

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

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

from the

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

June 8, 2004



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF VERMONT

The Rt. Rev. Thomas C. Ely
Bishop of Vermont

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June 13, 2004

To the people of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont:

It is with a profound sense of gratitude that I receive and commend to our diocese, and to the wider church, the report from the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Committed Same-Gender Relationships. I applaud the hard work and dedication of the members of the Task Force and, in particular, the leadership of Anne Clarke Brown and the Very Reverend Kenneth Poppe, co-chairs of the committee, and Stan Baker, chair of the Resources subcommittee. The careful and thoughtful research, pastoral sensitivity and clear writing of the report will serve us well in the months to come as we make our way into the next chapter of our pastoral ministry with all couples seeking the ministry of the church in support of their sacred relationships.

I am grateful to the many people who have commented on various drafts along the way, including Diocesan Council, the Standing Committee, diocesan clergy, parish wardens and other bishops from the Episcopal Church. I also appreciate those who have expressed their concerns with respect to the church moving forward in this sensitive area of pastoral ministry where the larger church is clearly not of one mind. I have much admiration for the spirit of mutual respect and eagerness for understanding that is generally present in the Diocese of Vermont in conversations concerning human sexuality.

Some Background

Prior to General Convention 2003, I announced the creation of the Task Force and appointed its co-chairs. Following General Convention, I appointed the other members of the Task Force. Their charge was to “offer something wonderful” to our diocese which would assist us in moving forward in our pastoral ministry to and with gay and lesbian couples, building upon the good work already begun in the diocese. General Convention resolution CO51 was adopted at the 2003 Convention in Minneapolis, and, among other things, it recognized that “local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions.” Passage of this resolution meant the Task Force’s work could be seen within the broad context of our support for all persons desiring the pastoral ministry of the church as a way of expressing their commitment to one another—a commitment to live in relationships characterized by “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.”

Among the significant contributions of the report of the Task Force are the material it brings together and the opportunity for discussion it provides. I hope people will read the report in its entirety before commenting on the recommendations. In this way, the substantive material of the report will

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inform our conversation. Among other things, the report rehearses the decades long conversation with regard to human sexuality and the ministry of gay and lesbian persons in which the church has been engaged.

The report also provides important biblical and theological frameworks within which to carry on our discussions and through which to more fully inform our understanding of blessing committed relationships. While not exhaustive in its scope, the report acknowledges many of the tensions and difficulties present as we continue our conversation.

Above all, the report is clear that the question of blessing persons living in same-gender relationships is primarily a pastoral matter. It is in that context of the church's pastoral ministry to and with couples that I requested this report.

The Recommendations of the Report

The report contains three major recommendations, and I fully embrace each of them. The first calls for a unified policy addressing both Holy Matrimony and Holy Union in the Diocese of Vermont. It is interesting to note that in the discussions of various drafts of this report with members of our diocese, many were not aware of the existing policy regarding Holy Matrimony or of the Canons of the Church, both of which address marriage and remarriage following divorce. Thus, the recommended new policy offers an excellent teaching opportunity. The policy recommended by the report (Section V) will become effective July 1, 2004, when clergy are asked to begin using it as their guide in the exercise of their pastoral ministry with couples.

The second recommendation calls for resources to assist clergy, couples, and congregations and for workshops/training sessions to introduce the report and the resources—including the liturgical resources—being provided to assist clergy and couples in the celebration of Holy Unions. The workshops scheduled for June 18 and 19, 2004 are intended to serve that purpose. Other workshops will be scheduled as needed. Some of the resources offered will be especially helpful to congregations in their ongoing discussions regarding human sexuality, blessings and reconciliation. The liturgical resources include orders of service for trial use that offer a clear and consistent theological framework for couples desiring to celebrate a Holy Union in the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont. The use of common liturgies over the course of the next couple of years will provide sound and consistent teaching to our members and better position us to evaluate such liturgies and offer our gathered experience and wisdom to the larger church.

The third recommendation calls for an evaluation process of the revised policy, the liturgical and other resources, and the experience of clergy, couples and congregations. It is only through the use and evaluation of this policy and the liturgical resources being offered that we will be in a position to present the fruit of our experience to the larger church. To that end, I have asked Diocesan Council to establish a committee to monitor and evaluate our experience with this policy, and the liturgical resources provided for trial use, and to make a report to the diocese at the 2004, 2005 and 2006 Diocesan Conventions. It is my hope that some members of the Task Force will serve on that committee.

Some Final Thoughts

Introducing a new policy, liturgies and other resources for our diocese is bound to generate discussion. I am keenly aware that these next steps in our pastoral ministry with gay and lesbian couples do not take place in a vacuum. The conversations going on within the larger Anglican Communion as we present this report are of crucial importance to the future of our communion, a communion I treasure and which I believe the people of Vermont deeply value. I would respectfully point out that our diocese has lived with the reality of civil unions—and the pastoral ministry called forth by that

reality—for four years. In some congregations such pastoral ministry with gay and lesbian couples has been a part of their common life for much longer. It is essential and central to our Anglican ethos that we respect and honor the local context in which each diocese and province within the Anglican Communion seeks to be faithful in praying the prayer, learning the mind, and doing the deeds of Christ. My hope is that our experience in Vermont will be of value to the larger church and I pray that our discussions will be open, honest and respectful.

Mindful that all will not be fully supportive of this revised policy and all that accompanies it, I invite thoughtful critique from persons throughout our diocese and beyond. My request is that the work of the Task Force be respected and that those who engage in conversation with its contents and recommendations appreciate the report in its entirety.

I am proud of the way our diocese welcomes and encourages the full participation of gay and lesbian persons in our common life and ministry. The gifts and skills each of us brings are integral parts of who we are as a diocese. My hope is that the pastoral ministry to and with gay and lesbian couples—which these measures seek to provide—will be seen as a positive step as we continue to live ever more fully into Christ’s reconciling mission. Thank you for giving your attention to this important matter. I pray that you will join me in thanking the Task Force for their hard work and the gift of their report.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'T' followed by the word 'Thomas' in a cursive script.

The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely

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Part I

Introduction

In the summer of 2000, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church passed a resolution (D039) acknowledging that couples “in the Body of Christ and in this Church” are living both in marriage and in “other life-long committed relationships.” The resolution stated the expectation that “such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.” The resolution further said that “this Church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them.”

That same summer, the new Vermont civil union law took effect, allowing, for the first time, couples of the same gender to enter into legal covenants conferring the rights and responsibilities previously reserved for opposite-gender couples through marriage. The Rt. Rev. Mary Adelia McLeod, then Bishop of Vermont, and other Episcopalians had taken active roles in the statewide debate that led to passage of the civil union legislation.

The law authorizes members of the clergy to perform civil unions, and a number of Episcopalian same-gender couples who planned to enter into civil unions in Vermont wanted to do so with the support and blessing of their church communities. Bishop McLeod informed the clergy that those who chose to celebrate and bless civil unions could do so provided that counseling precede the civil union, the union not be called marriage, and the marriage rite from the Book of Common Prayer not be used. To date, that has remained the policy of the Diocese of Vermont. While it has permitted clergy to respond pastorally in their local contexts, it has resulted in a variety of pastoral and liturgical practices.

Appointment of task force

The Rt. Rev. Thomas C. Ely, consecrated Bishop of Vermont in April 2001, wrote to the diocese in his July/August 2003 *Mountain Echo* column of his intention to appoint a Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships. Noting that resolutions would be before the 2003 General Convention asking that the church affirm the need for pastoral support of such relationships, he wrote, “My deepest longing is that we will find a way through this conversation that is affirming of the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the mission and ministry of the Episcopal Church and of their ministries that are already so much a part of who we are as the Episcopal Church here in the Diocese of Vermont and beyond. That means, among other things, finding a way to offer the Church’s blessing upon persons living in committed same-gender relationships. From my perspective, there is simply too much at stake for the church not to move forward in this direction.”

The resolution passed at the 2003 General Convention (C051) recognized that “local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions.” It reaffirmed the 2000 Convention’s resolution that expressed the qualities the church hopes all relationships would exhibit, but it did not authorize the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to prepare liturgies for blessing such relationships.

After the convention, Bishop Ely did appoint an eighteen-member task force, with the Very Rev. Ken Poppe, Dean of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul and President of the Standing Committee, and Anne Clarke Brown, Deputy to General Convention, as co-chairs. We met for the first time on October 16, 2003. Bishop Ely told us he believes Vermont can “model for the rest of the church something of what it means to be the kind of com-

munity that embraces people for who they are and not put them into a category.” He said, “I want the diocese to move forward and to build on what we have done.” He charged the group to work hard at “offering something wonderful for our diocese.” This report represents the outcome of that effort. We offer it to the bishop and the people of the diocese in the hope that it will both move us forward and generate prayerful conversation on a subject of deep importance to many in our diocese.

Who we are and how we have worked

We are nine lay persons and nine members of the clergy, including Bishop Ely. We come from all parts of the Diocese of Vermont and from small and large congregations. Some of us are gay or lesbian, and most of us are married or living in civil unions. [See Appendix A for a list of Task Force members.]

Because the charge of the task force is to “move forward” in the direction of offering the Church’s blessing, all of us are committed to that task. There have been, and will continue to be, opportunities for dialogue and discussion about that goal, and we respect those who disagree. As will be made clear below, the fact that the Diocese of Vermont may sanction the blessing of those in same-gender relationships does not mean that clergy or congregations must offer such liturgies. This is, above all, a pastoral matter.

Our self-awareness as Christians living out our faith in this part of the Anglican Communion, and of how we are doing theological reflection, undergirds our work in this document. Each of our monthly task force meetings began with a period of study, reflection and prayer focused on a passage

from one of the gospels, usually the lectionary text for the following Sunday. The insights gained in that very valuable time spent together informed our attempt to be faithful to our Anglican heritage by trying to avoid an overly narrow theology focused on proclaiming what we think is the “right” way to answer essential questions about intimate human relationships. At the same time, we have tried to avoid an overly broad theology that is not filtered through the unique experience of being Christian.

As faithful Anglicans, we resist the idea that we have a monopoly on biblical faith and values. Rather, we believe that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the church today and to draw upon the gifts that have been given to all the members of the Body of Christ. At this time of threatened schism in the Episcopal Church, we seek the mind of Christ as we attempt to discern both the Spirit’s direction and the gifts exhibited by the people of God. We acknowledge that we will probably never be like-minded about many of the questions that are now dividing us, but, as the primates of the Anglican Communion stated on October 16, 2003, we believe that “what we hold in common is much greater than that which divides us in proclaiming Good News to the world.”

We organized our work into four main areas and worked on each in small groups. The small groups reported their progress to, and received comments and suggestions from, the full task force at its monthly meetings. What follows in this report is first a summary of our recommendations and then reports from each group. They are: Theology, chaired by Anne Brown; Policy and Procedures, chaired by Bishop Ely; Liturgy, chaired by Dean Poppe, and Resources, chaired by Stan Baker.

Part II

Summary of Task Force Recommendations

The Task Force recommends that the Diocese of Vermont continue the pastoral ministry of blessing persons living in covenanted same-gender relationships, that a unified policy be adopted to govern the celebration of Holy Matrimony (the blessing of a marriage) and Holy Union (the blessing of a civil union). The new policy should replace the current policy that governs the celebration of Holy Matrimony.

The Task Force further recommends that the liturgies offered in Part VI of this report be used on a trial basis for the celebration of Holy Unions. The Diocese of Vermont has been engaged in a process of discussion and discernment regarding the full participation of our gay and lesbian members for many years, and the movement has been toward full inclusion in the life and ministry of the church. We believe these are the appropriate pastoral steps for this diocese at this time in our common life.

In approving the civil union law, the State of Vermont has recognized the need to provide equality for the families of same-gender couples, and we believe the church should do no less. Same-gender couples who are Episcopalian should have the same opportunity as opposite-gender couples to seek the support and blessing of this faith community for their unions. Many faithful members of this diocese are gay and lesbian, and we believe our congregations ought to be able to support and uphold the relationships of commitment of all their members. We see this as a “conservative” move that promotes the stability of families and holds all couples accountable to the traditional values of fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, open communication and holy love.

In the State of Vermont, both marriage and civil unions are legal contracts between two persons that confer a series of rights and responsibilities. Clergy are authorized by the state in both instances to cross the boundary between church and state to act as agents of the state. We recognize the tension

this creates, and while it is beyond the scope of our charge, we did discuss the usefulness of separating the civil from the religious aspects of marriage and civil unions. We refer to these relationships as Holy Matrimony and Holy Union in order to emphasize the covenantal aspect of sacred trust and commitment witnessed through the liturgy of the church.

Congregations and clergy may opt not to offer liturgies for blessing Holy Unions. We do hope that all congregations that have not already done so will engage in prayerful conversation about the question, using some of the resources described in Part VII of this report.

Proposed unified diocesan policy

The full policy may be found in Part V and the proposed liturgies in Part VI. [The current policy regarding Holy Matrimony is printed in Appendix B.] We note especially the following:

1. A unified diocesan policy will govern Holy Matrimony and Holy Union. Its key provisions require that:
 - one member of the couple be a baptized person, involved in the life of the church;
 - thorough preparation precede the ceremony;
 - a Declaration of Intention be signed that outlines the church's expectations regarding the characteristics such unions should exhibit;
 - a marriage or civil union license be obtained for clergy to officiate at a liturgy of Holy Matrimony or Holy Union; and
 - liturgies or liturgical outlines authorized by the Episcopal Church for Holy Matrimony or those provided in this report for Holy Unions be used.
2. A similar unified policy will outline pastoral care for those who have previously been in a marriage or civil union. It will require that:
 - clergy obtain permission from the bishop

to officiate at a liturgy for persons who have been divorced or in a civil union that has been dissolved;

- the request be submitted at least thirty days in advance of the date of the union;
 - the request include counseling session results and the specifics of the care of any minor children;
 - the cleric have a copy of the divorce decree(s) and/or civil union dissolution(s);
 - preparation include conversation about why the marriage or union was dissolved and how the new relationship is different.
3. Permission for third or subsequent marriages or unions will be granted only in rare cases. It will require:
- a letter from a therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist stating that the person has worked through personal issues surrounding broken relationships;
 - receipt by the bishop of the request to officiate at least sixty days prior to the proposed date of the marriage or civil union;
 - copies of the divorce or dissolution decrees, the letter from the therapist, and an outline of care for any minor children.
4. Other provisions of the policy:
- The provisions apply to all Episcopal clergy officiating at liturgies of Holy Matrimony and Holy Union in the Diocese of Vermont.
 - Clergy who are not canonically resident must obtain permission from the Bishop of Vermont to officiate in the diocese and obtain the necessary civil authorization from the State of Vermont.
 - Clergy and congregations are encouraged to develop any fee, building use, pastoral or other policies appropriate to the local ministry setting.

Proposed liturgies

For Holy Matrimony, the Book of Common Prayer authorizes the following rites:

- The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage
- The Blessing of a Civil Marriage
- An Order for Marriage

For Holy Unions, we propose that the following rites (printed in Part VI of this report) be used on a trial basis:

- The Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union (2 rites)
- The Blessing of a Civil Union
- An Order for Holy Union

Educational resources and training

We propose to offer resources to assist clergy and congregations in continuing the conversation about human sexuality and the role of the church in supporting couples as well as resources for clergy and couples in preparing for Holy Matrimony and Holy Union. We also propose workshops/training sessions to introduce the report and the resources.

Initially, identical workshops will be offered on June 18, 2004, at St. James', Arlington, and June 19, 2004, at Christ Church, Montpelier, for clergy and congregational leaders. Included will be:

- presentation of the Task Force's report;
- presentations of resources available to clergy to assist in working with couples seeking Holy Unions;
- presentation of resources to aid congregations in holding discussions about the new policies and about issues of human sexuality;
- opportunities for discussion.

Process for evaluation

We hope the policy will be put into effect as soon as possible, with careful introduction to the diocese, and that the liturgies will be made available for those who choose to use them in exercising their pastoral ministry. The task force recommends that the bishop appoint a small working group to develop a means for evaluating the policy and the liturgies and to report to Diocesan Convention in November 2004 on the process that led to this report, what has happened to date, and what we propose for the future. We also recommend that a report be made to Diocesan Convention 2005 on our use of this material, with an eye toward recommendations to the 2006 General Convention.

Part III

Background

General Convention actions

The 65th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, which met in 1976 in Minneapolis, is most remembered for its final approval of the ordination of women to the priesthood and its approval of a revised Book of Common Prayer. That convention also passed a resolution (A69) stating, “It is the sense of this General Convention that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church.” A second resolution (A71) stated that, “this General Convention expresses its conviction that homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens, and calls upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality.”

An interim meeting of the House of Bishops in 1977 called for each diocese to form a study and dialogue group to focus on the issue of human sexuality. Every General Convention—and quite likely nearly every House of Bishops meeting—since has included some consideration of the complex issues of human sexuality, primarily those related to homosexuality. Two questions stand out:

1. Is it appropriate for the church to ordain persons who identify themselves as gay or lesbian and who live in relationships with others of the same gender?
2. Should the church pronounce God’s blessing on relationships of commitment between persons of the same gender?

Not only have the nine General Conventions since 1976 considered these questions, but nearly all of them have called upon the church at the congregational and diocesan level to study and engage in dialogue about them. Many congregations and dioceses have complied with these requests; some have not.

We include in this report the following brief

synopsis of some of the actions of General Convention since 1976 as a reminder that the work we have done does not come “out of the blue.” It is built upon a long history of struggle with the issues, not only at the national level but also in the Diocese of Vermont and in many of our congregations.

66th General Convention, 1979

Resolution A53 said no one should be barred from the ordination process on the basis of sexual orientation, but, “we believe it is not appropriate for this Church to ordain a practicing homosexual, or any person who is engaged in heterosexual relations outside of marriage.” A number of bishops signed a dissenting statement (initially 20, and subsequently many more).

Resolution D107s called for study in every diocese, using the report of the Standing Commission on Human Affairs and Health to the 66th General Convention as a guide.

67th General Convention, 1982

Resolution B61a reaffirms previous actions stating, “that homosexual persons are children of God and are entitled to full civil rights.”

68th General Convention, 1985

The Convention urged each diocese “to find an effective way to foster a better understanding of homosexual persons, to dispel myths and prejudices about homosexuality, to provide pastoral support, and to give life to the claim of homosexual persons ‘upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral care and concern of the Church’ as recognized by the General Convention resolution in 1976.”

69th General Convention, 1988

The Convention received and responded to a report of the Standing Commission on Human Affairs and Health and again urged opportunities for open dialogue in congregations and dioceses. It also passed a series of resolutions regarding pastoral responses to AIDS.

70th General Convention, 1991

The Standing Commission on Human Affairs reported that 28 of 99 dioceses submitted reports on their efforts at dialogue, that 19 had programs planned (Vermont was not on either list) and expressed disappointment at the low level of participation. Among the commission's conclusions:

In addition, we all [commission members] accept the biblical witness, first enunciated in Genesis 2:18, that human beings are not meant to be alone. The single and celibate life is part of the vocation of a number of disciples, but all persons can benefit from the comfort and support of close relationships. We agree that homosexual relationships often provide such comfort and support and exhibit commendable love and commitment.

A strong majority of this commission believes that it is possible and desirable for Christian communities fully to support marriages of men and women and their families, to bless, safeguard and strengthen them, without withholding support and blessing from persons of the same sex who are in faithful, committed relationships, seeking in them the characteristics of sacrificial love and abiding care for each other. The firm intention of a life-long covenant with these characteristics is the context for the offering of God's blessing and the community's commitment of full support.... A strong majority of this commission recommends that the Standing Liturgical Commission study the theological and liturgical issues involved in affirming and blessing these covenants of gay and lesbian persons and begin the process of developing liturgical forms for them.

Resolution A104sa resolved that, "this Church continue to work to reconcile the discontinuity between this teaching [sexual expression is appropriate only in marriage] and the experience of many members of this body." It again called for dialogue and study at local and diocesan levels and called for a pastoral teaching from the House of Bishops. A committee chaired by the Rt. Rev. Richard Grein produced *Continuing the Dialogue: A Pastoral Teaching of the House of Bishops to the Church as the Church Considers Issues of Human Sexuality*.

71st General Convention, 1994

The Convention changed the designation of *Continuing the Dialogue* from "pastoral teaching" to "pastoral study document" to respond to objections from those who felt their concerns were not sufficiently addressed. Some bishops had signed a statement titled "An Affirmation in Response" that supported the traditional teaching on sexuality. Bishop John Shelby Spong wrote "A Statement of Koinonia" that stated, among other things, "But we also believe that those who know themselves to be gay or lesbian persons, and who do not choose to live alone, but forge relationships with partners of their choice that are faithful, monogamous, committed, life-giving and holy are to be honored." This was also signed by a number of bishops as well as deputies.

Resolution B0112a again called for study and dialogue, this time using *Continuing the Dialogue*, and it set up a national Committee on Dialogue on Human Sexuality. The Rev. Jane N. Garrett, a deputy from Vermont, served as co-chair.

Resolution C042s directed the Standing Liturgical Commission to address "the theological considerations involved in the development of rites honoring love and commitment between persons of the same sex" but not to develop rites unless authorized by General Convention.

As with other conventions, this one did not act on a variety of prohibitive resolutions.

72nd General Convention, 1997

Convention resolutions commended "the process of voluntary dialogue" for "facing questions about human sexuality" and, while affirming the sacredness of Christian marriage, asked the Standing Liturgical Commission to "continue its study of theological aspects of committed relationships of same sex couples," with a report due in November 1999.

73^d General Convention, 2000

A special legislative committee was formed to focus exclusively on the several proposed resolutions addressing issues of blessing same gender relationships, and it reported to the Convention a single resolution (D039sa) with eight resolves. As noted in the introduction to this report, it acknowl-

edged “that while the issues of human sexuality are not yet resolved, there are currently couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in marriage and couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships,” It stated expectations for all intimate relationships and said, “that this Church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values, and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them.” The first seven resolves (including the above) were passed by large margins in both houses, but the eighth resolve, calling on the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to prepare rites by which the church may express its support for faithful, committed relationships other than marriage, was defeated.

74th General Convention, 2003

Meeting again in Minneapolis, the most recent General Convention gave its consent to the consecration of the Rev. Canon Gene Robinson as Bishop Coadjutor of the Diocese of New Hampshire. Bishop Robinson, who was installed as the Ninth Bishop of New Hampshire on March 7, 2004, lives openly in a faithful, monogamous relationship with a male partner.

The Convention also approved Resolution C051sa, which reaffirmed the resolution of 1976, acknowledged differences of opinion about the pastoral care “for those who intend to live in monogamous, non-celibate unions,” reaffirmed the characteristics of such relationships outlined by Resolution D039 of the 2000 Convention, recognized that “local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions,” and committed the church to continued prayer, study and discernment as well as to “our communion with one another...despite our diversity of opinion and...pastoral practice.”

Current situation in the Anglican Communion

Disagreements over issues of human sexuality today threaten to divide the worldwide Anglican Communion, a “family” of 38 autonomous geographical provinces encompassing 161 countries,

with over 70 million members. Tensions over the authority and interpretation of scripture, the authority of bishops and institutions, the ordination of women, and cultural diversity have been simmering for many years, and in some cases differing understandings have affected relationships among provinces. Several provinces, for example, do not accept the validity of women’s orders as priests or bishops. Diversity, however, has historically been a hallmark of the Communion, and such differences have not led to broken relationships.

Two actions in the summer of 2003—the approval by the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster of a rite for the blessing of same-gender unions and the consent by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church to the election of Bishop Robinson—have led some provinces and dioceses to declare themselves to be out of communion—or in a state of impaired communion—with other provinces, dioceses, and bishops.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Rowan Williams, called the primates, or leaders, of each of the provinces to a special meeting at Lambeth Palace in October 2003, to discuss the issues. The statement agreed to by all the primates affirmed “our pride in the Anglican inheritance of faith and order and our firm desire to remain part of a Communion, where what we hold in common is much greater than that which divides us in proclaiming Good News to the world.” They did, however, claim that the actions in Canada and the United States threatened the unity of the Communion. They called “on the provinces concerned to make adequate provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities,” and they asked the Archbishop to form a commission to examine the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury in “maintaining communion within and between provinces when grave difficulties arise.” This group, under the leadership of the Primate of the Church of Ireland, the Most Rev. Robin Eames, has begun its work and is due to issue a report in October 2004.

Within the Episcopal Church, groups calling themselves “traditionalists” have sought either affiliation with other provinces (the Anglican Mission in America) or to organize “like-minded” dioceses and congregations to change the direction of the church

from within. Among the latter are the American Anglican Council and the new Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes. Some congregations are withholding funds from their dioceses—and some dioceses are withholding funds from the Episcopal Church—in protest against the actions of the 2003 General Convention.

While dissenting groups have varied concerns and agendas, a common theme is the claim to represent *the* orthodox Anglican tradition, which in turn is said to adhere to a traditional understanding of the “clear meaning of Scripture.” They believe that scripture is unequivocal in its condemnation of same-sex sexual activity, and they argue for some means within the Anglican Communion for disciplining dioceses and provinces that do not adhere to that teaching.

At their meeting in March 2004, the House of Bishops worked out a plan to meet the call for “adequate provision for episcopal oversight of dissenting minorities.” Titled, “Caring for All the Churches: A Response of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church to an expressed need of the Church,” the plan acknowledges disagreements concerning human sexuality and commits the bishops to “a process for Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight.” The process focuses on seeking reconciliation, with the recognition that, “Sensitive pastoral care does not presuppose like-mindedness,” and that, “Our theology and practice hold that ordination and consecration provide the gifts and grace necessary for the sacramental acts of a bishop to be effectual.” In cases where a dissenting congregation and their bishop cannot reconcile, the bishop, while retaining canonical jurisdiction, may appoint another bishop (who is in good standing in the Episcopal Church) to provide pastoral oversight.

The Anglican understanding of the historic episcopate includes the proviso that bishops have authority only within their own diocesan jurisdictions unless invited to perform episcopal functions in another diocese. Some of the dissenting groups had pressed for allowing congregations to invite bishops of their own choosing, including bishops from other provinces in the Anglican Communion.

Consequently, they have described the plan as “inadequate.”

The Vermont context

The Diocese of Vermont has both sponsored and encouraged dialogue on the questions facing the church with regard to human sexuality, particularly since the 1991 General Convention. The statewide debate in 1999-2000 over the Legislature's effort to respond to the decision of the Vermont Supreme Court in *Baker vs. Vermont* brought the issue of marriage and blessings for same-gender couples to the forefront for both civil society and the churches. Basing their decision on the equal benefits clause of the state constitution, the court said gay and lesbian couples should have access to the same benefits—and responsibilities—available to couples through marriage.

Bishop McLeod, a number of Vermont clergy, and many lay persons participated actively in the process that led eventually to the passage of the Civil Union law in April 2000. The *Mountain Echo* ran an extensive series of news articles, opinion articles and editorials encouraging discussion in the congregations of the diocese. These were put together in June 2000 in a booklet titled, *Intimate Human Relationships: Resources for Conversation in the Congregations and Deaneries of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont*. Candidates for election as Tenth Bishop of Vermont visited Vermont in the fall of 2000, and discussion about civil unions was part of their conversations with the discernment committee and with members of the diocese.

Since the summer of 2000, civil unions have been blessed in many Vermont congregations, giving gay and lesbian couples the opportunity to share the gifts of their loving relationships with, and seek support from, our faith communities. As Episcopalians, we are a people of common prayer, but in this aspect of our common life, we do not have common liturgies that reflect our Anglican theological and liturgical traditions. The liturgies recommended by the Task Force will bring the celebration of holy unions into our life of common prayer.

Part IV

Theological Considerations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How Anglicans do theology

Roles of scripture, tradition and reason

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some principles for interpreting Holy Scripture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How Anglican theology informs the discussion about same-gender unions

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

Incarnation, relation, sin and redemption

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How do we understand sin today?

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

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

How are humans expected to relate to one another?

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

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

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

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

What do we mean by blessing?

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

In Holy Matrimony

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

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

In Holy Union

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

Part V

Proposed Diocesan Policy

The Task Force recommends that the current Diocesan Policy for Holy Matrimony [see Appendix B] be replaced by the following unified policy for Holy Matrimony and Holy Union.

Diocesan Policy for Holy Matrimony and Holy Union

Preparing couples for lifelong relationships is an important pastoral responsibility. Care should be taken to ensure adequate time for preparation. In situations in which there has been a previous marriage or civil union, adequate time should be allowed to comply with all Diocesan policies. These guidelines are meant to serve as general guidelines for the clergy and congregations of the Diocese of Vermont. Clergy and local congregations may wish to develop additional guidelines and policies to assist couples seeking the church's pastoral support and blessing on their lives together. If you have any questions about these policies or procedures, please call the Bishop's office early on in the process.

General provisions for Holy Matrimony and Holy Unions

1. At least one of the persons must be a baptized person, involved in the life of the church.
2. Thorough preparation is required and should include conversation about the Christian understanding of Holy Matrimony and Holy Union, money, communication, relationship roles, sexual relations, family, any minor children, and finally, planning the liturgy.
3. A Declaration of Intention, signed by both parties, is required (available from the Diocesan Office). The Declaration is to be kept in the Parish file. Through use of this Declaration, couples will be reminded that the Church expects that "such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication,

and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God." (Resolution D039, General Convention 2000)

4. Couples are required to have a Marriage or Civil Union license in order for Clergy to officiate at a liturgy of Holy Matrimony or Holy Union.
5. Liturgies or liturgical outlines authorized by the Episcopal Church are to be used for Holy Matrimony, and the trial liturgies developed by the Diocesan Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships shall be used for Holy Unions in the Diocese of Vermont.

Pastoral Care For Persons Who Have Previously Been In A Marriage Or Civil Union

In addition to the above, any priest officiating at the Holy Union or Matrimony of anyone who has been divorced or whose Civil Union has been dissolved, must obtain permission of the bishop. The form to request permission can be found in Section V of the Diocesan Handbook and must be submitted to the Bishop at least 30 days before the proposed date of the union, by the officiating cleric.

1. The request to officiate should be on the bishop's desk *at least thirty days* before the proposed date of the union. The request should include counseling session results and the specifics of the care of any minor children.
2. A photocopy of the divorce decree(s) and/or civil union dissolution(s) must be in the cleric's files and the cleric should assure the bishop of this when submitting a request to officiate.
3. The preparation required should also include conversation about why the first marriage or civil union was dissolved and how the new relationship is different.

Permission will not be normally granted for third or subsequent marriages or unions, except

for the most extenuating circumstances, and then only with evidence of substantial counseling from a therapist, psychiatrist or psychologist who will provide a letter to the bishop stating that the person has worked through personal issues surrounding broken relationships.

The request to officiate should be on the Bishop's desk *at least 60 days* before the proposed date of the marriage or union.

The following items are to be included with the priest's request to officiate form:

- (a) The letter from the therapist, psychiatrist or psychologist;
- (b) Copy of the divorce or dissolution decrees;
- (c) Outline of care of minor children (visitation, financial arrangements, blended family incorporation issues)

Other provisions

These policies apply to all Episcopal clergy officiating at liturgies of Holy Matrimony and Holy Union in the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont.

Clergy who are not canonically resident or licensed to officiate in the Diocese of Vermont are

- required to obtain permission of the bishop to officiate at liturgies of Holy Matrimony or Holy Union in the Diocese of Vermont; and
- required, by law, to obtain the necessary civil authorization from the State of Vermont.

Clergy and congregations are encouraged to develop any fee, building use, pastoral or other policies appropriate to the local ministry setting.

Consistent with the provisions of Title One, Canon 18, Section 4 of the Canons of the Episcopal Church, it shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to solemnize any marriage or civil union.

Declaration of Intention for Holy Matrimony

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We,

And

desiring to receive the blessing of Holy Matrimony in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold marriage to be a lifelong union of husband and wife as it is set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.

We believe that the union of husband and wife 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.

And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this relationship and to seek God's help hereto.

Signature

Signature

Dated

A.D.

Declaration of Intention for Holy Union

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We,

And

desiring to receive the blessing of Holy Union in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold this partnership to be a lifelong union of persons as described by the Episcopal Church gathered in General Convention.

We believe that the union of two partners is intended by God for their mutual joy, for the encouragement and support given one another in daily life and changing circumstances, for the deepening of faith as they experience God's love in their love for one another, and (if it may be) the physical and spiritual nurture of children. Such relationships are nurtured and characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.

And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this relationship and to seek God's help hereto.

Signature

Signature

Dated

A.D.

Part VI

Trial Liturgies for Holy Union

The Task Force recommends that the following liturgies be used on a trial basis for the celebration and blessing of Holy Unions in the Diocese of Vermont, and that their use be evaluated on an annual basis by a group to be appointed by the bishop:

- The Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union (2 rites)
- The Blessing of a Civil Union
- An Order for Holy Union

Three of the rites are very similar to the rites authorized in the Book of Common Prayer for mar-

riage, with a principal difference being the vows. The second rite for the celebration and blessing of a Holy Union has a different structure, with the Ministry of the Word preceding the Declaration of Consent, the Making of Vows, the Blessing and Giving of Rings, the Prayers and the Blessing of the Union.

The Blessing of a Civil Union is identical to “The Blessing of a Civil Marriage” in the Prayer Book (433-434), except that the vows provided in the other rites are to be used. It is not printed below.

A Rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union 1

[Adapted from St. Thomas' Church, Washington, DC]

Provided for trial use in the Diocese of Vermont beginning July 1, 2004

+ *The Presider faces the people and the two persons to be joined in holy union, who stand before him/her.*

Presider Dear people of God:
we have come together
to witness and bless the covenant of love and fidelity
which NN. and NN. have made with each other.

Such a covenant shows us the mystery of the union between God and God's people and between Christ and the Church, and the Holy Scriptures point to the offering and receiving of love as the principal sign of God's presence.

Behold now the mystery of the union between N. and N.,
called by God to embody in their covenant
that union between Christ and the Church.

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 that their love may be a source of grace and blessing
to all whom they encounter.

This solemn covenant is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly,
but reverently, deliberately,
and with the commitment to seek God's will for their lives.

THE DECLARATION OF CONSENT

+ *The Presider addresses each member of the couple in turn:*

Presider N1, will you have N2 as your partner in life,
to live together in the covenant of holy union?
Will you love him/her, comfort her/him,
honor and keep him/her in sickness and in health,
and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her/him as long as you both shall live?

N1 I will.

Presider N2, will you have N1 as your partner in life,
to live together in the covenant of holy union?
Will you love him/her, comfort her/him,
honor and keep him/her in sickness and in health,
and forsaking all others, be faithful to her/him as long as you both shall live?

N2 I will.

Presider (To sponsors)

N3 and N4, you have been chosen to accompany N. and N.
as they journey towards the fulfillment of their commitment,
growing in love and faithfulness.

Will you support them in their life together?

Sponsors We will.

+ *In the following question to the witnessing congregation, the words “family in God” or “spiritual family” may be substituted if appropriate. The couple may also ask this question directly of the people, e.g., “As our family in Christ, will you share our joys,...”*

Presider (to the people)

As N. and N.’s family in Christ, will you share their joys,
help them to bear their burdens, and do all in your power
to uphold them in their covenant of holy union?

People **We will.**

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Presider The Lord be with you.

People **And also with you.**

Presider Let us pray.

O gracious and everliving God,
you have taught us to love one another as Christ loved us:
look with favor on N. and N. who come to you seeking your blessing.
Assist them with your grace, that with true fidelity and steadfast love
they may honor and keep the promises and vows they make.
Protect them from all trouble and danger, and bring them, with us,
to the heavenly feast of your eternal kingdom,
through Jesus Christ our Savior,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.

People **Amen.**

+ *Then one or more of the following passages from Holy Scripture is read. If there is to be a Communion, a passage from the Gospel always concludes the readings.*

Ruth 1:16-17
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (*New English Bible*)
Micah 4:1-3, 6-8
Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Song of Songs 2:10-13, 8:6-7
I Samuel 18:16, 3, 20:16-17, 42a
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

I Corinthians 12:31-13:13
Ephesians 3:14-19
Romans 12: 9-19

I John 4:7-16, 21
II Corinthians 5:17-20
Colossians 3:12b-16a

Between the readings, a psalm, hymn or anthem may be sung or said. Appropriate psalms are 67, 65 85, 111, 127, 133: 1-3, 149, 8:10-11

+ *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.**

John 15:9-12
John 2:1-11
Matthew 5:14-16
Matthew 7:24-27

Mark 12: 38-34
Luke 6:32-38
Luke 10:21-2

+ *A Homily or other response to the Readings may follow.*

THE MAKING OF VOWS

+ *The couple stand facing one another.*

N1 (taking N2's hands in hers/his)

N2, I join my life with yours, from this day forward.
In prosperity and in hardship, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow,
I will love and cherish you as long as we both shall live.
This I vow before God.

N2 (taking N1's hands in his/hers)

N1, I join my life with yours, from this day forward.
In prosperity and in hardship, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow,
I will love and cherish you as long as we both shall live.
This I vow before God.

or

N1 (taking N2's hands in hers/his)

In the name of God, I, N1, take you, N2, to be my partner in life, 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.

N2 (taking N1's hands in hers/his)

In the name of God, I, N2, take you, N1, to be my partner in life, 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.

THE BLESSING AND GIVING OF RINGS

Presider Bless, O Lord, these rings, to be signs of the vows by which these two people have bound themselves to each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

People Amen.

+ N1 places the ring on the hand of N2, saying

N, I give you this ring in token of my vows, in witness of my faithfulness and love and as a sign that all I have I share with you.

+N2 places the ring on the hand of N1, saying

N, I give you this ring in token of my vows, in witness of my faithfulness and love and as a sign that all I have I share with you.

or

+N1 places the ring on the hand of N2, saying

N2, 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 God.

+N2 places the ring on the hand of N1, saying

N1, 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 God.

Presider In exchanging vows of love, support and fidelity, N and N are now joined in holy and civil union, as celebrated by this community of faith, and as recognized by the State of Vermont.
May the grace of God be with them for ever.

People Amen.

THE PRAYERS

+ The prayers may be led by the Presider, a deacon, one of the sponsors, or a family member chosen by the couple. At the end of each petition, all respond Amen.

Leader Almighty and everliving God,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,
clothe N. and N. with your Spirit;
seal the bond of their union;
and create one flesh and one spirit together.

People Amen.

Leader Grant to N. and N.
the wisdom and vision to see your image in each other
and the courage to honor you in their love for each other.

People Amen.

Leader Grant that all who witness N. and N. in their life together
may see your presence in their love for each other.

People Amen.

Leader Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection
that they may reach out in love and concern to others.

People Amen.

Leader	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.
People	Amen.
Leader	Bless N. [and N.], the <i>child</i> of N. and N., that this newly formed household may be a place of nurture and strength for <i>him</i> .
People	Amen.
Leader	Guard, guide and protect your Church; and grant that its members and all their works may always reflect your presence and will in this world.
People	Amen.
Leader	Be present with the leaders of our nation and the leaders of other nations; and move them to seek peaceful resolution to conflict and help them to govern in wisdom and justice.
People	Amen.

Leader Bless the union of N. and N;
walk with them in joy and in sorrow,
sustain them in prosperity and in adversity,
guide them in light and in darkness,
and ground them in their love for each other.

People **Amen.**

THE BLESSING OF THE UNION

+ *The blessing is pronounced by the Presider. The couple may stand facing the Presider or may kneel. The Presider may place his/her hands on the heads of the couple or hold their joined hands.*

Presider O God, you have so consecrated the covenant of holy union
that in it is represented the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church:
Send therefore your blessing upon these your servants,
that they may so love, honor, and cherish one another
in faithfulness and patience,
in wisdom and true godliness,
that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Savior,
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

People **Amen.**

or the following

Presider 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.

By the power of your Holy Spirit,
pour out the abundance of your blessings upon these two people.
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 Savior,
who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, for ever and ever.

People **Amen.**

Presider God the Father,
God the Son,
God the Holy Spirit,
bless, preserve and keep you;
the Lord look upon you with mercy and favor,
and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace;
that you may faithfully live together in this life,
and in the age to come have life everlasting.

People **Amen.**

THE PEACE

Presider The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People And also with you.

+ *The couple greet each other and the congregation.*

+ *When Communion is not to follow, the congregation withdraws. A hymn, psalm or anthem may be sung; or instrumental music may be played.*

At the Eucharist

+ *The Liturgy continues with the Offertory, at which the couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.*

Preface

Because in the holy covenant of love between two people
you have given us an image of the heavenly Jerusalem
where we will at last be united
with your Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
who loves us and gave himself for us

to make the whole creation new.

Therefore we praise you, joining our voices...

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

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

Presider 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 union,
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.

People **Amen.**

+ *As the congregation withdraws, a hymn, psalm or anthem may be sung; or instrumental music may be played.*

A Rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union 2

Provided for trial use in the Diocese of Vermont beginning July 1, 2004

Acclamation

Hymn of Praise

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Presider The Lord be with you.

People **And also with you.**

Presider Let us pray.

O gracious and everliving God, You have created us in your image and called us to love you and one another. Hear our prayers for N and N, who now celebrate before you their covenant of holy union and ask for your blessing. Give them grace to keep the vows they make here today, that their life together may be a witness to your love; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.

People **Amen.**

Then one or more of the following passages from Holy Scripture is read. If there is to be a Communion, a passage from the Gospel always concludes the readings.

Ruth 1:16-17
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (New English Bible)
Micah 4:1-3, 6-8
Zephaniah 3; 14-20

Song of Songs 2:10-13, 8:6-7
I Samuel 18:16, 3, 20:16-17, 42a
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

I Corinthians 12:31-13:13
Ephesians 3:14-19
Romans 12: 9-19

I John 4:7-16, 21
II Corinthians 5:17-20
Colossians 3:12b-16a

Between the readings a psalm, hymn or anthem may be sung or said. Appropriate psalms are 67, 65 85, 111, 127, 133: 1-3, 149, 8:10-11

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

The Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ according to _____.

People **Glory to you, Lord Christ.**

John 15:9-12

John 2:1-11

Matthew 5:14-16

Matthew 7:24-27

Mark 12: 38-34

Luke 6:32-38

Luke 10:21-2

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 Presider faces the people and the two persons to be joined in holy union, who stand before him/her.

Presider

Dear friends in Christ: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the union of N and N in a lifelong commitment of love. The calling to live in the bond of a covenant is a gift from God, in whose image we are created and by whom we are called, in Christ's Body the Church, to live in God and with one another.

N. and N. are here to bear witness to their love for each other and their intention to embody Christ's love in their life together.

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 that their love may be a source of grace and blessing to all whom they encounter.

This solemn covenant is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and with the commitment to seek God's will for their lives.

THE DECLARATION OF CONSENT

The Presider addresses each member of the couple in turn:

Presider

N1, will you share your love and life with N2, your wholeness and your brokenness, your joys and your sorrows, your health and your sickness, your riches and your poverty, your success and your failure, and be faithful to him/her so long as you both shall live?

N1 I will.

Presider

N2, will you share your love and life with N1, your wholeness and your brokenness, your joys and your sorrows, your health and your sickness, your riches and your poverty, your success and your failure, and be faithful to him/her so long as you both shall live?

N2 I will.

Presider (to witnessing congregation)

Will you, the families, friends and faith community of N1 and N2, promise to honor and uphold them in their life together?

People **We will, with God's help.**

THE MAKING OF VOWS

The couple stand facing one another.

N1 (taking N2's hands in hers/his)

In the name of God, I, N1, take you, N2, to be my partner in life, 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.

N2 (taking N1's hands in hers/his)

In the name of God, I, N2, take you, N1, to be my partner in life, 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.

or the following

N2, I join my life with yours, from this day forward. In prosperity and in hardship, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, I will love and cherish you as long as we both shall live. This I vow before God.

N1, I join my life with yours, from this day forward. In prosperity and in hardship, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, I will love and cherish you as long as we both shall live. This I vow before God.

THE BLESSING AND GIVING OF RINGS

Presider

Bless, O Lord, these rings to be signs of the vows
by which these two have bound themselves to each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

People **Amen.**

N1 places the ring on the hand of N2, saying

N2, 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 God.

N2 places the ring on the hand of N1, saying

N1, 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 God.

or the following

N1 places the ring on the hand of N2, saying

N, I give you this ring in token of my vows, in witness of my faithfulness and love
and as a sign that all I have I share with you.

N2 places the ring on the hand of N1, saying

N, I give you this ring in token of my vows, in witness of my faithfulness and love
and as a sign that all I have I share with you.

Presider

Now that N and N have spoken their vows before God and those present,
and have given to each other signs of their commitment, their covenant of holy union is sealed.
We now pray God's blessing upon them.

THE PRAYERS

The prayers may be led by the Presider, a deacon, one of the sponsors, or a family member chosen by the couple. At the end of each petition all respond: Hear our prayer.

Leader Let us pray.

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation and giver of grace: Look with favor on the world you have made, and for which your son Jesus gave his life; and especially on these two persons whose covenant you bless. God, in your love,

People **Hear our prayer.**

Leader 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. God, in your love,

People **Hear our prayer.**

Leader 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 lives. God, in your love,

People **Hear our prayer.**

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

People **Hear our prayer.**

Leader Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others. God, in your love,

People **Hear our prayer.**

Leader Bless them According to your will, with the gift and heritage of children and the grace to bring them up to know you, to love you, and to serve you. God, in your love

People **Hear our prayer.**

Leader Bless N. [and N.], the child/children of N. and N., that this household may be a place of nurture and strength for him/them.

People **Hear our prayer.**

Leader Grant that we who have witnessed these vows may find our lives strengthened and our loyalties confirmed. God, in your love,

People **Hear our prayer.**

THE BLESSING OF THE UNION

The blessing is pronounced by the Presider. The couple may stand facing the Presider or may kneel. The Presider may place his/her hands on the heads of the couple or hold their joined hands.

Presider

Most gracious God, you have put into the hearts of your people a yearning for union with you and one another. You call us into covenant and endow us with heart and will that we may honor and keep our commitments. Pour out your blessing upon N. and N., that they may honor one another in all times and in all places. Bless them in their loving faithfulness; touch others through them, that many may know more fully the grace of your love. Deepen their joy, sanctify their celebration; guide and console them in difficult times;

ever sustain in them an awareness of your loving care; and finally bring them to know you face to face; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

People **Amen.**

or the following

Presider

May the God of peace bless, preserve, and keep you; may God be gracious to you, guide you in truth and peace, and make you strong in love and faith; so that you may grow together in this life, and the love that you share be taken up beyond death itself, to dwell in God's eternal glory.

People **Amen.**

THE PEACE

Presider The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People **And also with you.**

The couple greet one another and the congregation.

When Communion is not to follow, the congregation withdraws. A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung; or instrumental music may be played.

At the Eucharist

The Liturgy continues with the Offertory, at which the couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.

[The Preface and postcommunion prayer are the same as those offered in A Rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union 1]

Preface

Because in the holy covenant of love between two people
you have given us an image of the heavenly Jerusalem
where we will at last be united
with your Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
who loves us and gave himself for us
to make the whole creation new.
Therefore we praise you, joining our voices...

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

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

Presider 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 union,
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.

People **Amen.**

As the congregation withdraws, a hymn, psalm or anthem may be sung; or instrumental music may be played.

An Order for Holy Union

Provided for Trial Use in the Diocese of Vermont on July 1, 2004

If it is desired to celebrate a holy union otherwise than as set forth in “A Rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union,” forms 1 and 2, this Order is used. Normally, the presider is a priest or bishop. Where permitted by civil law, and when no priest or bishop is available, a deacon may function as presider, but does not pronounce a blessing. The laws of the State of Vermont and the “Policy for Holy Matrimony and Holy Union” of the Diocese of Vermont having been complied with, the couple, together with their witnesses, families, and friends, assemble in the church or in some other convenient place.

1. The understanding of the Church concerning Holy Union, as it is declared by Resolution C051sa (“on the subject of blessing same-gender relationships”) of the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church* and the “Policy for Holy Matrimony and Holy Union” of the Diocese of Vermont, which includes the “Declaration of Intention for Holy Union,” is briefly stated.
2. The intention of each partner to enter the state of holy union, and their free consent, is publicly ascertained.
3. One or more Readings, one of which is always from Holy Scripture, may precede the exchange of vows. If there is to be a Communion, a Reading from the Gospel is always included.
4. The vows of each partner are exchanged, using one of the following forms:

N, I join my life with yours, from this day forward. In prosperity and in hardship, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, I will love and cherish you as long as we both shall live. This I vow before God.

or

In the name of God, I, N, take you, N, to be my partner in life, 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.

5. The Presider declares the union of the couple as life partners, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
6. Prayers are offered for the couple, for their life together, for the Christian community, and for the world.
7. A priest or bishop pronounces a solemn blessing upon the couple.
8. If there is no Communion, the service concludes with the Peace, the partners first greeting each other. The Peace may be exchanged throughout the assembly.
9. If there is to be a Communion, the service continues with the Peace and the Offertory. The Holy Eucharist may be celebrated either according to Rite One or Rite Two in the Prayer Book or according to the rites in *Enriching Our Worship*, or according to the Order on page 401 of the Prayer Book. The Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union may be used with any authorized liturgy for the Holy Eucharist. This service then replaces the Ministry of the Word, and the Eucharist begins with the Offertory.

* Cf. Resolution C051sa, paragraph 4: “That we reaffirm Resolution D039 of the 73 General Convention (2000) that ‘We expect such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God,’ and that such relationships exist throughout the church.” Paragraph 5 states: “we recognize that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions.”

Part VII

Resources and Training

The resources group focused on two areas: developing resources for congregations to support learning and conversations about same-gender blessings and about sexuality; and developing resources for couples considering entering into Holy Union. Our work together was prayerful and energetic. We learned, wept, and laughed. We look forward to transmitting some of the spirit of this powerful process to congregations in the Diocese of Vermont.

Resources for Congregations

We recommend that a concise packet of resource materials on same-gender blessings and human sexuality be made available by the diocese to all congregations in the diocese. We believe that keeping the packet of materials brief will make them more useable.

It quickly became clear that the Diocese of Vermont already had a significant resource in the work published in the *Mountain Echo* in 1999 and 2000 addressing the statewide debate about what became civil unions. These articles and columns were collected in the booklet, *Intimate Human Relationships: Resources for Conversation*, and made available in June 2000. An expanded version will be included in the training packet, along with *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*, by the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston, published by Episcopal Divinity School, and *Congregations Talking about Homosexuality*, edited by Beth Ann Gaede and published by the Alban Institute.

In addition to the training packet, we recommend posting resources that can be copied as downloadable files on the diocesan website, along with a bibliography of books, articles, and videos/DVD's. The downloadable files should include *Claiming the Blessing*, a report produced in 2003 by Claiming the Blessing; *Let the Reader Understand: Principles of Scriptural Interpretation*, published in 2002 by the Diocese of New York; *Background Es-*

say on Biblical Texts for "Journey Together Faithfully: Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality." edited by Arland J. Hultgreen and Walter F. Taylor, and published in September 2003 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We wish to recognize and support the different developmental stages through which each congregation will travel. They have differing needs at different times on the journey. Some congregations will prefer to work from within, and some will prefer to have resource people from outside the congregation available to either lead discussions or offer insights. Both approaches have merit and need to be supported.

It is important to create an invitation to these discussions that will draw people into the conversation rather than isolate those who are questioning, opposed, or wondering. Therefore, we propose to identify some resource people who are seen as more "central." Resource people should include persons who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, as well as allies.

Resources for Couples

Many of the kinds of support and preparation that same-gender couples need for Holy Union are identical to the needs of opposite-gender couples, and the same guidelines should apply. Clergy need excellent skills in counseling *both* same and opposite-gender couples, and we hope they will strive to be aware of their biases in both circumstances. We also recognize some differences in the issues faced by couples, and we need to provide resources addressing both the similarities and differences.

In preparing couples for Holy Union, clergy and couples should pay attention to the nuts and bolts of same gender relationships, the possible pitfalls as well as the joys, and the issues involved if two families are to be united. Questions might include:

- What to do if there are problems?

- Where to go for help?
- How to allay fears concerning security, opposition, public exposure, parishioners' reactions, etc.
- What concerns face two families coming together?
- What support networks are available?

In addition to the counseling required by the diocesan policy, we recommend that congregations identify "buddies" who can be support people for couples considering same-gender blessings.

Training Days

We propose that two one-day training opportunities be offered for clergy and lay leaders on same-gender blessings: June 18, at St. James', Arlington, and June 19, at Christ Church, Montpelier. Training will be offered in full group and breakout sessions and will focus on the following areas:

- Background for the consideration of same-gender blessings in Vermont and the Episcopal Church
- Theological considerations
- Diocesan policy on marriage and same-gender unions
- Liturgies for Holy Union
- Resource materials and how to use them in congregations
- Tools and ideas for responding to the needs and concerns of various congregations
- Counseling same-gender couples

We expect the training events to be a time when we also begin to identify a small group of people throughout the diocese who can offer support and training skills to those congregations that may desire external resources.

Appendix A

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

Anne Clarke Brown, Co-chair
Deputy to General Convention

Theology Group

Anne Clarke Brown, Chair
Church of Our Saviour, Killington

The Rev. Brad Clark
St. James', Arlington

The Rev. John C. Morris
St. Martin's, Fairlee

Steve Swayne
St. James', Woodstock

Policy Group

The Rt. Rev. Thomas C. Ely, Chair
Bishop of Vermont

The Rev. Canon Thad Bennett
St. Mary's in the Mountains, Wilmington

Wayne Cook
St. Michael's, Brattleboro

The Rev. Diane Root
Church of Our Saviour, Killington

Kathy West
Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Burlington

The Very Rev. Ken Poppe, Co-chair
Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Burlington

Liturgy Group

The Very Rev. Ken Poppe, Chair
Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Burlington

The Rev. Mary R. Mansfield
St. John's in the Mountains, Stowe

The Rev. Gunnar Urang
Montpelier

Nene Riley
St. Andrew's, St. Johnsbury

Resources Group

Stan Baker, Chair
Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Burlington

Peggy Bresee
St. John the Baptist, Hardwick

Dr. Helen E. Daly
St. Michael's, Brattleboro

Cheryl Elinsky
St. Paul's, White River Junction

The Rev. Jean Jersey
White River Junction

Appendix B

Current Diocesan Policy on Holy Matrimony

Preparing couples for Holy Matrimony is one of our most important pastoral responsibilities. Care should be taken to ensure adequate time for pre-marital preparation and, in the case of re-marriage after divorce, adequate time should be provided to comply with Diocesan policies. If you have any questions about these policies or procedures, please call the Bishop's office early on in the process.

First Marriages

1. One of the persons to be married must be a baptized person, and an active member of your congregation.
2. Premarital counseling is required and should include: Christian understanding of marriage, issues around money, communication and sexual relationship and finally, planning the service.
3. Declaration of Intention shall be required, signed by both parties. [Canon 18, (d)] The Declaration is to be kept in the Parish file.

Second Marriages

In accordance with the canons of this Church, any priest officiating at the marriage of anyone who has been divorced must have permission of the bishop. The form to request permission can be found in Section V of this Handbook and must be submitted to the Bishop at least 30 days before the proposed date of the marriage.

1. All four pages of the request to officiate should be on the bishop's desk *at least thirty days* before the proposed date of the marriage. The request should include counseling session results and the specifics of the care of minor children.
2. One of the persons to be married must be a baptized person, and an active member of your congregation.

3. A photocopy of the divorce decree(s) must be in your files and you should inform the bishop that you have it (them) in your request to officiate.
4. Premarital counseling is required and should include: Christian understanding of marriage, the care and welfare of minor children, discussion of why the first marriage(s) failed and how the prospective bride/groom participated in that failure, conversations about how minor children will be raised, issues around money, communication and sexual relationship and finally, planning the service.

Third or Subsequent Marriages

Permission will not be normally granted for third or subsequent marriages, except for the most extenuating circumstances, and then only with evidence of extensive premarital counseling (at least six sessions) and a letter from a therapist, psychiatrist or psychologist stating that the person has worked through personal issues surrounding failed marriages.

1. All four pages of the request to officiate should be on the Bishop's desk *at least 60 days* before the proposed date of the marriage.
2. The following items are to be included with the priest's request to officiate form:
 - (a) Copy of the letter from the therapist, psychiatrist or psychologist;
 - (b) Copy of the divorce decrees;
 - (c) Signed Declaration of Intention (that the parties involved intend their marriage to be a life-long union);
 - (d) Outline of care of minor children (visitation, financial arrangements, blended family incorporation issues)

Appendix C

Resources Consulted

The resources listed below are among the many consulted by members of the Task Force in the preparation of this report. It is not meant to be exhaustive but rather to acknowledge our debt and gratitude to the many who have made significant contributions to the church's ongoing discussion of human sexuality, the role of gay and lesbian Episcopalians in the life of our church, and the theology and practice of blessing persons in intimate human relationships.

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