

**"In All Our Loving, We Praise You, O God;"
Celebrating Relationships at Good Shepherd Church**

**A Report to the Rt. Rev. William E. Swing
Diocese of California
December 1994**

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The Rev. Kathleen J. Van Sickle
Deacon-in-Charge

May 5, 1996

Dear Friend(s):

The enclosed document is being made available to you for your information. It contains the complete history of this congregation's journey in the development of a liturgy to celebrate relationships, along with the liturgy itself, the sermon, and questions from the meeting that followed. It should be noted that the process undertaken to create this service was as important to the congregation as the liturgy which was finally produced.

Please do not reproduce any portion of this material. We do not envision others simply using the liturgy created by this congregation, but would hope to see the development of a greater body of material and experience by many churches. We are interested in how other congregations approach a project of this nature and what liturgies might be produced. If you would be willing to share what your congregation/ commission develops, we would be interested in viewing the material.

If you have any questions concerning this report or wish to discuss it, please feel free to call me at home in the evenings (510/528-6313).

Sincerely,



The Rev. Kathleen J. Van Sickle

Enclosure

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1. A Proper, Public Celebration

On the evening of Sunday December 4th, 1994, the people of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Berkeley, California, celebrated the Eucharist in honor of two people who are very important to us. Friends, family members, and co-workers of these two gathered with us for the service, and for a potluck supper afterwards in the parish hall. In the course of the service, these two people whom we love, who are part of the Body of Christ with us, spoke publicly about the love and commitment they have for each other. They asked us to support them with prayer and action. We prayed for our two friends, and for all the households and families of the community where God's love grows and is recognized.

The evening was pervaded with thankfulness. We were thankful for our friends, thankful that they belong together and have the courage to say so. We were thankful for the things that have happened in our congregation -- things that God has done with our congregation -- over the last few years, bringing us to the point where this celebration became possible. We were thankful, too, as we often find ourselves to be at Good Shepherd, for the Good News of Jesus Christ for all people, good news discovered in scripture, proclaimed in preaching, sung with gusto in hymns, and rehearsed in the familiar shape of the prayers of Anglican worship. We are a small part of something big. Through two much-loved but quite ordinary people, this celebration helped us glimpse the grand scale of God's plans for us, for our church, and for the world.

What was unusual about our celebration was the couple whose love and commitment we were honoring, Barbara and Kathleen. They are lesbians. They have been together as a couple for more than eight years, and they understand themselves to be partners for life. Both are long-term, committed Christians and members of the Episcopal church, and they see their relationship as they see the rest of their lives: as a response to their baptismal calling to follow Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Of course

these two Christians want to praise God for the love they share. Of course their friends want to thank God for the blessings such a relationship brings to the Christian community. Of course the community of faith has a responsibility to support these two, as it supports every team of faithful disciples with prayer and practical help. But because the church has had the habit of paying liturgical attention only to heterosexual couples, Barbara and Kathleen and we who are their fellow Christians found ourselves without the words, without the prayers, without the symbols and actions for a proper, public celebration of this couple's life in relation to the church's life.

On December 4th, however, there was a proper, public celebration of this couple's life in relation to the church's life. This document is the story of why we did it, how we did it, and what we discovered about God and the church as we did it. Our bishop has asked us for this account of our work, and we offer it gladly.

2. Who "We" Are

Good Shepherd Church is about 116 years old, and it is a mission of the Diocese of California. In all its years it has never been fully self-supporting; it has had times both of relative vigor and of near collapse. We have a tiny but beautiful building and a spacious but hideous parish hall, located in one of Berkeley's poorer neighborhoods a couple of miles from the U.C. Berkeley campus and the Episcopal seminary, the Church Divinity School of the Pacific.

At Christmas 1991, the average Sunday attendance was about twenty. At that time, our vicar left and in his place we installed a deacon in charge, who had been serving for several years as the half-time stipendiary parish administrator. We were well-supplied with non-stipendiary clergy to officiate at services. After a series of congregational meetings early in 1992, this is some of what we were able to say about ourselves. In late 1994, we number well over forty worshipers each Sunday,

and we still stand by the following as a good description of who we are, and who we hope to be.

Welcome to Good Shepherd Church, a place for. . .
. . . lively and intelligent preaching by a variety of voices, all emphasizing that Christian faith has good news to offer people today.
. . . worship in which liturgical pomp unites comfortably with west coast informality in a beautiful carpenter Gothic church from the 1870's.
. . . a community of faith where we understand our diversity as a particular gift of God's grace to us.

At Good Shepherd, we are a small but diverse group: young and old; adult and children; single, couples, halves of couples, and families; lesbian, gay and straight; black and white. We hope to grow further both in size and diversity.

We are people who take Christian faith seriously, but not in dogmatic or authoritarian ways. We think that mature faith is distinguished by its openness to question and its willingness to grow in understanding.

We try to welcome newcomers without hovering over them. We aspire to live, as a community, by the gifts that God gives to the group through its individual members rather than by assigning jobs or pigeonholing people.

We have a variety of opportunities for education, reflection, and socializing.

These details of size, location, history, and ministry configuration are important for the present story. As the smallest and most far-flung of Berkeley's Episcopal churches, our material resources are few. Just to survive, let alone flourish, we have to value each and every member, improvise a great deal, rely on God's providence, attend to our relationship with the diocese of California, and reconcile ourselves to being something rather different from most people's idea of the typical Episcopal congregation.

Along with these challenges, however, come some important gifts and opportunities. When we are not trying to be "typical," we find more room for the imagination, and the Holy Spirit, to operate. We have less to lose by taking risks than a more "successful" congregation might have. We rejoice in the presence of some fine teachers and enthusiastic ministry students from the

seminary community. We cultivate the sense that the wider Episcopal church may need us precisely for our "oddness," just as much as we need to draw on the wider church's solid predictability and broader resource base.

For the purposes of the present story, two elements of Good Shepherd's identity are critical. First, we include a significant number of gay and lesbian members, but we do not understand ourselves to be a "gay church," whatever that might mean. Sexual orientation is not the primary way in which our members define ourselves, but neither is the subject taboo or even controversial in our common life. "We" at Good Shepherd are both gay and straight -- that is simply a "given" of our life as a congregation.

Secondly, our worship, Sunday by Sunday, is the principal focus of our identity as a Christian community. Most of our energy goes into, and flows from, our worship life, and in the Eucharist we experience radical equality before God and profound unity with each other. The Good News preached and the Holy Communion celebrated have taught us irrevocably that those whom the Spirit has made into one Body in Christ, no one should separate. The church's official behavior towards its lesbian and gay members has often offended against this principle. In our experience, and because of our faith, when some of us are excluded, silenced, or ignored, all of us are diminished. Out of this tension, this dual experience of grace and offense, came Good Shepherd's desire to celebrate our same-sex couples' relationships.

3. Conversations with Our Bishop

In the Fall of 1993, Good Shepherd had its regular episcopal visitation. At that stage, we had for some years seen ourselves as a mixed community in which many different vocations to sexuality and intimacy are represented. In Lent of 1993, we had reflected upon that circumstance as we met for the discussions on human sexuality that the national church had mandated at the 1991

General Convention. Two things stood out in our discussions. As a community, we were able to engage in serious, respectful, truthful conversation about matters of sexuality and human relationships. Furthermore, our conversation did not seem to fit quite the same pattern as the one envisaged by the official discussion materials provided for our use; our levels of anxiety and controversy seemed to be lower than the materials expected, and our grasp of the Good News seemed to be a little stronger than the materials feared. We realized that we might be somewhat out of step, somewhat atypical, but we felt once again that our oddness might be an asset.

When Bishop Swing visited us that October, therefore, we asked him over a potluck lunch what he saw as the state of play around two sexuality-related issues in the church: the acknowledgement of same-sex relationships, and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. We let him know that we were not happy with the prevailing cautious pessimism and low expectations of change at the official level of the church and the diocese. Many of us spoke to Bishop Swing about our own sense of marginalization and being under-valued or invisible as lesbian or gay Episcopalians, or about how we felt when others were thus excluded. No punches were pulled, but the conversation remained respectful, and the meeting closed with a strong sense that more needed to be said and done on this topic.

After that meeting, there was quite a flow of correspondence from Good Shepherd members to the bishop. One member wrote of her hopes for the church's recognition of her own committed lesbian relationship, and explained that she and her partner wanted neither some private, unsanctioned celebration of their partnership, nor a public celebration as limited in scope as those currently authorized by Bishop Swing (a house-blessing, a simple collect added to the Sunday Prayers of the People at the time of an anniversary, or the like). Rather, they longed for a celebration that would be a joyful part of the whole church's life, though this seemed impossibly far off, given the present state of controversy in the Episcopal Church. Other members wrote with further stories, reflections, and ideas that we felt the

bishop needed to hear in order for him to develop a full picture of the "mind of the church" in his diocese. And we asked the bishop for a further meeting to discuss these things.

That meeting was arranged for Shrove Tuesday, 1994. In the meantime, we pursued congregational discussions about faith at Good Shepherd, and about the relationship between that faith and our liturgical language, with a view towards creating a Eucharistic prayer for the congregation. (This project is still underway. It is relevant here because it adds to the ground-work we have done concerning our faith and its liturgical expression.)

More than thirty people came to the Shrove Tuesday meeting, held in the home of a parish couple. We had been expecting to put forward our views and our hopes once again, and to ask what could be done to move the church forward, but we were to be surprised. First, Bishop Swing told us about the results of the national church's survey of attitudes towards human sexuality (a survey following on those same Lenten discussions we had entered into at Good Shepherd). We saw that Episcopalians' attitudes to sexuality were not as negative as we might have assumed. Then the bishop told us that he saw a need for the church to start accumulating resources, experience, and reflections on experience, to prepare for the day when Episcopalians would be ready to embrace and celebrate same-sex relationships along with heterosexual marriage. He wanted to respond pastorally, too, not just to issues of national church debate, but also to particular concerns being raised by the people of Good Shepherd.

At this meeting, then, the bishop commissioned us to carry out a pilot project under his auspices, and to report back to him. He asked us to devise and use services to acclaim, celebrate, honor, and/or give thanks for, the long-term, committed relationships of same-sex couples in our congregation. Faithful love, said the bishop, is an entirely appropriate subject for the church to honor. The blessings that a couple brings to the church are likewise an entirely appropriate stimulus to thanksgiving.

The bishop asked us to provide appropriate pastoral care and preparation for any couples requesting such a service. He asked us to keep records of what we would do, in the interests of

feeding back our findings through him to the wider church. He asked us not to seek media attention or publicity, and not to use "marriage" language about the services we might develop for same-sex couples. He asked that the services not celebrate the beginning or inauguration of a relationship, as the marriage service does.

Some of these concerns arose from pastoral good sense: a congregation would do this work more effectively without the secular media breathing down its neck in search of controversy, and some same-sex couples are vulnerable to harassment of various kinds if their relationship is widely known. Some of the concern for discretion arose from the state of the "same-sex union" debate in the Episcopal church. "Marriage" is a term that is heavily-laden both emotionally and theologically, and its use might tend to constrict our work unnecessarily. Single-use services can be a way of innovating without diminishing the authority of the Book of Common Prayer. And, as several of Good Shepherd's married couples were quick to point out, one of the major problems with the marriage service is precisely that it does not recognize that many, perhaps most, couples have been living together faithfully for a considerable time before the actual wedding.

Our response to the bishop was first of all astonishment and delight that he had heard our concerns and taken us seriously. We were honored that he felt he could trust this congregation with such a task. We could think of four couples at Good Shepherd who might be interested in such liturgies. One of us, a heterosexual woman moving towards marriage with the man with whom she has been in relationship for five years, indicated that the kind of service the bishop was talking about would meet her own needs much better than existing Prayer Book services. She also spoke about her reluctance to take advantage of liturgical provisions such as the marriage service which excluded her lesbian and gay friends. Other married people expressed similar sentiments. We saw the task as one of corporate prayer, discernment, and creativity. We said we were willing to try it.

4. Our Vision

We found a coordinator for the task, and set up some meeting times. At our first meeting, we rehearsed some history and clarified the task we had been set. We also looked at the probable benefits of doing our job well, benefits not just for us at Good Shepherd, but also for the wider church to which we belong.

This vision includes our hope for a time when the national church will have at its disposal careful reports from a congregation that has experienced the blessing of same-sex relationships, and will be able to reflect both on the ways the liturgies came into being, and also on the results the liturgies have had for all the people involved.

Our vision includes an expectation that the bishop of California will have a strengthened relationship with Good Shepherd Church. He will know that he has gone some way towards meeting a pastoral need in one of his congregations. He will have the results of a pilot project the diocese could be proud of.

Our congregation will have a strengthened relationship with its bishop. We will have a deeper relationship with the wider church, having contributed something to the common wisdom out of our gifts and experiences. We will know more about our faith; we will have learned some more theology; we will be better educated than before. We will have a richer and deeper experience of being in community together as a congregation, through having cared for each other, having accepted loving care from each other, and having listened and talked together, whatever our status as straight or gay, single or partnered. We will have new resources, in the form of pastoral care of relationships, and liturgical celebrations for relationships, to help us grow as a community where intimacy and sexuality are celebrated in the light of the good news. And our vision included the hope that we would be praying better, individually and together: we could hope for new delight in, and new thankfulness for, God's gifts to us, because of our celebrations of our same-sex couples' relationships.

There is a special place in our vision for some of the

couples in our congregation. These couples will have the experience and the memory of a splendid celebration, an officially-recognized, community-generated affirmation of their primary, life-giving relationship. In a community that loves them, they will give and receive the wisdom and gifts that are uniquely theirs. Love will be discerned, love will be offered, love will be received, in specially focused ways.

As we write this report, we are glad to say that the gap between vision and reality is perceptibly narrowing. The benefits we hoped might flow from our work are indeed beginning to flow, and this report itself is one of the ways in which we are keeping faith with the wider church to which we belong, and with which we want to share the blessings we have received.

Earlier in the process, however, the grand vision had to be matched with the reality of our small congregation and its real, live, same-sex couples. One of us had spoken privately to each of our four couples, in order to establish how they felt about the possibility of a liturgical celebration of their relationship.

One couple hoped to have such a celebration, but were unable at that time to say a definite "yes." Another couple wanted to be involved in the discussions, but did not want a celebration for their own relationship. A third couple said they were "possible" candidates for a celebration, depending on what we came up with, and that they would gladly be part of the discussions.

Our fourth couple quietly but firmly said that although they were glad we would be working on the bishop's project, they did not want such a ceremony for themselves. The way these two saw it, separate rites for same-sex and heterosexual couples tend to create a kind of liturgical apartheid, separate and unequal. This couple wishes that the church would get out of the "marriage business." They think that the church should leave legal matters to the state, and should instead provide one rite suitable for use by any and all Christian couples regardless of the sexual orientation of the couples.

Upon hearing this last couple's reaction, there was general sympathy for their attitude. We agree that the church needs to move towards one rite for all couples, and away from having the

ministers of the church acting as agents of the state in heterosexual marriages. That would be a much wider goal than the one the bishop assigned us, but we decided to view the project we were embarking upon as a worthwhile interim step in a much longer process of liturgical and legal change.

At this point, we realized that we would have to go ahead with our planning without any specific celebration date or couple in mind. We committed ourselves to praying for all our same-sex couples, keeping them in our hearts. Though only a few of us were in committed lesbian or gay relationships, and though such couples represented only a fraction of the kinds of relationships and intimacies that this congregation enjoys, it was because of these particular couples and others like them beyond our congregation that we had embarked upon the project, and we wanted to support them faithfully.

5. "We celebrate life-giving relationships"

In our discussions, we looked at each of the three key terms in this phrase. Who are we? How do we do liturgical celebration? And why do we celebrate things or people liturgically in the first place? We devised ways of examining each of these questions, matching scriptural and theological understandings with our local and personal experience.

We recognized that the whole process would make demands on us that would go beyond meeting time and thinking time. Confidentiality was important; the project was not a secret, but the level of trust between members that we expect at Good Shepherd could not be compromised. This is always a good rule when people are talking about things as close to the bone as God and prayer and love and sex; it is even more important a rule when some people's jobs and family life and personal safety might depend on others' discretion. We made a commitment to pray for each other, and to talk to each other about the questions and insights and ideas that were bound to arise as we worked on the project together.

We also made a commitment to keep our Sunday gathering for worship as a high priority throughout the process. In order to come to the point of celebrating special and particular relationships well, we would need good habits of ordinary celebration to build on.

(a) Who Celebrates

In May, we talked about our identity as a community of faith. The question of who celebrates is a question about the nature of the church. It includes questions about the nature of Christian community generally, questions of Anglican and Episcopal identity, and questions about believing and worshiping at Good Shepherd Church in particular. Our earlier discussions about faith and God-language at Good Shepherd were very useful here. We cannot talk about our church without also talking about our God. This is the God who created each of us in the divine image; this is the Christ whose life, death and resurrection bring us together to hear his story each week; and the Holy Spirit is especially important, as the "glue" that holds us together, gives us vision, and gives us the gifts we need to grow and flourish. The short answer to the question about who "we" are is that we are a community of faith, called and cared for by this God.

We celebrate, too, as people who share certain habits of common prayer. We have certain assumptions about the kinds of words, actions, and symbols we use to express what is important to us as a community of faith. Again, we cannot talk about our common prayer without talking about the God whom we address when we pray. This is the God who adopts us as children in our baptism; the Christ whom we meet and receive in the Eucharist each week; and the Holy Spirit who makes all our praying possible, whether we do it alone or as a worshiping assembly. We who celebrate are people who use scripture, Eucharist, and the kinds of symbols that are already present in many of our Episcopal liturgies, together with new words and actions that are congruent with the ones we have inherited.

The Sunday Eucharist at Good Shepherd is the key moment at

which we experience that community. Among people's reasons for coming to share in that Eucharist are the desire to be with other people, and to pray with them; to reconnect with other people and with God; to discover that the life events of each individual matter to the whole body; to have fun; to sing, and to hear others sing, too; to celebrate the community, and the Resurrection of Jesus, with these people; to give thanks for the week's events (or to whine about them!). Sometimes we come because it is a habit or a discipline, or because we love the other people who will be there. We come to be reminded of the good news. We come because in this community, people know our story; because it helps to shape our week; because someone else brings us; because there is always room for one more. We come to receive support in the multiplicity of our relationships. We come because God reminds us that we are together, and so that we can be recombined.

We made long lists of the things that we do when we gather as a community for the Eucharist. We sing, pray, talk, and keep silence. We eat and drink, give money, draw pictures, and spend time with children. We play, read, hold hands, laugh, smile, and listen. We worship: we put together all these pieces and more. In all this, we are givers and takers; we are friends, family, and a Body; we are guests of God, children of God, supported by the Holy Spirit; we are conversation partners. We are agents of transformation, we are learners and teachers. We are people who carry with us out of worship, into the world, what we have received.

There is a strong "Jesus-component" in this community of the Eucharist, and baptism is the other key place in which faith in Jesus and identification with the Body of Christ is clearly seen. In the last few months, two baptisms celebrated in our community have helped us see this more clearly. One was the baptism of the very new baby of the couple in whose home we had met with the bishop earlier in the year. The second was the baptism of a woman in her late twenties who had visited Good Shepherd for the first time at Easter, and who had found herself drawn into the life and faith of the church. We have seen baptism as a calling to belong, as a calling to witness to the grace of God, and as a calling to

the whole community to support its new members. Baptism and Eucharist help to make us a community of the gospel, a community of faith in Jesus Christ. We remember and rehearse that good news together, and we offer it to the world at large.

(b) How We Discern Life-Giving Relationships

The question about life-giving relationships is a question about the gifts of God that we celebrate. It includes questions about grace and love and forgiveness and reconciliation and "salvation" generally, in contrast to alienation and fear and isolation and "sin" generally. It includes questions about all the relationships, not just the couple-relationships, in which members of this community experience God's grace and gifts. This question, too, means that we have to talk about God. Our God, here, is the one who is the source of all life and grace. Our God is likewise the Jesus who modeled and mended and renewed all kinds of human relationships, and who called for whole new ways of loving one another and bearing fruit in response to God's grace. The Holy Spirit, too, is essential here as the giver and the gift and the energy in all holy relationships. Finally, the Trinity as a whole is perhaps the foundation and the best expression of all life-giving relationships: God in three persons, in a constant movement and embrace. A liturgical celebration of human relationships aims to catch glimpses of the life and love of the Trinity.

There is no short answer to the question about the nature of life-giving relationships! In order to approach an answer for it, we proceeded to meet in small groups, going over what we have learned through our life experience about those human relationships which are life-giving both to the people in them, and to the people around them. All of us, in our diverse vocations to intimacy and relationship, needed to be heard and seen in these discussions, sharing our particular wisdom for the benefit of all.

We therefore spent time attempting to describe the

characteristics of the life-giving relationships we know. In some cases, we ourselves are directly part of those couples or relationships. In other cases, we experience others' life-giving relationships, their "couple-ness," as friends, or as family members, or as members of our church.

One key element that we perceive in life-giving relationships is hospitality. Each member of the couple is hospitable to the other, and both together are hospitable to the people around them. It is relaxing, exciting, and healing to be around such relationships. It brings out the best in us. Some members who are part of a couple also spoke about the ways in which being together has changed them as individuals: it can make a person more generous and sharing, calmer, more creative. A sense of humor and a sense of perspective seem to be essential to life-giving relationships. Growth and change in the relationship is also a healthy sign. It is also true in our experience that the community around a couple can have a role in discerning and supporting the life that is in a relationship.

In the course of these discussions, we made two very basic points. The first is that, when it comes to couples, we find no reason to make any qualitative or quantitative distinctions between same-sex or mixed-sex couples where the relationship is life-giving. We see the same Life at work in all of them. The second is that couples of whatever composition are not the only people who have relationships that we perceive as life-giving. Single people, and people in all kinds of non-couple households, also find this same Life at work in their relationships, and the community discerns and affirms it there as well. Having established this as the "big picture," however, we continued to work on the particular task the bishop had given us, the task of giving special recognition to "our" same-sex couples and their relationships.

(c) How We See Our Couples in Community

Why would a community of faith single out couples of whatever kind for a special celebration? Why, exactly, would a community

of faith would want or need to celebrate liturgically the life-giving relationships of its couples? We were aware of but did not go into the complex history of heterosexual marriage as a legal and liturgical part of church life. We wanted to begin neither from an analogy with heterosexual marriage, nor from a contrast with it. Instead, we wanted to begin from what we were most confident about: our conviction that the couples in our midst bring blessings to our community life. We also assumed that if we could identify why a liturgical celebration was necessary, we would not have too much difficulty discovering how such a celebration should unfold. We found several ways of speaking theologically about the analogies between a Christian couple and a Christian community.

The formation of a household is a big event in the life of a community of faith. The ordinary household meals that a Christian couple shares can echo the Eucharistic meal that the whole community -- the "household of God" -- shares to remember Christ's death and resurrection. Hospitality is an important value for households, both in the bible and in our experience. Recognizing the hospitality that each member of the couple offers to the other, and which the couple as a household offers to others, and making that hospitality visible through the liturgy, can help the whole community of faith remember its corporate commitment to hospitality.

The care and enjoyment of bodies is an important part of the life of a community of faith. Christian faith takes the human body seriously as a good gift of God to us, and recognizes the body as the way in which God was present among us in Jesus Christ. We also call ourselves a Body, the Body of Christ, when we gather together. Our bodies are washed, anointed, and signed with the cross in baptism. Our bodies are fed in the Eucharist, and connected with each other as we hold hands around the altar. The couples in our midst add another dimension to the embodiment that is recognized in our faith and worship: human bodies are also sexual, and couples hold before us the care and enjoyment of our own sexuality, and all our embodied relationships. Celebrating a couple and their relationship can help a community of faith

remember all people's bodily life as a gift of God, to be cared for and wisely enjoyed.

Along with the idea of the couple as hospitable household goes the idea of the couple as forgiving community. Many of us find it difficult to imagine life without the Good Shepherd community and the good news we hear there. Yet life in community is not uniformly easy and delightful. Change can be frightening, departures or deaths are sad, connecting with each other requires time and effort and is not always fully achieved. Our joys and sorrows are not always well synchronized, so that great patience and perseverance are often required of community members. We do not create or sustain this community by our own efforts. It is Christ's body, called into being by God's forgiveness and love, and sustained by the Holy Spirit in spite of our shortcomings. When we are a life-giving community, it is by the grace of God.

In this scenario, the couples in our midst can have a special role, and one well worth celebrating: they are an icon for all to see, a holy, living image of the community we are called to be. They can be a sacrament of community. A couple is a tiny community: they have been called together in God's love, and they are kept together by God's grace. When we see their life-giving relationship, we are reminded of the life-giving community we are called to be. In turn, a couple may look to the community at difficult times in their relationship, and will hope to be reminded, by what they see in the wider community, of the love, strength, forgiveness, and hope that they need for their life together. Celebrating a couple and their relationship can help a community of faith remember both the blessings and the responsibilities of being a community.

Finally, the life-giving relationships of couples can remind each and all of us of our relationship with God. Love, acceptance, forgiveness, hospitality, and growth are hallmarks of Christian community because they are qualities of our God. Our God is known as Trinity, three persons in a relationship of endlessly out-flowing, creative love. Where loving human relationships are seen and touched, God is being made known. Celebrating a couple and their relationship can help a community

of faith remember the nature and the wonderful works of the God who has called that community into being.

After our discussions raised all these issues, we found ourselves asking: how can we afford not to celebrate the couples in our midst? They help us to know ourselves, and our God, better. For our own sake, for the couple's sake, and for the sake of the Good News of Jesus Christ that all of us are committed to proclaiming, we must gather from time to time, as a community of faith, to remember all these things. We must give thanks to God and pray for one another, with a special focus on couples whose relationships we discern as life-giving, called forth and sustained by our God.

6. What We Ask a Liturgy To Do

We identified some building blocks for Anglican worship: prayer forms, central symbols and actions, and key attitudes towards God and each other. These key attitudes are thanksgiving, commitment, and petitionary prayer, and all three are found in various proportions in any Eucharistic celebration. We opted for an emphasis on thanksgiving and commitment, to be expressed in the following ways.

We wanted a service that would acknowledge the presence of a life-giving relationship in a particular couple. We wanted to see the partners expressing thanks for, and commitment to, the life in their relationship. We wanted them to be able to ask the community to support them, and to receive that support. We wanted an atmosphere in which everyone would be thankful to God for blessings received, and in which we would pray for continuing grace to be given to us.

We also recognized that the service would need to include some prayer for wider recognition of the divine grace being made known in and through this couple. Although we did not want the service to be highly polemical, we were aware that many in the church, and in the world beyond the church, still find it hard to imagine God's grace at work in a lesbian or gay couple. As a

community, we have a commitment to telling the truth about where God is at work, and that commitment needed to find a voice in the liturgy.

Finally, we wanted words and actions that would include everybody present, single, married, divorced, engaged, old, young, without sacrificing the liturgy's special focus on the couple. It seemed sensible to take the Eucharistic liturgy as the basic shape of the celebration, because Eucharist is already so central to our identity at Good Shepherd, and also because Eucharist is the whole church's basic mode of thanksgiving.

7. Scripture for Worship

A group of us met to discuss which scripture readings might be appropriate to the service. We discovered that it is very hard to find descriptions of equal, mutual sexual or romantic relationships in bible stories. Men and women were never equal partners in relationships, in biblical times. And, however real and vivid the friendship and commitment was between such pairs of biblical figures as David and Jonathan, or Ruth and Naomi, it is questionable whether we should try to see in them forerunners of today's lesbian and gay partnerships. Song of Songs, however, is one biblical book which offers some wonderful poetry of mutual delight and honor. Although the speakers in the Song are clearly male and female, there is no preoccupation there with marriage or child-bearing in the patriarchal system of the ancient world. It would be possible to find a passage from the Song suitable for the celebration of a same-sex couple.

We also looked for other readings that might speak to the themes of commitment, of celebration, of the goodness of creation, and of relationships that enhance rather than diminish community. Many of the readings associated with baptism fit such a description, and so do many associated with the Holy Spirit. They speak of God's overflowing goodness towards us, and about the way an individual (or a couple) receives the Spirit's gifts in order to help build up the community. We have a strong tradition of

biblical preaching at Good Shepherd, and we found that we were willing to allow considerable discretion to the preacher in the choice of readings, following these general principles.

8. The Celebration Emerges

In the Fall of 1994, Kathleen and Barbara came to the decision that they were willing to begin planning a service in which the community would honor their relationship and give thanks with them and for them. This meant that the liturgical writers and planners had to get words onto paper for discussion by the congregation and the couple. It meant that those with gifts of pastoral care and couple-counselling needed to meet and pray and plan how best to help Barbara and Kathleen through the practical, spiritual, and emotional stresses of preparation for the celebration. It also meant planning hospitality, both for the liturgy and for the party afterwards, on a larger scale than usual at Good Shepherd. This was not going to be a celebration given by the couple, nor by their immediate families. This was to be a celebration given by the whole church, in their honor. It would be an opportunity to bear witness to Kathleen's and Barbara's family and friends, and to the church at large, concerning the way we honor them as a couple, and concerning how deeply our community of faith is enriched by their presence among us.

We discovered that it is easier to devise good liturgical texts and actions with real people in mind than it is in the abstract. We discovered that the service would need some mildly didactic sections, in order to explain its purposes as we had identified them in the course of our discussions. Such teaching portions in the liturgy itself would relieve the preacher of the need to provide full explanations of the service; instead, the preacher would have space to speak a broader message of good news to all present.

We recognized that where people sit or stand in the course of a liturgy says a lot about who those people are in relation to everyone else present. We decided to have the couple begin and end the service sitting together in a pew along with the rest of

the congregation, in the midst of their people. The final blessing, too, would be given to the whole congregation as Kathleen and Barbara stood in their midst. It was also important, however, to see the couple as a couple, in the spotlight, to make them visible as a special unit within the community. This would happen when the time came for the couple to profess their love and commitment, and ask for the community's support.

We found a way of making the couple's ongoing relationship visible in our midst at the time of the Eucharistic prayer. We would ask them to dress the holy table at the time of the offertory with the tablecloth, candlesticks, flowers, crystal, and so on, that they use in their own home, replacing the usual ecclesiastical linen and vessels with Barbara and Kathleen's own household treasures.

We remembered our goal of including everyone in the service. Good Shepherd has a strong commitment to the full participation of our children in the Eucharist, and we therefore scheduled a children's talk as part of this Eucharist, immediately after the gospel reading, just as we schedule it every Sunday morning. In this case, the children's sermon included interaction between children, preacher, and congregation, enhancing the connections within the worshiping community. Members of the congregation told the children about who shared their homes, and how they would welcome guests to their table. We talked about the Holy Spirit's presence in all our homes, whether we live alone or with various kinds of family, and sang a line from a hymn as a prayer to the Spirit to be especially present in table hospitality. We explained to the children that the church has a dining table, too, where the Spirit is present as the community of faith shares a special meal to which all are invited. Kathleen and Barbara asked the children to help them prepare the altar at the appropriate time.

Close to the beginning of the service, we placed a special litany in which many vocations to intimacy, love, and fruitful relationship are named. Not only should each congregation member be able to hear himself or herself included in that prayer, but representative voices from the congregation would speak the

different petitions. The whole congregation would say other short prayers at the time when we recognized the couple special gifts to us, and after communion.

We found some words the couple could say to each other, and some dialogue they could enter into with the congregation. We found a way of indicating that this celebration was part of, not secret from, our membership in the wider Episcopal church, through our relationship with our bishop. Remembering our earlier commitment to richer and more truthful liturgical language we looked for alternative texts of the Eucharistic prayer that would be appropriate to Episcopal worship. Barbara and Kathleen chose hymns for the occasion, and one new hymn text was written especially for them and set to a familiar tune.

The bishop was consulted, the preacher set about the task of exegesis and proclamation, the catering committee planned the potluck and conscripted every member of the congregation for duty before, during or after the meal. Kathleen and Barbara sent out invitations, a volunteer prepared the service bulletin, the pastoral care team met with the couple several times to discuss community and commitment, and to help reduce general anxiety levels. Everyone prayed a lot.

We also thought about appropriate forms of record-keeping, and decided on a three-fold recording process: first, an entry in the regular register of services at Good Shepherd; second, a "certificate" which everyone present for the celebration could sign during the party afterwards, and which Barbara and Kathleen could keep as a memento, and third, a similar certificate with the signatures of the couple, the preacher, the deacon, and the priest presiding at the service, which would be kept in a special-purpose record book at the church. The signing of these documents was not part of the liturgy itself; it had administrative but not ritual significance.

We thought about the introductions and logistical instructions that would need to precede the service. If we were talking about hospitality as a vital gospel value, we needed to pay attention to the details of our liturgical hospitality, but we did not want to interrupt the flow of the service with many

announcements. We would introduce all the robed ministers by name before the liturgy began. We would mention local customs for standing or sitting to pray, sing, or listen. We would invite everyone present to participate in the worship to the extent that they felt comfortable -- an important factor at a service where some of the family members, friends, and co-workers of Barbara and Kathleen were of other faiths or other Christian traditions. And we explained the pattern we would use for the administration of communion.

9. The Rite We Used

At the bishop's request, the title of the celebration for Kathleen and Barbara emerged as "Honoring an Abiding Relationship and Giving Thanks for the Blessings the Couple Brings to the Church." The text of the rite is given below. Where the basic texts were taken from the 1979 Book of Common Prayer or the Supplemental Liturgical Texts (1991), they are not printed in full.

Honoring an abiding relationship, and giving thanks for the blessings the couple brings to the church: Kathleen Van Sickle and Barbara Hill

1. THE PEOPLE GATHER

The people standing, the presider says

Blessed be our God,
Eternal Wisdom, Living Word, and Holy Spirit:
People The Source of life and grace. Amen.

A hymn of praise is sung

The presider addresses the congregation

Welcome, in the name of Christ, to this celebration. You represent the communities of Good Shepherd Church, All Souls' Church, and the families, co-workers, and friends of Barbara Hill

and Kathleen Van Sickle.

We are here to do the church's work of praise and thanksgiving, in fellowship with our Bishop, and sharing in the joy of our sisters.

Kathleen and Barbara have been committed to one another for eight years now, in love and faithfulness and in shared discipleship. We give thanks today for the blessings we receive through the love they share.

Barbara and Kathleen ask us to pray for them, to stand with them, and to witness to them as they witness to us. Together, we rejoice in the goodness of God's creation shown forth as people love one another with body, mind, and soul. Together, we discover how Jesus Christ calls us to abundant life. And together, we recognize the gifts by which the Holy Spirit builds up the Christian community.

Let us pray.

(Silence is kept)

The deacon, assisted by other ministers, leads this litany, and the people respond, all standing

We praise you for your love,
Living God, creator of heaven and earth,
source of all being.
We praise you, O God.

We praise you for your love,
Lord Jesus Christ, Word made flesh,
crucified and risen.
We praise you, O God.

We praise you for your love,
Spirit of truth and unity,
life-giver.
We praise you, O God.

We praise you for your love,
Holy Trinity, holy and glorious,
holy and one.
We praise you, O God.

In all our loving we praise you, O God:

In children and parents,
learning together, and growing in grace,
we praise you, O God.

In friends old and new,
cherishing intimacy, and growing in grace,
we praise you, O God.

In neighbors and co-workers,

sharing resources, and growing in grace,
we praise you, O God.
In those who live alone,
fruitful in solitude, and growing in grace,
we praise you, O God.
In lover and beloved,
delighting in each other, and growing in grace,
we praise you, O God.
In all kinds of family,
generous in caring, and growing in grace,
we praise you, O God.
In Kathleen and Barbara,
joyful in partnership,
faithful in community,
and growing in grace,
we praise you, O God.

The presider concludes the litany with this collect

Eternal Wisdom, you make yourself known to all who desire you:
Bless Barbara and Kathleen, whose love we celebrate today, and
keep them in that friendship with you which is pure delight,
through our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

2. THE PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD

The people sit. Zephaniah 3:14-20 is read.

A hymn or psalm is sung or said

2 Corinthians 5:17-20 is read

All standing, alleluia is sung.

The deacon announces the Gospel, Luke 10:21-24

The children's talk and sermon follow.

3. HONORING AN ABIDING RELATIONSHIP

After the sermon, a hymn is sung

At the end of the hymn, the priest goes to the place where Kathleen and Barbara are sitting in the midst of the congregation, and brings them to stand before the people, facing the congregation, hand in hand. The priest addresses the congregation, saying

God calls all human beings to intimacy, to fruitfulness, and to mutual love. We respond to God's calling in many kinds of life-giving relationships, and the Holy Spirit sustains and strengthens us in our responses. In Kathleen and Barbara, the community of faith discerns a relationship that is both Spirit-gifted, and

life-giving.

We see two people who have established a household. It is a household marked by the hospitality that they show to one another and to those around them. Barbara and Kathleen therefore offer us a sign of the hospitality of God in Jesus Christ, who invites us to the feast shared by the whole company of heaven.

We see two people who enjoy and care for each other, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Their mutual delight is marked by the praise of God, their creator and redeemer. Barbara and Kathleen therefore offer us a sign of the grace of God made known in human flesh: of the grace of Jesus Christ, who was embraced and anointed by his friends, and who feeds us with his body and his blood.

And we see two people living as a community formed and sustained by the grace of God. It is a community marked by forgiveness, strength, and hope. Kathleen and Barbara therefore offer us a sign of the community that the whole church is called to be, a community born of faith in Jesus Christ and nourished by the Holy Spirit.

For all that God has revealed to our sisters, and through them to us, let us now give thanks.

Silence is kept

All say together

Holy God,
we thank you for calling Kathleen and Barbara
to live together,
and for blessing them
with faith and hope and love.
Give us hearts to recognize
your love alive in them.
Give us grace to accept the hospitality
you offer us in them.
Give us wisdom to grow with them
in the community of faith
for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Priest and deacon step to either side of the couple. Barbara and Kathleen turn to face each other. Each takes the other's hands. First one, then the other, says

N., in the midst of our people
and with the help of God,
I commit myself to you again today.
I love you.
I trust you.
I delight in you.

I will bear your burdens,
I will share your joys,
and I will go with you
wherever God calls us together.

They embrace each other. They then turn to the congregation and say together

Will you support us
in our commitment to each other?
People We will, with God's help.

Will you share our joys
and help to bear our burdens?
People We will, with God's help.

Will you bear witness
to the grace of Christ revealed in our loving?
People We will, with God's help.

The presider says

We are the body of Christ.
People The Spirit makes us one.

The couple says

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

The couple first exchange the greeting of peace, and then extend it throughout the congregation.

4. THE HOLY COMMUNION

All sit, while the couple prepare the holy table with fair linen, candles, flowers, communion vessels, and other adornments, and present the bread and wine for the communion. The couple will stand at the table with the priest and other ministers during the Great Thanksgiving.

A hymn is sung by all standing

The people remain standing for the Eucharistic prayer

The Lord's Prayer follows

The Presider breaks the consecrated bread

A period of silence is kept.

An anthem is sung

The Presider invites those present to Communion

The clergy, the couple, and other ministers as necessary receive the Sacrament and then distribute it to the people. During Communion, hymns may be sung as time permits

*After Communion, all stand and a hymn is sung.
While all are still standing, the Presider says*

Let us pray.

Presider and People

We thank you, God,
for the abundance you have offered us in this holy meal,
food and drink and life for all the world
in Jesus Christ.
Thank you for courage to share intimacy,
and strength to live faithfully.
Send us now into the world you love,
and give us grace to go thankfully and with joy,
in the power of your Spirit. Amen.

*The couple stand together in the midst of the congregation.
The Presider blesses all present, saying*

The love of the living God bear much fruit in you.
The truth of the living Word bear much fruit in you.
The gifts of the living Spirit bear much fruit in you.
And the blessing of our God, the holy and life-giving Trinity,
be upon you, now and for ever. Amen.

The deacon dismisses the congregation

10. The Sermon We Heard

A HOMILY FOR THE CELEBRATION OF AN ABIDING RELATIONSHIP

For Kathleen Van Sickle and Barbara Hill

Church of the Good Shepherd (4 December 1994)

Jay E. Johnson

Zephaniah 3:12-20

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Luke 10:21-24

The longing and desire of the human heart.

The hopes and dreams of God's people.

Our celebration this evening is about such lofty things as these; it's about what human beings truly long to see, what we truly long to hear.

Luke's Jesus says to his disciples, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For many prophets desired to see what you see – but didn't. Many prophets desired to hear what you hear – but didn't."

It seems we may have to revise our usual caricature of prophets as generally irritating, disagreeable, and divinely appointed nay-sayers. Luke's Jesus would have us believe that prophets give voice to the deepest longings of the human heart. "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see," Jesus says. Blessed are you who actually witness what God's people have desired for a very long time, what the prophets, for many generations, have only dreamed.

We have just heard such dreams from the ancient Hebrew prophet Zephaniah. To a people living in exile comes the promise: "Have no fear; I am bringing you home. From the distant margins, from the *Diaspora* of your exile, from your outcast state among the oppressors I am gathering you," says the Lord God, "and I am bringing you home."

"Sing!" Zephaniah says, "rejoice and exult with all your heart. For the Lord is in your midst, rejoicing over you with gladness, renewing you in love, turning all your shame into praise."

What is the desire and longing of the human heart? What are the hopes and dreams of God's people? Rather simple things, really: To love and be loved; to love without fear and to rejoice in our loving; to find and know that we have a home. These are the things we are celebrating here this evening, and in a very particular way. Kathleen and Barbara are signs for us; they are signs of love and prophets of hope.

Signs of love. In a society whose popular culture reduces love to fleeting moments of passion; that sells it like any other commodity; that buries it behind political slogans, we give thanks tonight for a different vision of love, something life-giving, something that rings true in our own hopes and dreams.

But let's be clear about this: The different vision of love we celebrate tonight does not reject passion. As Christians, we

need not be embarrassed or self-conscious about the flames of passion that draw us together. Indeed, passion can take root and flower. Passion can bring the deepest desire of the human heart to blossom and we dare to believe and proclaim boldly tonight that such desire is holy and God-given.

As Kathleen and Barbara have tended their relationship with care and patience, like gardeners with an eye to the inevitable seasons of change, the times for planting, for waiting, for nurturing and harvest, their friends have watched it grow and have taken great delight in its fruits. They have found and given thanks for finding in their love an abundance of hospitality and humor; of welcoming friend and stranger alike to their own high-hearted table of comfort and joy.

So we gather in this place tonight, we pray, and we celebrate the Eucharist for a rather simple reason: We believe that in such relationships God is truly present. We believe that Kathleen and Barbara are signs of the God who gathers us in love; of the God who rejoices over us with gladness; of the God who welcomes us to the table of love's feast without question or condition.

As signs of such love, however, Barbara and Kathleen are also prophets of hope. I suspect that few of us came here this evening intending to be prophets, least of all Barbara and Kathleen. If the Hebrew Scriptures are any indication, being a prophet is not usually a vocation of choice, but one of necessity: Come what may, the word *must* be spoken.

The particular love which is a sign for us tonight is still that love which dare not speak its name — if so, then please, not too loudly. But there comes a time when such love cannot keep silent — it must be spoken, it must be celebrated. For such is the nature of intimate commitments: They spill over, like a harvest too plentiful for a single basket; like a mighty but quiet river brimming over its banks; like the prophet who must give voice to the yearning of a people and speak the language of hope.

So it is for us this evening. We celebrate, but we also remember all those others who have, for so long, yearned to see what we see this evening, but haven't; all those who have longed

to hear what we hear this evening, but haven't. Yes, all those whose experience in our culture is one of exile, but especially tonight gay and lesbian people who hope, who dream, who long to find a home.

So we gather in this place, we pray, and we celebrate the Eucharist for another rather simple reason: We believe that through Barbara and Kathleen's relationship God makes the promise known. Exile is not forever; shame will turn into praise; and we have, even now, in the midst of an alien land, a place and a people we can call home.

Do I mean to suggest that their voices are the only ones of prophetic hope? Does all of this mean that Barbara and Kathleen manifest God's love perfectly and completely? Certainly not. Relationships are not perfect, nor are they ever complete. That too seems to be the point: To be more and more completely known for who we are and all the while loved more fully – that, surely, is part of what we mean by finding a "home".

So we celebrate tonight and we dare to speak of desires, hopes and dreams because of what we know about God. And what we know about God tonight is that God makes all things new. We heard it from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. God's passion is reconciliation; God's continual work is making a new creation from the age-old hostilities that divide us; from the factions and labels and politics that keep us sequestered in fear; from the divisions that make an exiled people long for those pastures where no one shall make us afraid.

We heard about God's passion from Paul and we see it here tonight. We see it in the diversity of this congregation which Kathleen and Barbara's relationship has brought together: In the people of Good Shepherd and All Souls' parish, in clergy and laity, in young and old, in single and married, in gay and straight. We see it in a community that has struggled together with its bishop to find the language and the symbols and the rites for celebrating what we know is true and holy and good.

So, as they should be, passionate love and reconciliation are linked for us this evening as we speak the language of prophetic hope. For wherever and whenever any of us love one another and rejoice in our loving, whenever we struggle to build a home and set the table of hospitality, whenever we speak the language of hope for an exiled people, God is there. God the Holy Spirit is there, bringing forth a new creation.

So blessed are you – you, here this evening – blessed are all of us who see what others long to see, who hear what others yearn to hear: From the distant margins, from the borders of exile, from the land of outcasts God gathers us together. God brings us home.

Sing, therefore! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, say the prophets. The doorway is flung open; even now the fires are lit and the hearth is warmed; the table is being set, and the feast is spread out before you.

God is bringing us home – a home which doesn't look or feel so very different from this celebration tonight.

Amen.

11. Our Experience of the Celebration

Words on paper, whether the text and rubrics of a rite or the outline of a sermon, can only hint at what really happens at a liturgical celebration. Much of what happens is seen in people's faces, and felt in people's hearts, and spoken over the potluck that follows the church service. The Good Shepherd congregation met on the Sunday following our celebration of Kathleen and Barbara's relationship, to talk about some of these less tangible things, and to find words to describe what the service had meant to us and to others. Here are some of the fruits of that discussion.

The excitement, the eager anticipation of all who gathered for the celebration was unmistakable. People were hungry for the

celebration, and perhaps had hardly known just how hungry they were for it, until it was actually happening. People visiting Good Shepherd for the service commented upon how warmly welcomed they felt, and how the sense of love and community had been very strong. This sense of community was perceptible even to "outsiders" who had not been part of the planning process but were visiting from other churches or from no church background. One visitor wrote: "I thought it was inspirational. The electricity, the excitement within the church was more than at any other service I have attended in the past fifty years. I had a very good feeling during and after the service which I have never experienced before at a religious ceremony. I am not a member of any church, but the effectiveness of this service may change my mind from my current minimum participation to something greater."

We talked about how good it was to see Barbara's and Kathleen's family members, friends, and co-workers present at the service, supporting the couple, and becoming aware of how the church supports the couple.

The service was, as one member described it, "an experience of church in action." It worked in part because so many people had been involved in its development. It worked in part because things that began as limitations (for example, not wanting it to be a version of the marriage service, and therefore including neither forms of consent, nor vows echoing the marriage service, nor exchanges of rings, nor language implying change of legal or ecclesial status for the couple as individuals or together, nor special blessings for the couple alone) were transformed into virtues. For example, the blessing offered to all, at the end of the service, with Barbara and Kathleen standing in the midst of the people, was experienced as a very moving moment. Another important feature was the explicit connection with the wider church; one member wrote: "I loved the statement, "We are here to do the church's work. . . ." Since I feel strongly about catholicity, the "in fellowship with our bishop" clause was very important to me."

Many of us spoke of the ways in which the service had enabled us to feel fully included. We have quite a variety of stories to

tell about how alienated it is possible to feel at some marriage services, when being part of a couple seems to be the be-all and end-all of human existence. Of this service, however, one of us said, "Everyone's commitment was acknowledged and recognized, and all of us were reminded of our own commitments. My singleness wasn't left out."

Kathleen talked about her anxiety prior to the service, and how that cloud of anxiety dissipated as she stood in front of us, looking at her community, and realizing how we love her. Never in her life, she said, has she felt so much love. At the very time she was about to profess the love she shares with Barbara, she recognized the depth of the love she shares with this whole community.

This basic analogy between couple and community, an analogy in which the bonds in one reflect and reinforce the bonds in the other, seems to have been well and truly conveyed in the course of the celebration. "Analogy" is probably too weak a word to describe our experience of the connection; "sacrament" comes closer. One member wrote: "The event seemed genuinely a celebration of the whole household of God in its constituent households, with Barbara and Kathleen as the sacrament of that grace."

One ritual moment in the course of the liturgy that evidently spoke very clearly to this connection occurred when the couple prepared the altar prior to the celebration of the Holy Communion. The altar, then, was Kathleen and Barbara's table, it was the Church's table, and it was God's table, all brought together sacramentally. Ordinary, everyday table furnishings with individual history and family significance added greatly to the richness of the ceremony. One person said: "It told me about what Barbara and Kathleen's relationship is, and what it will be, and about what I want my own household to be." Another said that, during the planning period when the table-setting process had been suggested as a possible part of the ceremony, he had thought it was the corniest idea he had ever heard. At the service, however, he experienced it not as corny, but as deeply moving. We noted, too, that the children were transformed at that moment of the

service into solemn participants, as they assisted the couple in preparing the table. One member said: "I hope I never again set a festival table for guests at home without remembering what that moment in the liturgy was like." Another pointed out that the message of hospitality in community proclaimed by the liturgy was reinforced by the way Good Shepherd congregation members waited on the visitors during the potluck after the service. All of us shared this ministry in the parish hall, creating a very different model of hospitality than would have been offered by a commercially catered reception.

We recognized, too, that the service was a time when God did great things for us. When we responded to the couple's requests for our support with "We will, with God's help," it was a powerful moment, with a strong sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. None of us, as a group or as individuals, could do this in our own strength. In services like this, we remember that we love each other and that we trust that the Holy Spirit will be there to make it work for us. Careful preparation notwithstanding, the main thing is to get out of the way and let the Holy Spirit do the work.

It seemed, as we talked about our experience, that we got the kind of celebration we had hoped to get, but that it came to us more richly and deeply than we had dared to hope. The messages of hospitality, embodiment, and community that we hoped the liturgy would proclaim were indeed proclaimed. The community celebrating the liturgy was definitely strengthened by the experience. The couple did receive a longed-for embrace from the community of faith. They did stand in the midst of the community, offering the blessings of their relationship to us, and seeing us receive them gladly. We did bear witness, beyond the usual Good Shepherd congregation, to our sense of solidarity with one another, and to the mutual love that grows among us. We do hope to have further such celebrations for couples at Good Shepherd, as and when life-giving "couple" relationships are discerned in our midst and seem to call for liturgical recognition. We did produce something that we are proud to offer to the wider church, as our gift to other communities of faith seeking ways to recognize liturgically the

couples in their midst. In all these things, we are profoundly thankful for what the Spirit has been doing with us.

12. Our Questions

As we offer this document to the wider church through our bishop, we conclude with some of the questions that arise from our work and from our reflection upon it.

1. What are the circumstances under which we at Good Shepherd will continue using this kind of celebration? And what will be the ways in which we bring to other aspects of our life in the church and the world the love and acceptance of which this service has made us aware?

2. What can be learned by a detailed comparison of this rite with the marriage rite in the Book of Common Prayer? In what circumstances would a rite like this one be a more realistic, truthful, or genuine celebration for other kinds of couples, including, for example, heterosexual couples who have been living together for some considerable time, or who have made use of civil marriage provisions?

3. Could we have a shorter, snappier name for the service? "Honoring an abiding relationship, and giving thanks for the blessings a couple brings to the church" says very well what the service does, but it is rather a mouthful. Perhaps a sub-title -- "Celebration of a relationship"? "Celebrating N. and N. in the community of faith"? Other suggestions?

4. How can we help the wider church to move away from "ghettoizing" some couples and "mainstreaming" others, liturgically, based on sexual orientation alone? Our question is well focused in the words of one congregation member, who wants to avoid a scenario in which the church might appear to be saying in a patronizing way: "Okay, some gay couples who've been together a

very long time do attain the level of Christian wonderfulness we automatically expect from straight newlyweds, so I guess we can reward them with an obscure liturgy acknowledging their existence."

5. How can we offer to other communities of faith the wisdom into which we have grown during our work on this celebration? How can we tell our story to others, so that they can look at their own pastoral and liturgical context and see appropriate ways of celebrating the gifts of the couples in their midst, especially but not only their lesbian and gay couples?

6. If this rite has the coherence and integrity that we think it has, and if it does relate the couple and the community ritually in ways that enrich both, thereby proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to all present, how might it become a resource for those responsible for official liturgical developments in the Episcopal Church?