

Read Section I  
with Lesson on.

# REPORT

of the  
SECOND CONSULTATION of EPISCOPALIANS  
on SAME-SEX UNIONS

July 1996

## INTRODUCTION

1. The contents of this Report continue and supplement the document resulting from a consultation on same-sex unions held in July 1993. The three components of that document appear in its title: *An Illustration of a Rite for the Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together, Suggestions for Education regarding Such a Rite, and Theological Reflections of the Need for Such a Rite.*
2. Like the previous document, the present Report is in three sections, centered on a liturgical text. The theological setting of the earlier version of this rite concentrated on explaining the need for such a liturgical innovation, emphasizing question of moral justice and pointing out that the church is a 'heterocentric' institution that supports 'heterosexism' — the unjust privileging of those who practice heterosexual, as contrasted with homosexual, relationships.<sup>1</sup> At the 1996 Consultation, this emphasis and the corresponding need for new liturgical forms were assumed to be real and important. Accordingly, the discussion focused instead on a wide range of other, different theological issues. One purpose of this Report is to make these questions, and the consultation's reflections on them, more widely available.
3. Any rite is, in itself, a theological statement. The words and actions of a liturgy have a meaning that already expresses, implicitly or explicitly, answers to theological and pastoral questions. At the same time, the very existence of such a rite as the one presented here, and its possible or actual use within the Episcopal Church, cannot help but raise a wide range of issues in a way that they have not, perhaps, been raised before. In turn, the way in which these issues are dealt with can be expected to influence any further development of the rite. Meanwhile, it is hoped that this Report will contribute to such a continuing the dialogue on issues of human sexuality as has been commended to the Episcopal Church by its House of Bishops.
4. The first section of the Report raises theological issues relevant to the blessing of commitments to a life together. Section Two is the illustration of a rite for blessing such commitments. Section Three

<sup>1</sup>See especially Ralph Smith and Patricia Beattie Jung, *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

offers, again mainly in the form of questions, some practical wisdom about celebrating same-sex unions<sup>2</sup> in parishes of the Episcopal Church.

## SECTION ONE

### THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS ON

### THE BLESSING OF COMMITMENTS TO A LIFE TOGETHER

#### *A fundamental question*

5. The range of theological topics that are bound up with such a rite as the one presented here can be approached in more ways than one. The discussion that follows takes its bearings from this broad and basic question:

*What is being, and/or should be, sacramentally recognized, celebrated, and blessed in and by the Church?*

6. Given the current liturgical practice of the Church, and the cultural setting in which the Church exercises its ministry, such a question is inevitable and urgent. There is plainly a discontinuity between, on the one hand, the position on the blessing of relationships that is formally, officially, and most often tacitly *assumed* and, on the other, what as a matter of fact is taking place — notably, though by no means only, in the blessing of gay or lesbian couples. Most fundamentally, the question arising from this discontinuity is a question about love: What is the nature of the love that we, the Church, bless?

#### *A framework for pursuing the question*

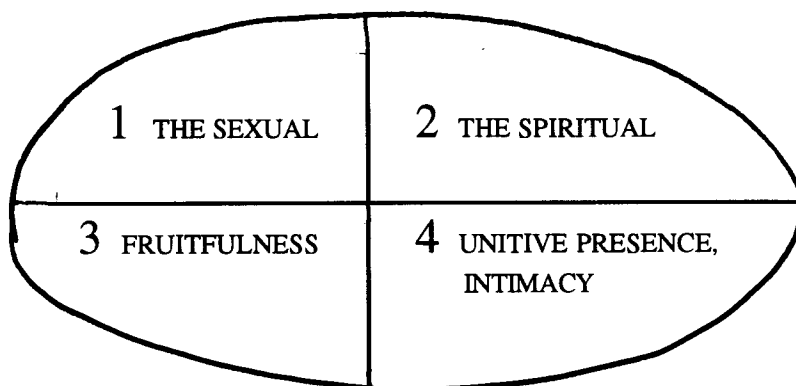
7. A discussion of *eros* in Christian terms needs to take into account four aspects or dimensions, their relationships, and their wholesome integration. These four can be thought of schematically as in the diagram that follows.

Human sexuality is never *merely* sexual. It involves the psychic, personal presence of partners to each other in a solidarity and intimacy to which traditional moral theology gives the name 'unitive.' It has an intrinsic tendency to pass beyond the 'we-ness' of two partners, into a wider interpersonal context, here labelled 'fruitfulness.' It affects and is affected by each partner's and by the couple's orientation to holiness — by faith and hope in God. None of these realities is ever

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<sup>2</sup>Throughout this Report the term 'same-sex union' will be used. It should be noted, however, that one significant emphasis at the 1996 Consultation was the shift in usage (at least in secular discussions) from 'same-sex union' to 'gay marriage.'

completely absent. Each depends intrinsically on all the others. Their combination is a powerful sign of divine Love in and for creation.



8. The diagram proposes nothing utterly new. The Church has traditionally paid attention to at least two distinctive ways of coordinating all four dimensions of *eros* — two institutions that are deliberately chosen by Christian persons: marriage and the monastic life.<sup>3</sup>
9. By recognizing and honoring marriage and the monastic life in its liturgy, the Church has *effected* and *constituted* these two institutions. That is, it has made them to be what they are, namely holy and wholesome estates of Christian living. The situation in which the Church finds itself today makes it appropriate, indeed imperative, to ask what ought *now* to be recognized, honored, and commended, in and by the Church, as holy. The 'Fundamental Question,' as stated above, is the question of *which* relationships of erotic love it is good for the Church to bring into being through the sacramental action of Christian community. *Why* should certain relationships be celebrated and blessed?

### *A structure of inquiry*

10. To ask why the Church should bless some relationships is to ask an enormous and complex question. In order to make asking it more particular, and to bring the inquiry closer to the specific issues surrounding the "Rite for the Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together," the following sequence of questions might be applied with respect to the four aspects of erotic love set out in the diagram above:

#### *Question A*

What have we as Christians *believed*, thought or supposed or held, that we recognize, celebrate, and bless in the estate of marriage or that of monastic celibacy?

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<sup>3</sup>The inclusion, here and elsewhere in this Report, of monastic vows alongside matrimony is intentional and, we think, important. Celibacy, in the context of religious vocation, is not a denial of sexuality but one way of being a sexual man or woman. It is a fact worth emphasizing that within the tradition of catholic Christianity there are more institutions than one that coordinate the four-dimensional reality of erotic love, and more ways than one of coordinating them.

*Question B*

What is it, in their love for each other, that gay men or lesbians find to be of such value as to call for recognition, celebration, and blessing?

*Question C*

Where rites for solemnizing the unions of lesbians or gay men exist and have been performed, what is it that these rites recognize, celebrate, and bless?

*Question D*

What is it, *in the light of the three preceding questions*, that the Church *should* recognize, celebrate, and bless?

11. Question A belongs, roughly, to sacramental theology and the study of liturgy. Different answers are possible and different answers have, in fact, been given at different times and within different communities of the Church. It is a question with a great many facets, and most of the rest of this Section will be devoted to spelling out some of these in greater detail.
12. Question B takes seriously the fact that the matter under discussion is intensely personal. Consequently it is important for the Church to take seriously the first-person accounts of same-sex love offered by those whose experience qualifies them to offer such accounts.
13. Question C recognizes that a large and growing number of 'forms of service' have been composed and used by Episcopalians and other Christians, including the rite presented in this Report, and that these texts are relevant theological data.
14. Question D reiterates the 'Fundamental Question.' It has been put last on purpose. A *responsible* answer will depend on taking into account all the information that is pertinent, but bringing that information to bear on the matter depends on fairly and thoroughly answering Questions A, B, and C.

*Further relevant questions*

15. It is not the purpose of this Report to propose comprehensive answers. Much of the discussion at the 1996 consultation was given to clarifying particular issues that enter into or grow out of the four general questions in the structure of inquiry proposed above, especially the issues connected with Question A. These issues have been formulated and grouped in the remainder of this Section in such a way as to suggest possibly relevant directions for the Church's further reflection.
16. *What are the created goods of sexuality?*  
One strand of Christian tradition would regard sex as a mechanism for reproduction to which, because of the Fall, marriage has been added as a remedial constraint. As the four-quadrant diagram above was meant to suggest, this view seems untrue to the facts. What, then, would a more adequate account include? What is the good of sexuality for single persons, who are neither married nor monastic?

17. *Are celibacy and monogamy the only sexual vocations that are spiritual?*

Sexuality and spirituality, quadrants 1 and 2 of the diagram, are very often thought to be distinct, separate, and (except under sharply defined circumstances) opposed. Both marriage and the monastic life have been regarded primarily as 'a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication' (BCP 1662). If, however, celibacy and monogamy are *positive*, spiritual vocations, what is it about the practices they entail — exclusivity, abstinence — that conduces to holiness? Is either sexual exclusivity or sexual abstinence *always* a holy way of being human? Can any other way of coordinating the components of erotic love be recognized as oriented to sanctity?

18. *What does the 'fruitfulness' of love consist in?*

The designation of the third quadrant in the diagram is deliberately unspecific. It suggests the turning of a household towards the world beyond itself. With respect to matrimony in particular, something of what this 'public' aspect of love entails finds expression in the petitions following the Lord's Prayer in the current marriage rite.<sup>4</sup> What fosters such fruitfulness, and why?

19. *Is parenthood an intrinsically spiritual vocation?*

This is one of several questions that can be asked about the relation of the third quadrant ('fruitfulness') to the second ('the spiritual'). Plainly, procreation and the adoption of children are not the only manifestations of 'fruitful' love, which also overflows in gifts of hospitality and spiritual nurture, energizes members of a household to 'work for justice, freedom, and peace,' and empowers them in creative and artistic endeavor.

20. *What makes fidelity important?*

Faithfulness, as a value, would seem to bridge several quadrants of the diagram. It has traditionally been associated with the 'sacramental' character of Christian marriage,<sup>5</sup> and thus pertains to quadrant 2. Exactly what, then, does faithfulness consist in? Is it a matter of physical exclusivity (quadrant 1, 'the sexual'), or of personal loyalty (quadrant 4, 'unitive presence, intimacy'), or of both? How are these linked with the rearing of children, or with other ways in which a household can be 'fruitful' (quadrant 3)?

21. *What makes permanence important?*

The phrase 'till death do us part' or its equivalent endures, despite drastic changes in social practice. Is the relevant sense of 'death' *physical* death? If so, what are the implications for intimacy (quadrant 4) and fruitfulness (quadrant 3)? Is the only true commitment a lifelong commitment?

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<sup>4</sup>BCP 429–430; see the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth petitions in particular; also the clause in the second prayer of blessing (BCP 431) which asks 'that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace.'

<sup>5</sup>'It signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church' (BCP 423).

22. *What importance has the political dimension of sexual households?*

Marriage is a political as well as an ecclesial institution; the same is true, in certain respects, of monasticism. To what extent does the *state's* interest in quadrant 3, 'fruitfulness' — especially, but not only, the wellbeing of children — bear on the *church's* giving or withholding its blessing?

23. *How does the body, as sexual, know or reveal God?*

Christian ascetical theology has concentrated almost exclusively on the *soul's* knowledge of God. Yet it is in and through the body that a sexual partner is 'known' (quadrant 4, 'unitive presence, intimacy'). Are these knowings utterly separate? Both Christian sacramental theology and the doctrine of the Incarnation recognize physical, sensual reality as a vehicle of divine grace. How does this emphasis bear on the physical, sensual reality of erotic love?

24. *What makes the relationships of human, sexual persons 'godly'?*

'Participation in God' is an important, though neglected, strand of Anglican theological tradition.<sup>6</sup> But God, for Christians, is God the Holy Trinity — indivisibly Three and socially One. In what way, then, do the relationships of *human* persons, and specifically their relationships of physical love, participate in the relationships of the *divine* Persons?

25. An adequate theology of erotic union grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity is plainly beyond the scope of this Report, not least because Trinitarian theology itself is a matter of much current discussion and debate. Nevertheless a few suggestive points may be noted.

- The Persons of the Trinity are, as such, without gender.
- Each Person is radically distinct from the others; the Word *is not* the Spirit and so on.
- The second Person, the Word, is the 'image' of the first; the third Person, the Spirit, is not an image of either of the others but the union of the Word with the first Person, who eternally 'speaks' the Word.
- While the union of the first and second Persons is complete, their distinctness is in no way dissolved. There is no merger, no 'blurring' of identities. The unity is dynamic, constituted by that breathing-out ('spiration') of Love which *is* the Spirit.

26. If these basic tenets of Western Trinitarian theology were to be taken as the divine norm and exemplar of such a human relationship as marriage, it would follow that:

- The two human persons who are to be joined are unique, distinct from each other, with equal dignity and identity.
- The resulting relationship is not, in principle, a matter of domination, 'enveloping,' or any other 'hierarchy.'

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<sup>6</sup>See A.M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988).

- The unity of the two persons is total. It entails fidelity and exclusivity. Each person 'coinheres' with the other in making her or him more fully the person she or he is becoming.
- The love that unites the two persons is a dynamic activity, mutually exerted in self-giving and other-accepting.
- Such a union of two persons would not be the only case of participation in the Triune God, but would 'sacramentalize' and promote other interpersonal relationships that embody similar characteristics.

27. *What is a blessing?*

In former Prayer Books matrimony was 'solemnized' with the Church's rite. Since 1979 matrimony has been 'celebrated and blessed.' In Western theological tradition, a (prayer of) blessing has been deemed the essential element of marriage as sacramental. What exactly does all this mean?

There is a question here of exactly what or who gets blessed. Is it the bride or, more precisely, her fecundity, as in medieval theology? Is it the couple? Is it the couple's relationship?

28. *What 'counts' as blessable?*

In other words, what, if anything, distinguishes the blessing of a relationship between two persons from the blessing of fonts or fleets or frontals, churches or chasubles, individuals or congregations?

29. *What constitutes a 'covenanted' relationship?*

At present, the matrimonial rite marks the beginning both of a sacred covenant and of a secular contract. The existence in the current Prayer Book of a rite for blessing a civil marriage implies that covenant and contract are distinct. In a relationship that the church blesses, what are the qualities or characteristics that make it covenantal, as distinct from contractual?

It is possible, of course, for a relationship to be (civilly) contractual without being (religiously) covenantal; such is the relationship of two persons who marry before a magistrate. The crucial theological question would seem to regard the converse case: Can a relationship between two persons be (religiously) covenantal without being (civilly) contractual? If it can, what constitutes its being a covenant? Is it the content of promises made? Is it the kind of community — the Church as contrasted with civil society — to which the two persons hold themselves responsible for fulfilling their promises?

30. *Who is the minister, or who are the ministers, of the 'joining together'?*

Where matrimony is concerned, perhaps the strongest of several traditions that answer this question maintains that two persons marry each other; they are the 'ministers' of the sacrament (or

the sacramental rite). The current Prayer Book supports this interpretation by providing for marriages in which the officiant is a deacon, and which accordingly do not include a blessing.<sup>7</sup>

According to the Prayer Book, however, the norm is that a priest (or bishop) will preside, because only a priest (or bishop) can bless. What, then, does the officiant's blessing contribute to the rite? Is that contribution essential? Is it independent of his or her role as 'witness'?

What is the theological significance of the requirement that a congregation — at least two 'witnesses' besides the officiant — take part in the service? Do the people, by their thanks-giving, participate in the blessing? For what does the congregation give thanks? For the relationship that is constituted and effected by the rite? For a relationship that already exists?

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<sup>7</sup>BCP 422. It is noteworthy (1) that this provision is clearly an exception to the norm, and (2) that it depends on the civil legality of marriage 'performed' by a deacon.



## SECTION TWO

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

#### ***Introduction***

*This rite is intended for use as 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 welcomes the people in these or similar words.*

Welcome. Today, N. and N. come before us, declaring their intention to join their lives together and requesting 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, sharing with this congregation our joy and seeking 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 into their commitment, growing in love and faithfulness. Will you share their joys, carry their burdens and support them in their preparation?

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

You are invited to participate fully throughout the service, in order to express your commitment to support of *N.* and *N.* in their relationship.

*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 hear each other's weaknesses, and 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 a new world 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 maybe 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 Preside 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.*

*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, or 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, those addicted, 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. [We remember especially \_\_\_\_\_] 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.*

*Presider* Praise and thanks to you, O God,  
Source of all life and Lover of the world.  
Earth and sky, rivers and seas  
and all that live in them praise you.  
We too join their praise,  
for you have brought together *N.* and *N.* in your love.

*Deacon* People of God, give praise to God.

*People* Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.

*Presider* Praise and thanks to you, O God,  
Liberator and Healer of the world.  
You have broken down the dividing wall,  
calling together by the law of love those who were apart.  
For this, Christ died, giving birth to a new creation

*Deacon* People of God, give praise to God.

*People* Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.

*Presider* Praise and thanks to you, O God.  
You renew the face of the earth.  
Pour your Holy Spirit upon *N.* and *N.*  
Let them love each other openly without fear,  
a joyful sign of your new creation in justice, love and peace.

*Deacon* People of God, give praise to God.

*People* Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.

*Presider* The living God bless you.  
May you flourish together  
and rejoice in your friends.  
[May God bless your children.]  
May God grant you every good that endures ,  
and bring you everlasting joy.  
And the blessing of the Living God,  
The Source, the Word and the Spirit, One God,  
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 maybe 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 maybe 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 the Eucharist is to follow) from the Celebration of a Commitment to a Life Together may be used.*

### **At the Celebration of Commitment**



*Whenever Part II takes place at the regular Sunday service, the readings appointed for that Sunday take precedence over other possible readings.*

*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.*

- *the couple may join hands upon the gospel book*
- *the couple may be crowned*
- *the couple may be anointed*
- *the presider may lead the couple in a procession around the table*
- *the couple may be draped in a mantle or humeral veil or tied with a cord*

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

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

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.

*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. There are times when these larger purposes which give life to a union may be frustrated, but the commitment is to abide with each other that they may be realized. However, physical or emotional spousal abuse or infidelity may so break the bonds of union that the purposes of the vows cannot be realized and the integrity of the relationship may be diminished or destroyed. In such a case, the dissolution of the vows and union may be necessary. Before it is undertaken, however, the couple is responsible to themselves, to their children, if there be any, to their families and friends, to their sponsors, the church, and the larger society, to seek forgiveness and reconciliation and the counsel and advice of a wise and understanding priest or counselor.*

## SECTION THREE

### CONSIDERATIONS BEARING ON THE CELEBRATION OF SAME-SEX UNIONS IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

31. The contents of this section have been gathered primarily from clergy and congregations that have experienced the blessing of same-sex unions as public events which have taken place with congregational support. As with the first section of this Report, the purpose is to raise relevant questions. On exactly how these questions should be answered, participants in the 1996 Consultation hold a variety of views.

The issues involved in celebrating same-sex unions in Episcopal parishes could be divided into these categories:

- congregational education and support
  - pastoral responsibilities
  - the relationship of clergy and congregation to the Bishop and to other parishes within the diocese
  - the relationship of clergy and congregation to the local community
  - the possible outcome, for the congregation, of such celebrations.
32. Because there is a complex interaction among these five, the relevant questions are organized here in a narrative sequence: considerations *prior to* the event, considerations that arise *once the decision has been made*, issues pertinent *near the time* of the event, and considerations *after* the event.

#### *Considerations prior to the event*

33. When clergy become aware of the desire of a gay or lesbian couple for a blessing of their union, the first thing is to ascertain the context or culture into which this request comes.

Is the cleric clear in his or her mind about her or his own feelings and thoughts about the idea of blessing such a union?

Is the local area one in which such an idea would be positively received?

Is there either support from a clericus or local ministerial association?

How does the vestry feel about the idea?

Has the idea been talked over with the Bishop?

How will one prepare the children of the couple and/or congregation?

What sort of premarital counseling is necessary?

34. The clergyperson must not act alone, in isolation from her or his congregation or in disregard of her or his relationship to the Bishop. It is important to have backing, and where this backing comes from may make a big difference in how one goes about having the blessing. Not everyone would agree that the Bishop is the *first* person to talk to. If the vestry is solidly behind the cleric, that is the best support available to begin with; jobs have, after all, been lost over much less serious things than blessing same-sex unions.

To put the matter differently: anyone who is determined to have a same-sex blessing as an event of public liturgy can count on making waves. To understand where the waves may come from is extremely important. The cleric has a responsibility for formation in her or his congregation, such that liturgical acts serve to knit up, rather than to unravel, the Eucharistic community.

35. If the vestry approves and is backing up the cleric, the next issue to be addressed is education for the congregation about what is going on and why. In some congregations this will be minimal, because the climate of congregational opinion has already been prepared by earlier education.

It is possible to view the idea of same sex blessings as a piece of a much larger whole, that of a catechumenal atmosphere within the entire congregation, where the church as a body nurtures the growth of all its members throughout their lives. Baptism and Eucharist are the foundations of the congregation's life and liturgical expressions are properly done within the congregation as a whole — including all regular marriages as well as same-sex blessings. On this model, the two people involved would be given sponsors early in their deciding to seek a permanent commitment to each other. These sponsors would be diligent in helping the couple look at all aspects of their promises to each other, standing in for the larger congregation and as such being included in the service of blessing as well as in the preparation. If the service itself takes place in two separate rites, as proposed in this Report, the sponsors would continue in their role through the first year or longer of the relationship. This would be done for all couples making a lifetime commitment to each other, without regard for gender. This has worked well for one priest in two different congregations.

36. Not every parish is one with a tradition into which blessing a same-sex union would easily fit. In such cases, Consultation participants urged that there be adequate education for members of the congregation as to what was to happen and why. Some clergy have done surveys of their congregations in order to ascertain present attitudes. Education can be fashioned accordingly.
37. In congregations where public liturgies of same-sex union have been performed, the educational keynote has been *justice*. Blessings for gay and lesbian people are of equal importance with blessings for heterosexual couples.
38. For the first such event of blessing, it may be important that the couple be well known in the congregation — people for whom there is already much support. If a congregation is to 'go to bat' in such a controversial matter, it will be for people they know and love. In itself, however, this consideration should not rule out the blessing of any eligible couple.
39. What do we teach our *children* about this? Are there children of the gay or lesbian couple? If so, they need to be prepared, not only so that they can face and understand the congregation's

attitudes, but also in order to respond to possible questions from people in their lives who are outside the church.

40. Another important question regards gay and lesbian adolescents. How will the congregation deal with this issue? How will these young people be treated by congregation? By their peers?
41. It may be inevitable that some individuals will leave the congregation over the issue of blessing same-sex unions. That possibility is one that clergy and congregation alike should be prepared to face, and to respond to in a pastoral way.

### *Considerations that arise once the decision has been made for the blessing*

42. If the decision has been made to have the blessing, several concerns for the clergy should be addressed.

How is one to address the subject with one's peers?

Is there a group outside the congregation to turn to for support?

If there is support within the diocese, are the supportive clergy willing to be public in their support? Or do they profess support, while adding that their congregations would not 'understand'?

Is there an ecumenical or interfaith ministerial association? Will it support the cleric? Or will she or he be shunned, even 'drummed out of the regiment'?

Will the Bishop be vexed by negative attitudes expressed toward the church, for example by newsmedia?

Has the issue been addressed in diocesan convention?

There can be a real tension between acting on one's conscience and, on the other hand, holding the community together.<sup>8</sup>

### *Issues pertinent near the time of the event*

43. Clergy who contemplate officiating at the blessing of same-sex unions must also address the issue of pre-blessing counseling. Here are some of the issues involved:

Has the couple already 'come out' as lesbian or gay? Are they prepared to do so now?

Has the couple's family been made aware of their decision? Have they come out to their families?

Are the couple's doctors aware they are gay or lesbian?

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<sup>8</sup>Morehouse has produced a video of Timothy Sedgwick, professor of ethics at Seabury Western Seminary, talking about the issue of conscience *versus* community. See also his article, "The Transformation of Sexuality and the Challenge of Conscience," in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Hefling (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1996), pp. 27-42, esp.36-40.

Have they been tested for HIV?

How does the couple plan to share their income, property?

How has each partner legally protected the other? There is need for such things as wills and durable power of attorney.<sup>9</sup>

How about children? Does the couple already have them? Do they plan to have children in the future?

The necessity of wills, durable powers of attorney.

What are the expectations for the couple's continued life in the congregation? (The hope is that it will be sustained and continued.)

44. One element of preparation might be asking gay or lesbian couples to meet with other gay or lesbian couples in the congregation to talk openly about their relationships.
45. At this point it is also necessary to listen to the apprehensions and concerns of the congregation as the event draws nearer. People will fear the loss of financial support of some members, members leaving, media attention, diocesan conflict, becoming seen as a 'one issue' parish or a 'gay and lesbian parish,' polarization and conflict within the parish.
- None of these is an idle fear, although some of the possibilities mentioned seem to be more feared than experienced.
46. Liturgy is a public event. When such a liturgy is planned, it can be expected that all the same social customs that a heterosexual marriage involves will be involved in this one too — invitations, questions (for clergy and laity alike) at the post office or the town square, media attention. If the issue is alive in public discourse at the time, the attention will be greater. How will such publicity be handled, and by whom?
- There may be protesters. Ushers who can quietly remove anyone who obstructs the serve may be needed. The church may be picketed. There is the possibility of vandalism of church property. The specter of 'bringing AIDS to the church' may be raised.

### *Considerations after the event*

47. Many of the potential problems mentioned above can be expected to continue, and perhaps to be amplified, after a same-sex union has in fact been celebrated. Clergy who plan such a celebration should ask themselves whether members of their congregation will be pleased or instead feel discomfort once the event has occurred. Integrating the newcomers into the life of the congregation, and dealing with the the perception that the parish is a 'one-issue' group, are two of many practical concerns for which all who are involved would do well to be prepared.

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<sup>9</sup>A good resource: *A Legal Guide for Gay and Lesbian Couples*