



DIOCESE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

STATEMENT FROM THE BISHOP ON THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX UNIONS

A number of inquiries have been made concerning the position of the Bishop of New Hampshire on the blessing of same-sex unions. In response to those questions, the following reflections and guidelines are offered to the clergy of the diocese.

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, makes no provision for the blessing of same-sex unions. The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, The Blessing of a Civil Marriage and An Order for Marriage in THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER are clearly intended for heterosexual unions and are, therefore, not appropriate for use in blessing homosexual relationships, although they may serve as models for the development of such ceremonies and portions of them may be adapted for that purpose. Likewise, the Order for the Blessing of a Home in THE BOOK OF OCCASIONAL SERVICES is not intended for the blessing of personal unions or partnerships, but it may serve that purpose with little or no adaptation.

Until such time as the Standing Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church may, with the consent of the General Convention, offer trial or permanent ceremonies for this purpose, clergy planning to provide such blessings will have to improvise appropriate ceremonies. Unless or until such happens, I propose the following guidelines:

1. It is the work of the Church, and especially of its priests, to bear witness to the Good News of the Gospel and, in so doing, to pronounce God's blessing wherever appropriate. Although priests ought to be careful not to pronounce God's blessing on persons in circumstances where it would not appear to be appropriate, I believe that the greater danger will generally lie in withholding God's blessing in situations where it may be sought and especially needed. In a word, we ought to be more ready to bless than to curse, and the latter may, indeed, be the effect of withholding blessing.

2. I myself have blessed same-sex unions where I felt such blessing was an appropriate expression of God's love and support for God's children. I have also given pastoral support to clergy contemplating such actions. Together with other clergy and lay people, I have been involved in developing proposed ceremonies for such blessings for submission to the Standing Liturgical Commission. In the meantime, the BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER states that "...for other special occasions for which no service or prayer has been provided in this Book, the bishop may set forth such forms as are fitting to the occasion" (p.13). At this time I do not intend "to set forth such forms", but I do wish to be of assistance to the clergy in this matter in the following ways:

a. exercise pastoral responsibility and support for those contemplating such actions, as well as for those who feel they cannot in good conscience do so;

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- b. be of whatever practical help may come out of my own experience;
- c. help those involved to realize that the church's blessing goes beyond the discretion of an individual priest even in situations in which the Church Catholic is not of a common mind. If we were able to act only when the Church Catholic is of a common mind, we would not be able to act at all. We are living; in the meantime, a reality that is at once both very frustrating and enormously exciting.

3. In our zeal to do the right thing for people who are particularly vulnerable, we must remember that we are dealing with individuals and that not every same-sex union is potentially beneficial any more than every heterosexual union is. The same thought, care and counsel should be given to the former as to the latter, and the same parameters of responsibility be applied.

4. The blessing of same-sex unions should not be referred to as "marriage". Although there are obvious similarities, the former is something different from traditional and prevailing understandings of marriage.

5. Quite apart from religious blessing of unions, the Episcopal Church's General Convention resolution of 1976 speaks to the need to establish civil and legal rights and protections for those who enter into same-sex unions, regardless of the religious context and nature of these, or lack thereof, or of our personal approval or disapproval, to wit: "...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." I believe this should apply to such matters as health, retirement and death benefits for same-sex partners, as well as other protections routinely given to heterosexual partners.

The matter of same-sex relationships and their blessing by the Church is extremely complicated and conflicted. We cannot sit by and do nothing until consensus is achieved. After nearly 2000 years, there is not consensus in the Church Catholic about the nature and purpose of marriage or about the role of sexuality in human experience. The witness of the church is least needed in areas of human life about which there is little confusion or disagreement. The compassion and guidance of the church are most needed where the answers are not clear, as in this matter.

Revised: November 25, 1996

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