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<sup>21</sup> Crsydale, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Crsydale, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Bainton, 83-84.



marriage rite in the 1549 Prayer Book of the Church of England came from these sources; the Sarum and York traditions, the Consultation of Hermann, the Brandenburg Church order, and the exposition of marriage from the King's Book.<sup>24</sup> The rite, set in the Sunday liturgy between the Litany and the Eucharist, required publication of the banns in advance and it recognized the three goods of marriage as: (1) procreation of children, (2) "a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication," (3) "mutual society, help, and comfort."<sup>25</sup> The 1552 Prayer Book made minor revisions and the 1662 Prayer Book, still used in England today, no longer required Eucharist as part of the ceremony.<sup>26</sup>

In the Episcopal Church, USA, the 1789 Prayer Book continued to separate marriage from Eucharist and made some minor deletions from the 1662 English Prayer Book. The American 1892 Book of Common Prayer restored references to marriage as being instituted by God and as signifying the mystery of the union between Christ and His Church. The 1928 BCP eliminated many of the images from the Old Testament models for marriage and eliminated the promise of the women to "obey."<sup>27</sup> Like its predecessors (1789 and 1892) it did not mention the goods of marriage, however, the 1928 BCP made mention in prayer for God to bestow upon the couple, **if it be God's will**, the gift and heritage of children and that the children be brought up in God's faith and fear.<sup>28</sup> The 1979 BCP again reinforced the place of the marriage rite within the Eucharist and it also provided a separate

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<sup>24</sup> Marion J. Hatchett, Commentary on the American Prayer Book, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995) 429.

<sup>25</sup> Hatchett, 429.

<sup>26</sup> Hatchett, 430.

<sup>27</sup> Hatchett, 430.

<sup>28</sup> The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1928) 303.

rite for the Blessing of a Civil Marriage.<sup>29</sup> It listed the goods of marriage in this order: (1) mutual joy, (2) help and comfort given each other in times of adversity and prosperity, (3) when it is God's will, the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.<sup>30</sup>

The Anglican understanding of marriage has been that marriage is an institution under civil jurisdiction which is to be blessed by the church. In England, where the Anglican Church is the state church, a marriage can take place in the church where the minister acts as a religious and civil authority. In the United States, since the American Revolution, ministers of Christian churches are allowed, in this case only, to act as civil officers by witnessing the exchange of vows in accordance with the licenses of individual states.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in the USA, a marriage can take place solely in a church, as long as the rules of the state are observed; which is unlike the modern customs in other parts of North America and Western Europe where a civil and church ceremony are required separately.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> BCP, 433-434.

<sup>30</sup> BCP, 423.

<sup>31</sup> Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, Liturgy for Living: The Church's Teaching Series, (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 254.

<sup>32</sup> Price and Weil, 254.

## Extending the Tradition

The section of the paper will attempt to show that the tradition of Christian Marriage can be extended to include the celebration and blessing of a marriage of couples who are gay or lesbian. This paper will then conclude with an example of what such a rite might look like given the authors' theological understanding of what a marriage between two gay people of the same gender is and how that understanding fits in with the tradition and practice of Christian marriage in the Church today.

A few words of caution and assurance are in order before the argument can be made. First, it must be made absolutely clear that this paper is not a political game plan for legitimizing same gender marriages in the Episcopal Church. Second, it is not necessarily descriptive of the current situation or situations one can find in the American Church. This paper arises out of consideration of the four options presented in the report of the ad-hoc committee consisting of members of the Standing Liturgical Commission and the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops to the 72<sup>nd</sup> General Convention.<sup>33</sup> The *hypothetical situation* the authors have decided upon is that the Church *has decided* on a blend of options B and C.<sup>34</sup> That is, *hypothetically*, the Church *might believe* that the sacrament of marriage is substantially the same for heterosexual as well as homosexual marriages, but that the witness to tradition

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<sup>33</sup>"Report to the General Convention on the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships" in Report to the 72<sup>nd</sup> General Convention (Otherwise Known as the Blue Book), by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, 1997, 285 - 300. Hereinafter, this will be referred to as "the Report."

<sup>34</sup>The four options are listed on pages 293-294 of the Report. Option B is to "Have the Standing Liturgical Commission devise a rite or rites of marriage to be authorized equally with heterosexual or homosexual couples. Option C would "Have the Standing Liturgical Commission develop a rite or rites that would officially bestow the church's blessing on same-sex unions but would clearly not be the same as sacramental marriage."

contained in the current marriage rite and the lack of the State's recognition of same gender marriages necessitates an altered rite for same gender marriages. Additionally, a second rite can emphasize that legitimizing same gender marriages does not denigrate the tradition and witness of heterosexual marriage.

Thus, the scope of this paper is to offer a theological defense for same gender marriage, present a possible liturgy for use and illustrate how that liturgy fits in with the theological defense. It will be evident at the conclusion that the sacrament of Christian marriage can be extended to include same gender couples.

### *A Rose by Any Other Name...*

The first issue to consider is the name of the rite. Various liturgies that have been used to celebrate and give public acknowledgment of the commitment to a common life between two gay people have borne many different titles. After examining several rites from around the country, the more popular titles used among Episcopalians appear to be:

A Rite for the Celebration of a Common Life  
Together,  
Blessing of Same-Sex Unions,  
Blessing of Same-Gender Relationships,  
Blessing of Gay (Lesbian) Marriages,  
Blessing of a Home and the Union between *N.*  
and *N.*,  
The Celebration and Affirmation of the Life  
Covenant,  
Blessing of the Covenant, and  
some rites where a title was avoided altogether.

As the above list indicates, there is a high degree of ambivalence about what to call an event when two people of the same gender come together to publicly proclaim their love for one another, their commitment to one another in union of common life and body, and seek their community's blessing. Within the discourse of the Church, there appears to be some evolution of terminology that may, in part, be politically rather than theologically motivated. In 1993, the "Consultation on the Blessing of Gay and Lesbian Marriages" was held in Cambridge, Massachusetts and attended by Episcopal Theologians with varying viewpoints. In 1996, roughly the same gathering was held under the title "Second Consultation of Episcopalians on Same-Sex Unions." The suggested liturgy arising out of that conference (Appendix B) carries the title "A Rite for the Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together." This demonstrates a move from "Gay Marriage" to "Same-Sex Union" to a "Commitment to a Life Together."<sup>35</sup> This latter rite is gender neutral and would appear to qualify for Option B of the Report to General Convention, the development of a rite equally suitable for heterosexual and homosexual couples.<sup>36</sup>

The question of a title is an important question for that will convey what the rite intends to do. It will also be a theological marker to guide the development of the rite. A Commitment to a Common Life can be more broadly interpreted and have different

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<sup>35</sup>These are the titles given in the Reports of each of these consultations and the second Consultation's proposed rite, which is Section 2 of its "Report of the Second Consultation of Episcopalians on Same-Sex Unions" (Second Draft, printed January 1, 1997).

<sup>36</sup>Section 2, "A Rite for the Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together" in "Report of the Second Consultation of Episcopalians on Same-Sex Unions" (Fourth Draft, March 18, 1997), 9. The introduction specifically states, "This rite is intended for use as a public celebration of commitment to a life together between *two persons...*" (emphasis added) The only stated requirement is that one of them be a Christian.

demands than the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage. For example, the former can, by title, be used of monastics making vows to a community whereas the latter is clearly understood to be about the physical and spiritual union of a man and woman.

This paper proposes that the title adopted be "The Celebration and Blessing of Marriage Between Two People of the Same Gender." This is chosen for specific reasons. First and foremost, it is our belief that the sacrament of marriage can be extended to include lesbian and gay couples. As Resolution C-013 of the 71<sup>st</sup> General Convention held, "...the prayers in the marriage service of the Book of Common Prayer offer guidance to *all* [emphasis added] Christians who seek to understand the nature of their relationships and who strive to be signs of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world...."<sup>37</sup> Thus, the theology contained in the marriage rite says something very specific about what marriage is about. The later section on theology will demonstrate how this applies to gay and lesbian couples.

Second, as the titles above indicate, no other word than marriage seems to convey, in its entirety, the emotional, theological and spiritual depth of what is happening in a same gender marriage. To use a different word would be to further enforce a second-class status on gay and lesbian couples, a status we believe the theological argument will not warrant. Indeed, as Juan Oliver states, "...from the point of view of sacramental theology, there is no reason to signal out "Same-Sex Blessing" as inherently different from the rite of Marriage..."<sup>38</sup> Additionally, some in the gay community specifically do not want to use the word marriage because they do not want

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<sup>37</sup>"An Illustration of a Rite for the Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together...", a paper arising out of the 1993 Consultation, June 1, 1995.

<sup>38</sup>Juan M. C. Oliver, "Why Gay Marriage?" The Journal of Men's Studies vol 4:1 (February, 1996), 210.

to be a part an institution which they view as unrealistically restrictive. Here, likewise, the theological argument will allow no wiggle room for a less permanent intent.

Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning has said:

The Christian sexual ethic is hard, but it has been the experience of Christians that only when human love participates in something of the divine, unconditional love can the yearning of the human heart be satisfied.<sup>39</sup>

Third, the term "Same Gender" focuses less on the sexual nature of the individuals involved, but more on a physical description. This emphasizes that marriage is about more than legitimating sexual expression. However, the title also is clear that this is an extension of the tradition of marriage and appeals to different biblical and traditional images of God's purposes for humankind than those used in the rite currently existing in the Book of Common Prayer.

Finally, even Stephen F. Noll, a staunch critic of proposed same-gender marriages, acknowledges that the union under discussion is not one of mere friendship, that ceremonies tend to mirror the marriage rite, and that the public debate is carried out in the context of marriage. Thus:

Same-sex *marriage* therefore is the only innovation worth discussing and is what is envisioned in the Resolution [C042s, 1994 General Convention], whether it calls is by name or not. We shall speak of same-sex marriage throughout the essay and attempt to understand it in terms of the Church's doctrine of marriage.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Edmond Browning, "Pastoral Letter to the House of Bishops" (New York: The Episcopal Church Center, April, 1987) quoted in "On Blessings of Same Gender Relationships" (Washington, DC: Integrity Inc, December, 1987), 1-2.

<sup>40</sup>Stephen F. Noll, "The Case Against Same-Sex Marriage in the Episcopal Church," a paper given to the ad hoc committee in response to C042s (September 10, 1996), 8.

A little later, he writes:

One simply cannot have it both ways: if justice requires same-sex couples to have parity with married couples in the Church's life, then the only alternative is either to expand marriage to include homosexual couples or devise a parallel rite. Both of which amount to the same thing.<sup>41</sup>

### *The Theological Argument*

As the authors of the report of the Second Consultation state, "Any rite is, in itself, a theological statement."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the next step is to discuss the theology that we believe should underlie any rite of same-gender marriage. Traditionally, Christian marriage is rooted in the tradition of Genesis and the presence of Christ at the Wedding in Cana of Galilee. Gays and lesbians can not draw on this tradition for it does not give the explicit endorsement of same gender marriages, though this tradition does speak to the essential character of humans as created for community, not isolation. Instead, two approaches might be useful for consideration. The first examines the nature of covenant in opposite gender and same gender marriages. The second follows an ethical approach and looks at the theological goods of traditional marriage and finds them compatible with same gender marriages.

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<sup>41</sup>Noll, 9.

<sup>42</sup>"Report of the Second Consultation of Episcopalians on Same-Sex Unions" (July, 1996), 1.



Charles Bennison and Timothy Sedgwick argue most persuasively from the vantage point of covenant. First, Sedgwick speaks of three goods related to human sexuality rooted in Scripture. The first is the good of procreation as seen in Genesis 1:1 - 2:4 wherein the key element is procreation to insure hope for the future. The second good is companionship, which is the most ancient scriptural good arising out of Genesis 2:4b - 3:25 - the older account of creation. Finally, in The Song of Songs, Christianity has found the legitimization of erotic desire. This desire is also seen as an allegory for desire for God.<sup>43</sup> Sedgwick then suggests that covenant is the proper context for sexual expression.

Following on this, Sedgwick reminds us that the Covenant is the central practice of Christian life and it is in our covenants with one another that our fundamental understanding of God is formed.<sup>44</sup> In the great covenants of Abraham and Moses with God, the nature of covenant is seen. The word "Covenant" implies a "binding relationship that is based on commitment, that carries with it promises and obligations, and that has the quality of constancy or durability."<sup>45</sup> Unlike a contract, a covenant is durable. It does not depend on obedience. A contract can be abrogated by other party if the other party fails to fulfill the conditions. A covenant is permanent. Therefore, by looking at a marriage as a covenant, we see a model for the covenant relationship between God and God's people. A marriage, with its requirement for faithfulness,

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<sup>43</sup>Timothy P. Sedgwick, "Covenants and Conscience: Integrity of Relations in the Church", An unpublished paper, 2-4.

<sup>44</sup>Sedgwick, 9.

<sup>45</sup>Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, Fourth ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), 89.

permanence, and which makes claims on each other, teaches its participants and witnesses about God's love for humankind.

God is known in the acknowledgment of the other, not as the one who will fulfill my needs but as a person with her/his own cares and commitments who invites me to respect and honor her/him. In this movement I am drawn beyond myself into a community with the other in which I come to love them for her/his own sake.<sup>46</sup>

Sedgwick argues that there are four elements which constitute the covenant of marriage. These are the vows, made publicly, lifelong in intent and sexually exclusive.<sup>47</sup> This is the framework in which marriage can function as an agent of the conversion and reconciliation which stands at the heart of the Christian faith. Since Christianity is an incarnational faith, it is logical that our relationship with one another, when guided by divine will, will reflect that relationship of God and humanity as a whole.

It is because of this strength of the covenant witness that Charles Bennison writes:

The biblical concept of "covenant," created by the speaking of words of promise and sustained by mutual forgiveness, appears to be the presupposition underlying most theological thinking and liturgical rites for gay and lesbian marriages.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Sedgwick, 9-10.

<sup>47</sup>Sedgwick, 11.

<sup>48</sup>Charles Bennison, "Some Theological Issues at the Consultation on The Blessing of Gay and Lesbian Marriages" (June 24, 1993), 5.

Thus, by examining heterosexual marriage in the context of covenant, a commonality can be found between heterosexual and homosexual relationships which suggests the viability of extending the tradition of Christian matrimony to same gender couples.

Tom Breidenthal structures his argument around the principle of householding as the sanctification of nearness. "The Kingdom is about nearness, because it is about Jesus, who embraced connection more completely than anyone else."<sup>49</sup> Households have to be converted to that nearness, not be barriers to it. In other words, the whole focus of the household is to enable the individual and the community to serve Christ. Breidenthal's question is whether or not householding characterized by two people of the same gender giving themselves to each other physically and emotionally can be training grounds for that nearness typical of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Households exist in many different forms. There are the traditional marriages with husband, wife and children; there are monastic communities; and there are celibate individuals whose lack of attachment to a specific individual or community frees them for relationship with a larger number of people. The fundamental concept of householding is that we are connected to one another. St. Paul's image of the Body makes clear that each individual is both unique and dependent. We cannot exist apart, just a foot or a hand cannot be separate from the body. In our togetherness, we can fulfill our common purpose, which is the praise of God, as the Body of Christ. The

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<sup>49</sup>Tom Breidenthal, Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1997), 6.

individualism present in our society today is a denial of essential connectedness with one another.<sup>50</sup>

However, there are limits to our ability to be familiar with one another. We live under the condition of sin which means that we simply cannot be equally available to all people. Thus, householding is a way to be available for another person or group of people (as in a monastery or other celibate communities) in a way that offer a witness to the community of our connectedness as the body of Christ.

Among other things, Christian life is a schooling in holy familiarity. But this schooling is tricky since, given our weakness and our tendency toward sinfulness, we cannot simply enjoy familiarity with everyone as if we were already in heaven. We must practice Christ-like familiarity with a few people in order that we may be ready, when the time comes, to enjoy it with countless others.<sup>51</sup>

There are three major principles of the Christian household. They are bodily fellowship, which is the act of householding itself; exclusivity, wherein the tendency for over-extension is guarded against; and accountability to the Church, which is a reminder of the larger horizon — that our household is to reflect the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>52</sup>

Breidenthal then takes this concept of householding and holds it against the three traditional goods of Christian marriage to examine whether or not a same gender marriage is, in fact, possible.

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<sup>50</sup>Breidenthal, 30.

<sup>51</sup>Breidenthal, 75.

<sup>52</sup>Breidenthal, 96 - 105.

As the first part of this paper demonstrates, the practice of marriage has meant different things at different times in human and religious history. In the modern world, some churches are deputized by the state to perform marriages and other churches have their own ceremonies which do not recognize those of the state. This is true within Anglicanism itself. Historically, our understanding of marriage focuses on the goods outlined in the prayer book. Cranmer's goods, described in the opening exhortation of the 1549 rite are:

1. "...procreacion of children, to be brought up in the feare and nurture of the Lord, and prayse of God...
2. ...a remedie agaynst sinne...that suche persones as bee married, might liue chastlie in matrimonie, and kepe themselues undefiled membres of christe bodye;
3. ...(and) for the mutuall societie, helpe, and coumfort, that th eone oughte to haue of thother, both in prosperities ad aduersitie."<sup>53</sup>

To answer the argument that procreation is an essential component in legitimate marriage, Breidenthal examines procreation in the light of love of neighbor (the potential child) and the openness to hospitality that is characteristic of the Christian household. Sexual expression is appropriate when it is born out of a desire for nearness with the other person which is good, whether or not procreation is possible. Gay couples are, in fact, able to adopt and raise children. Lisa Sowle Cahill describes the moral criteria for healthy Christian sexual expression as including: (1) an intentionally permanent commitment of partnership and love, and (2) the willingness of

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<sup>53</sup>The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI, Everyman's Library, no. 448 (London: Dent, 1910; reprint 1964), 252.

the couple to welcome and nurture as a couple any children that result from their union.<sup>54</sup> This might be described as procreative responsibility, where the commitment is to be responsible for the possible nurture and upbringing of children. Same gender Christian couples can express procreative responsibility even if their physical union, in and of itself, will not scientifically result in procreation. To be willing to care for children is a way of being radically available and loving to the neighbor. The Christian vocation to bring others to Christ and to witness to hope for the future, can be fulfilled differently for same gender Christian couples.<sup>55</sup> Their witness to hospitality could include a special availability to the larger community that a couple with children would not have the resources to easily achieve. This might take the form of a ministry of radical hospitality to the neighbor in which the same gender couple would make themselves and their home available on a much greater basis than which a couple nurturing children may be able.

The sexual exclusivity of the gay couple is equally important for Christian householding. Householding requires a commitment to the other that is unconditional - which holds nothing back - for God does not hold anything back from us, nor does God allow us to hold anything back from God's self. This notion arises from Sedgwick's vision of covenant as the model for marriage. The suggestion that legitimizing gay marriages would lead to legitimizing sex with two or more partners fails to recognize that adding an additional person into the mix requires that an individual can not be fully available to one other person. The condition of holding back is introduced into the

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<sup>54</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 148-149.

<sup>55</sup>Breidenthal, 133.

relationship and it can no longer model the exclusive, unconditional and totally self-giving love of God for us in Jesus Christ, which is the same love God requires from us. Householding, therefore, provides the context for sexual relationship which is focused on the other, not on the individual, for that is the nature of relationships in the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, it can be said that householding is a protection against vice in that it is a training ground for life in the Kingdom. It continually calls out of individual, sinful selves into relationship with the larger community, through a specific and intentional relationship with one other person (in the case of marriage).

Finally, the marriage vows make very clear that marriage is also for "mutual comfort." It should be self-evident that even same gender couples can take part in this gift of Christian marriage.

Thus, by examining marriage as a covenant and as Christian householding, we find both a biblical foundation for marriage that is equally suitable for heterosexual and homosexual couples. Through the concept of Christian householding, we even see that the three traditional goods of marriage can be seen in same gender relationships. Therefore, it would see that it is fully consistent with the intent and purpose of marriage to extend the tradition to same gender couples, under the same guidelines of exclusivity, permanence and communal witness that is found in heterosexual marriages.

## **The Rite in Context**

Having discussed the theology for the rite, it now seems appropriate to introduce the rite itself. It is found in Appendix A. The first thing the reader will notice is that is not substantially different from the marriage rite found in the Book of Common Prayer. The authors have not seen a need to revisit the entire concept of marriage, but have seen a way to include same gender relationships into the marriage tradition as it stands. Therefore, the rite is altered to take into account that Christians must appeal to a different Biblical foundation for same gender marriage (that of covenant) and cannot read back into Genesis and Jesus' presence at the wedding in Cana, an explicit endorsement of same gender marriage. The only concession to liturgical reform since the introduction of the 1979 Prayer Book is that the rite fits more specifically in the context of the Liturgy of the Word of the Holy Eucharist. Commentary on its components follow.

### **Concerning the Service**

The hypothetical situation that guides this paper is that the Church, in its councils, has agreed to adopt a middle position between options B and C in the Report to General Convention. This section of the rite describes that decision. Additionally, it must be clear that this is not a secular marriage since secular jurisdictions do not accept same gender marriages.

### **Opening Acclamation and Presentation**



Since there is no opening introduction, as in the prayer book marriage rite, it seems fitting to begin with the normal opening acclamations and then proceed directly to the Presentation. Since our theological understanding of same gender marriages is the same as heterosexual marriage, only slight accommodations to gender reference are made. However, since this is not a legal ceremony, reference to “lawfully” in the charge to the couple is removed.

### The Declaration of Consent

The term “partner” is adopted to replace “husband” and “wife” respectively. This is accommodation to the societal use of the term in reference to gay couples without critique of its etymological appropriateness. The *Gloria in excelsis* and the *Trisagion* are given as explicit options for the rubric on page 425 allowing for a hymn, psalm, or anthem to follow the Declaration of Consent. There is nothing to prohibit the *Kyrie*, but it is assumed that most couples would not use it.

### The Liturgy of the Word

The collect is altered with reference to gender. The options for the readings come from the proposed rite arising out of the Second Consultation, with the exception that we include the Matthean Beatitudes as an option to the Lukan Beatitudes.

### The Marriage

The phrase “Life-long partner” replaces “husband” and “wife”. “Life-long” is included this time to emphasize that there is no concession to modern, individualistic

desires for “escape clauses” in revisions of marriage rites. The Prayers are altered for gender purposes. The Lord’s Prayer is omitted since it is assumed there will be Communion. The prayer for procreation of children is left in because modern technology does indeed allow for same gender couples to become biological parents.

### The Blessing of the Marriage

Here, we use only the first option for a blessing because the second includes the theological language which suggests that God established the covenant of marriage to represent the spiritual unity between Christ and His Church, thereby implying that God has ordained same gender marriages throughout time. While we may personally believe this, we don’t want to convey the notion that this is a truth for The Episcopal Church. Therefore, under the principle of covenant, this blessing would indeed be theologically correct, but we do not wish to give suggestion that we are reading back into an established tradition what is not there.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **THE CELEBRATION AND BLESSING OF MARRIAGE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE OF THE SAME GENDER**

## Concerning the Service

In a Christian marriage, whether between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman or a man and a man, a solemn covenant is made before God and the Church. A Christian marriage between two people of the same gender differs from that of a man and a woman only in the legal standing of that covenant. There are no civil claims on a marriage celebrated and blessed by the Church between two men or two women and not all churches recognize the validity of extending the sacrament of Holy Matrimony to same gender couples. Therefore, the Episcopal Church requires that both people desiring to enter into this holy covenant be baptized Christians and eligible to participate fully in the sacramental life of this Church as defined by its canons.

This service does not constitute a legal marriage in the eyes of the state when used by two people of opposite gender.

A priest or a bishop normally presides at the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, because such ministers alone have the function of pronouncing the nuptial blessing, and of celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

When both a bishop and a priest are present and officiating, the bishop should pronounce the blessing and preside at the Eucharist. A deacon, or an assisting priest, may deliver the charge, ask for the Declaration of Consent, read the Gospel, and perform other assisting functions at the Eucharist.

It is desirable that the Lessons from the Old Testament and the Epistles be read by lay persons.

In the opening exhortation (at the symbol of N.N. ), the full names of the persons to be married are declared. Subsequently, only their Christian names are used.

It is assumed that this ceremony will take place in the context of The Holy Eucharist. If a Eucharist is not to be celebrated, the service concludes as directed in the rubrics for celebrating Ante-Communion as found on page 406 of the Book of Common Prayer.

## **The Holy Eucharist with the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage**

*At the time appointed, the persons to be married, with their witnesses assemble in the church or some other appropriate place.*

*During their entrance, a hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.*

*The people standing, the Celebrant says*

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
*People* And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen.

*In place of the above, from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost*

*Celebrant* Alleluia. Christ is risen.  
*People* The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

*In Lent and on other penitential occasions*

*Celebrant* Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins;  
*People* His mercy endures for ever.

*The Celebrant may say*

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **The Presentation and Declaration of Consent**

*The sponsors present the couple, saying*

We present N.N. and N.N. to be joined in the union of Holy Matrimony.

*The Celebrant says to the people gathered*

The union of two people in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore this union is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently and deliberately.

Into this holy union N.N. and N.N. now come to be joined. If any of you can show just cause why they may not be married, speak now; or else for ever hold your peace.

*After a significant pause, the Celebrant says to the persons to be married*

I require and charge you both, here in the presence of God, that if either of you know any reason why you may not be united in marriage you do now confess it.

*The Celebrant says to the First Partner.*

N., will you have this (woman) man to be your life long partner; to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her (him), comfort her (him), honor and keep her (him), in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her (him) as long as you both shall live?

*The First Partner answers*

I will.

*The Celebrant says to the Second Partner*

N., will you have this (woman) man to be your life long partner; to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her (him), comfort her (him), honor and keep her (him), in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her (him) as long as you both shall live?

*The Second Partner answers*

I will.

*The Celebrant then addresses the congregation, saying*

Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their marriage?

People We will.

*When appointed, the following hymn or some other song of praise, psalm or anthem is sung or said, all standing*

Glory to God in the highest,  
and peace to his people on earth.

Lord God, heavenly King,  
almighty God and Father,  
we worship you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your glory.

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,  
Lord God, Lamb of God,  
you take away the sin of the world:  
have mercy on us;



you are seated at the right hand of the Father:  
receive our prayer.

For you alone are the Holy One,  
you alone are the Lord,  
you alone are the Most High,  
Jesus Christ,  
with the Holy Spirit,  
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

*or this*

Holy God,  
Holy and Mighty,  
Holy Immortal One,  
*Have mercy upon us.*

## **The Ministry of the Word**

*The Celebrant then says to the people*

*People*      The Lord be with you.  
                 And also with you.

Let us pray.

O gracious and everliving God, you have created us in your image: Look mercifully upon these two men (women) who come to you seeking your blessing, and assist them with your grace, that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may honor and keep the promises and vows they make; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

*Then two or more of the following passages from Holy Scripture is read. The final passage is always from the Gospel. If the service is in the context of the principal celebration of the Holy Eucharist on Sunday, those readings are used instead.*

### **From the Old Testament**

Song of Solomon 2:10-13; 8:6-7 (Many waters cannot quench love)  
Ruth 1:16-17 (Where you go I will go...)  
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (Two are better than one)

### **From the Psalms**

67, 85, 111, 127, 133:1-3, 149

## From the New Testament

Romans 12:9-21 (Let love be genuine)

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (Love is patient and kind)

Colossians 3:12-17 (Love which binds everything together in harmony)

1 John 4:7-16 (Let us love one another for love is of God)

## From the Gospels

*When a passage from the Gospel is to be read, all stand, and the Deacon or Minister appointed says*

                    The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ  
                    according to \_\_\_\_\_ .  
*People*       Glory to you, Lord Christ.

Matthew 5:1-10 (The Beatitudes)

Matthew 5:13-16 (You are the light ... Let your light so shine)

Matthew 7:21,24-29 (Like a wise man who built his house upon the rock)

Luke 6:20-23 (The Beatitudes)

John 15:9-17 (Love one another as I have loved you)

John 17:1, 18-26 (...that they may be one as we are one)

*After the Gospel, the Reader says*

                    The Gospel of the Lord.  
*People*       Praise to you, Lord Christ.

*A homily or other response to the Readings may follow.*

## The Marriage

*The First Partner, facing the Second Partner and taking that partner's right hand, says*

In the Name of God, I, N., take you, N., to be my life-long partner, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

*Then they loose their hands, and the Second Partner, still facing the First, takes that Partner's right hand, and says*

In the Name of God, I, N., take you, N., to be my life-long partner, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

*They loose their hands.*



*The Priest may ask God's blessing on a ring or rings as follows*

Bless, O Lord, this ring to be a sign of the vows by which these two women (men) have bound themselves to each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*The giver places the ring on the ring-finger of the other's hand and says*

N., I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (or in the Name of God).

*Then the Celebrant joins the right hands of the couple and says*

Now that N. and N. have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of a ring (rings), I pronounce that they are life partners, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.  
*People* Amen.

## **The Prayers**

*All standing, the Celebrant says*

*The Deacon or other person appointed reads the following prayers, to which the People respond, saying, Amen.*

Let us pray.

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of all grace: Look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon these two men (women) whom you make one flesh in Holy Matrimony. *Amen.*

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. *Amen.*

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life. *Amen.*

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours. *Amen.*

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. *Amen.*

Bestow on them, if it is your will, the gift and heritage of children, and the grace to bring them up to know you, to love you, and to serve you. *Amen.*

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others. *Amen.*

Grant that all married persons who have witnessed these vows may find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed. *Amen.*

Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace, that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where, O Father, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign in perfect unity, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## **The Blessing of the Marriage**

*The people remain standing. The couple kneel, and the Priest says one of the following prayers*

Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life. We thank you, also, for consecrating the union of these two people in his Name. By the power of your Holy Spirit, pour out the abundance of your blessing upon them. Defend them from every enemy. Lead them into all peace. Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads. Bless them in their work and in their companionship; in their sleeping and in their waking; in their joys and in their sorrows; in their life and in their death. Finally, in your mercy, bring them to that table where your saints feast for ever in your heavenly home; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## **The Peace**

*The Celebrant says to the people*

*People*           The peace of the Lord be always with you.  
                      And also with you.

*The newly married couple then greet each other, after which greetings may be exchanged throughout the congregation.*

## **At the Eucharist**

*The liturgy continues with the Offertory, at which the newly married couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.*



*Preface of Baptism*

*At the Communion, it is appropriate that the newly married couple receive Communion first, after the ministers.*

*In place of the usual postcommunion prayer, the following is said*

O God, the giver of all that is true and lovely and gracious: We give you thanks for binding us together in these holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that by your Holy Spirit, N. and N., now joined in Holy Matrimony, may become one in heart and soul, live in fidelity and peace, and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love you; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*As the wedding party leaves the church, a hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung; or instrumental music may be played.*

## **APPENDIX B**

### **A RITE FOR THE CELEBRATION OF COMMITMENT TO A LIFE TOGETHER**

**From the "Report of the Second Consultation of Episcopalians on Same-Sex Unions"**

## SECTION TWO

### A RITE FOR THE CELEBRATION OF COMMITMENT TO A LIFE TOGETHER

#### *Introduction*

*This rite is intended for use as a public celebration of commitment to a life together between two persons, at least one of whom is a baptized Christian, and who desire to celebrate their commitment in the context of the Christian community. The rite consists of two parts.*

*In Part I, the couple declare to their families, friends, and congregation(s) their intention to explore their relationship and to begin a period of discernment, assisted by sponsors and ideally a small group from within the congregation, who help them discern the nature of their relationship and articulate their expectations and fears and the commitments that they are ready to make.*

*In Part II, the couple celebrate their commitment to each other, responding to the proclamation of God's Word by exchanging vows. The Presider leads the assembly in thanking God for God's love and faithfulness, manifested by the couple's commitment, and pronounces God's blessing upon them.*

*A suitable period of time should transpire between the two parts of the rite. For pastoral reasons, Part II may be celebrated without the first having taken place. (See Additional Directions.)*

#### PART I: DECLARATION OF INTENT

*This rite initiates a period of preparation leading to Part II. The Declaration of Intention may take place in the context of the Sunday Eucharist in the congregation to which one or both partners belong. Alternatively, it may be celebrated at any time or place.*

*The Eucharist begins as usual. Before the Song of Praise, the Presider may welcome the people in these or similar words*

Welcome. Today, N. and N. come before us, to declare their intention to join their lives together and to request our support as they prepare for their commitment. As their friends and family we rejoice with them and give thanks to God for calling them together in love.

We invite you to express your support of N. and N. and their relationship by participating fully throughout the service.

*The service continues with the Song of Praise. Collect and Readings. The readings are those appointed for the given Sunday.*

*Following the Prayers of the People, the Presider invites the couple to stand in full view of the congregation and introduces them.*

## Declaration of Intent

*The Presider or the couple may then address the people, explaining their decision to begin preparations for their celebration and announcing its date, if it has been decided. They may ask for their congregation(s)'s support and prayers.*

*The couple address the Presider*

*N., we come before you today, to share our joy with this congregation and to seek its support and prayers as we journey into our commitment to a life together.*

*The Presider addresses each partner*

*N., do you freely intend to commit yourself to N. as your partner in life?*  
*Response*      *I do. Blessed be God who visits me in N's love.*

*The Presider addresses the sponsors*

*NN. you have been selected to accompany N. and N. as they journey together in commitment, in love and in faithfulness. As you share their joys, will you help support them in their preparation and help carry their burdens?*  
*Sponsors*      *We will. Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.*

*The Presider addresses the congregation*

*Presider*      *As N. and N.'s family in Christ, will you rejoice in their love?*  
*People*      *We will. Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.*  
*Presider*      *Will you support them as they grow in love and faithfulness?*  
*People*      *We will. Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.*

*Rings or gifts may be exchanged in silence.*

## Prayer over the Couple

*The Presider, and if desired the sponsors, may lay hands on the couple. The Presider then says*

Creator and Healer of all that is,  
You make the heavens and the earth by your loving Word  
and give yourself to us in love.  
Be present now, with *N.* and *N.*  
as they prepare to give themselves to each other.  
By your Word, affirm in them your new creation  
and unite them in the bond of peace,  
as you promised through Jesus Christ, who said,  
“My peace I give you, my own peace I give to you.”  
For you are the fountain of all Peace,  
and to you we give praise and thanks, Source, Word and Spirit,  
one God, in glory everlasting.

*People*

*AMEN.*

*The liturgy continues with the Peace and the Offertory. The couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.*

## PART II: THE CELEBRATION OF COMMITMENT TO A LIFE TOGETHER

*Part II is designed to take place in the context of the Sunday Eucharist in the congregation to which one or both partners belong. If necessary, for pastoral reasons, the rite may be celebrated at another time. (See Additional Directions.)*

*The Eucharist begins as usual. Before the Song of Praise, the Presider welcomes the people in these or similar words*

Welcome to the celebration of *N.* and *N.*'s commitment to each other as life partners. The Christian community recognizes that the love between two people manifests God's love. Today we celebrate *N.* and *N.*'s love as a gift from God to them and to all of us. As they formally commit to their life together, we bless and thank God for this gift to us.

*Here follows the Song of Praise*

*If the Declaration of Intent did not take place on an earlier occasion, the following declaration may be used.*

*The Presider addresses each partner*

*N.*, have you made a free decision and do you have the firm intention to enter into this commitment with *N.* who stands here before you, having promised yourself to no other?

*Response* I have.

*Presider* The Lord be with you.

*People* And also with you.

*Presider* Let us pray.

O God our Maker and Lover of the heavens and the earth, you have taught us to love each other as Christ loved us, to bear each other's burdens, and to share each other's strengths. Look with favor on *N.* and *N.*, whom you have brought together in love. Grant them sincere love, and unfailing strength. Protect them in their life and work and lead them with us and all creation into our reign of justice and peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. *AMEN.*

*The readings are normally those appointed for the given Sunday. For pastoral reasons, one or more of the following readings may be used*

#### From the Hebrew Bible

Song of Solomon 2:10-13, 8:6-7 (Many waters cannot quench love)  
1 Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a (Jonathan made a covenant with David ... )  
Ruth 1:16-17 (Where you go I will go ... )  
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (Two are better than one)

#### From the Psalms

67, 85, 111, 127, 133:1-3, 149

#### From the New Testament

Romans 12:9-21 (Let love be genuine)  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (If I speak with the tongues of mortals ... )  
Colossians 3:12b-16a (Be clothed in sincere compassion)  
1 John 4:7-12 (Beloved let us love one another ... )

#### From the Gospels

Matthew 7:24-27 (The House built on the rock)  
Luke 6:20-23 (The Beatitudes)  
John 2:1-12a (The marriage at Cana)  
John 15:9-17 (This is my commandment: that you love one another)  
John 17:1, 18-26 ( ... that they may be one as we are one)



## The Vows

*The Presider invites the couple to stand in full view of the congregation. The couple face each other. Taking the other's hand, each says to the other*

N., I give myself to you.

*The other responds*

N., I take you to have and to hold from this day forward, to love and to cherish, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, as my companion, lover, and friend.  
This is my solemn vow.

*Deacon*

People of God, give praise to God.

*People*

Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.

## The Exchange of Rings and/or Gifts

*The Presider may say*

Praise and thanks to you, O God.  
You give yourself to us  
    in love and faithfulness.  
Bless these rings [or gifts]  
    as enduring signs of  
    N. and N. 's commitment to each other.  
Keep them in the bond of love  
    through Christ our Savior. *AMEN*

*Each person places the ring on the ring-finger of the other's hand, or presents the gift(s), saying:*

N., I give you this ring (or gift) as a sign of my love and faithfulness. With my body I honor you, and all that I possess I share with you.

*Deacon*

People of God, give praise to God.

*People*

Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.

## The Prayers of the People

*Presider*            Seeing how greatly God has loved us, let us lift up before God this couple, this community of faith, and the whole world, saying, *Hear our prayer.*

*The Deacon or an appointed lay person bids the people to pray, employing this or some other form.*

*Deacon*            I ask your prayers for the earth and all of God's creation: for the rivers and oceans, for the forests and fields, for the mountains and meadows, and for all creatures who live in them. Pray for our planet.

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon*            O God, Source of all life,  
*People*            Hear our prayer.

*Deacon*            I ask your prayers for the welfare of the world, for peace and respect among nations, for all the leaders of the world, and for all men and women and children everywhere. Pray for the world.

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon*            O God, Source of all life,  
*People*            Hear our prayer.

*Deacon*            I ask your prayers for our country, for those who govern, and for all in authority. Pray for justice in our own land.

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon*            O God, Source of all life,  
*People*            Hear our prayer.

*Deacon*            I ask your prayers for the concerns of our community, for the people of this [neighborhood, town, city], and for the yearnings of our hearts which we now present before God. Pray for our community.

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon*            O God, Source of all life,  
*People*            Hear our prayer.

*Deacon* I ask your prayers for those who suffer; pray for the sick and the poor, the destitute, the unemployed, the lonely, the bereaved, the victims of addiction, and the victims of hatred and intolerance. Pray for those who bear the pain of the world.

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon* O God, Source of all life,  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Deacon* I ask your prayers for the Christian community everywhere: for our life and ministry, for our bishop(s), and for all leaders, that we may be the risen Body of Christ in the world. Pray for the Church.

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon* I ask your prayers for *N.* and *N.*: for their life together, that they may be filled with God's blessing and grow in love for each other with faithfulness throughout their life together. Pray for *N.* and *N.*

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon* O God, Source of all life,  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Deacon* I ask your prayers for *N.* and *N.*: for the courage to recognize and forgive each other's faults as they bear each other's burdens. Pray for *N.* and *N.*

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon* O God, Source of all life,  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Deacon* I ask your prayers of gratitude for all those who are bound to us in love: for our families, friends, neighbors, for all who have gone before us in the faith, and for those whose faith is known to God alone. [I ask your prayers for \_\_\_\_\_ ] Pray for those we love.

*The people pray aloud.*

*Deacon* O God, Source of all life,  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*The Presider adds this or another concluding collect:*

God of all, you make us in your image and likeness and fill us with everlasting life. You taught your disciples to be united by the law of love. Hear the prayers of your people and grant to *N.* and *N.* grace to love each other in joy all the days of their lives. We ask this through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, to whom, with you, one God, be praise for ever and ever. *AMEN*

## The Blessing

*The couple stand. The Presider and the sponsors (and, if desired, the congregation) may lay hands on the couple. The couple may stand at the table with right hands joined upon the Gospel book or Bible. The Presider may bind their hands together.*

<i>Presider</i>	Praise and thanks to you, O God, Creator and Sustainer of the world. You spoke and the heavens came into being, the earth and everything that lives. You looked and found it good. The world was charged with you glory and mercy.  Praise and thanks to you, O God, Liberator and Healer of the world. You have broken down the wall of division, calling together by the law of love those who were apart. For this, Christ died, giving birth to a new creation  Praise and thanks to you, O Lord our God. You renew the face of the earth. Pour your Holy Spirit upon <i>N.</i> and <i>N.</i> Let them love each other openly without fear, a joyful sign of your new creation in justice, love and peace.
<i>Deacon</i>	People of God, give praise to God.
<i>People</i>	Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.
<i>Presider</i>	The living God bless you. May you flourish together and rejoice in your friends. [May God bless your children.]

May God grant you the goods that endure  
and bring you everlasting joy.

And the blessing of the Living God,  
The Source, the Word and the Spirit,  
be upon you now and forever. *AMEN.*

*The Liturgy continues immediately with the Peace. The couple kiss and the congregation welcomes them by greeting them and each other. During or after the exchange of the Peace, the following anthem (Ps. 85:10,22) may be sung.*

Mercy and truth have met together; \*  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Truth shall spring up from the earth, \*  
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

*The service continues with the Eucharist. The couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.*

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### *Additional directions*

*The welcoming statements at the beginning of this service may be printed in the program for the people to read before the liturgy.*

*It is helpful to have a rehearsal before the service begins, in which the deacon or leader of song familiarizes the congregation with their acclamation and other music.*

*Throughout the service, the sponsors express their supportive role by assisting the couple.*

*The rings or gifts may be blessed before being exchanged. The exchange in the second part of the rite may be omitted if it took place in the first part. It is appropriate to exchange signs of commitment typical of the culture(s) represented.*

*Special forms of the Prayers of the People at the Eucharist may be written for the occasion.*

*With the permission of the Ordinary, the couple may assist in the administration of Holy Communion.*

*If either partner, or both partners, has/have young or grown children, suitable adaptations may be made in the rite to recognize their presence and include their participation.*

### *At the Declaration of Intention*

*When pastoral care necessitates, the Declaration of Intention may be celebrated at any time or in any place. If this rite is celebrated outside the Sunday Eucharist, one or more of the readings (including a Gospel passage, if*

## At the Celebration of Commitment

*The vows may be expanded by the couple in consultation with the one presiding.  
Immediately after the Prayers of the People, one or more of the following liturgical action(s) may take place.*

- During the action, the following anthem may be sung.*

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Abraham and Sarah.  
Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Isaac and Rebecca.  
Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Jacob and the patriarchs.  
Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Ruth and Naomi.  
Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Moses and Zipporah.  
Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed David and Jonathan.  
Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Joachim and Anna.  
Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved Noah in the ark.  
Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved Jonah in the belly of the whale.  
Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved the holy children from the fire.  
Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved Jesus in the tomb.

*Antiphon*      You crown them with precious stones,  
                      and you give them the fulness of life.

[The following material should be moved to Section III]

*With the exchange of vows persons bind themselves in a life together. This life is celebrated and blessed as it seeks to express and deepen a life formed by Christian faith and lived in Christ. The life together to which the parties commit themselves should be marked by non-violence, equality, mutual respect, love, care, joy, and forgiveness.*