

Final Version

LETTER FROM THE RIGHT REVEREND ORRIS G. WALKER, JR.
EPISCOPAL BISHOP OF LONG ISLAND

Dear Friends in Christ:

At the November 2003 Diocesan Convention I ^{asked} ~~placed a charge on~~ the Diocesan Commission on Liturgy and Church Music to develop a rite for the blessing of same-sex unions. In the time since convention it became my desire to extend the pastoral care often sought to include other types of relationships that our society confronts. **I think here of our elderly population who often choose not to enter marriage because of the loss of certain financial benefits, or of people who act as care-givers to each other, as well as same gender people who seek to covenant their relationship.**

Enclosed is a *Rite for Celebrating the Blessing of a Covenantal Relationship*, which I am authorizing for use in the Diocese of Long Island. **This is not a marriage ceremony**, but a blessing of permanent and faithful commitments between people so that they may have the support and encouragement of the church in their lives together under God. **No priest or parish is obligated to use this rite.**

In taking this step, the Diocese is affirming our belief that **all people, heterosexual and homosexual, are created in the image and likeness of God.** And that by their baptism all people have a full and equal claim upon the love, acceptance, concern and pastoral care of the Church. The gospel of Jesus Christ compels all believers to guard against any and all forms of human injustice and to affirm that all persons are brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

Homosexual persons, like all persons, take strength and comfort from the overwhelming witness of Scripture to the unconditional love of God. The Holy Scriptures urge the Church to put into practice the compassion of Jesus towards all who suffer prejudice, discrimination and rejection because of their particular human differences and uniqueness. The *Rite of Blessing* is one response to that clear scriptural imperative.

Any couple, homosexual or heterosexual, who seeks this service of the church should be adequately prepared and instructed by the clergy beforehand, and supported and sustained by the Christian community afterwards. In offering its care in this way, the Church recognizes that all couples face the same challenges and share the same responsibilities in living out the costly demands of Christian love. Our purpose is to encourage and strengthen fidelity and mutual supportiveness in the varied forms of family life on which our wider society demands.

Thank you for your willingness to extend the Church's pastoral ministry in this way. I ~~also~~ wish to thank the Diocesan Commission on Liturgy and Music for their work in the design of this liturgy. May God grant joy and healing to all.

In Christ,

The Right Reverend ~~Orris G. Walker Jr.~~
Bishop of Long Island

→ I also wish to thank the canon theologians of the diocese for their guidance, and critique. and input. And most importantly

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A RITE FOR CELEBRATING THE BLESSING OF COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Concerning the Blessing of Covenantal Relationships in the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, New York

In the absence of rites prepared for national use, it seemed prudent that the diocesan bishop provide liturgical rites to address the needs of the diocese. The practice of the blessing of covenantal relationships is subject to the direction of the bishop and the policies of the diocese.

Such blessings are a service of the Church. It is appropriate, therefore, that they should be solemnized before God in the body of the church and in the presence of friends and family and the congregation of the church.

Notice must be given to the priest in charge of a community at least thirty days before the proposed date for the blessing. No priest will be required to preside at such a blessing. Similarly, no blessing should take place where the community has not been prepared for such a liturgical act.

It shall be the duty of the priest, when application is made, to inquire if there is any impediment to the blessing. It shall also be the duty of the priest to provide appropriate means of preparation and support, as directed by diocesan policy, for the covenantal promises and commitment for which the couple are preparing.

At least one member of the couple entering into this commitment service must be a baptized Christian. It is preferable that both members of the couple be active congregants in which the blessing takes place.

The registration of the service shall be duly entered into the Parish register.

Concerning the Service

Blessing is a common feature of Christian worship. For centuries the church has blessed people, places and things. Every prayer of blessing is thanksgiving for creation and redemption offered in petition for the fulfillment of God's purpose in the world.

All human relationships have the potential to be the result of God's purpose. Regardless of the specific characteristics of the relationship, the act of blessing does not make the relationship more holy but rather, in giving thanks to God and invoking God's holy name, releases the relationship to realize its full potential as an expression of God's love and peace.

The act of blessing recognizes the pre-existent reality of the relationship; confers the community's authority upon the recipients to conduct themselves as formal

and public participants in such a relationship; establishes a communal context of responsibility, accountability and privilege; and petitions God to endow the partners with all such grace and strength necessary to fulfill the vows and commitments being made.

This Rite of Blessing is a public service of the church in the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island and is celebrated before God in the body of the church and in the presence of friends, family and the congregation. Friends and family members are encouraged to participate in the service as fully as possible.

All matters relating to the conduct of this service shall be in accordance with the liturgical policy and practice of the local community and the diocese.

It is desirable that the order of service be incorporated into the Eucharist wherever possible.

Policy for Eligibility

In order to request this Service of Blessing, each member of the couple must:

1. Be free to enter into such a covenant. That is, they must not be in an existing covenantal relationship, including marriage.
2. Enter the service with an understanding that the relationship is to be exclusive of any other partners and have the expectation of permanence.
3. Satisfy the requirements of any previous relationship. This involves appropriate support of dependents from any previous relationship and the appropriate dissolution and meeting of obligations that arise from the same.
4. Participate in a series of counseling sessions with the priest who will preside at the service in preparation for entering into this spiritual bond of covenantal love.
5. Be willing to seek the pastoral guidance of the parish priest if this covenant is ever imperiled.

THE CELEBRATION AND BLESSING OF A COVENANT

The Gathering of the Community

*As the community of faith gathers, a hymn, anthem, or canticle may be sung.
Instrumental music may also be played*

The presider welcomes the community.

Presider: The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

People: **And also with you.**

We are here today so that *N.* and *N.* may bear witness to their love for each other, and so that we may share in their happiness and joy. We have come to witness this exchange of promises, because we believe that God, who is love and truth, sees into all our hearts and longs to bless us, and to bless *N.* and *N.*, recognizing their love and accepting the offering they are making of themselves.

It is written that the greatest of all things, the most wonderful experience in the world, is love. *N.* and *N.*, into your lives has entered a deep and lasting love, and you have asked all of us to help you celebrate and affirm that reality.

A Hymn of Praise may follow

Here follows one of the following collects. [Additional collects in the Appendix].

The Risen Christ be with you. *Or* The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

O God our Maker and Lover of the heavens and earth, you have commanded us to love each other as Christ loved us and to bear each other's burdens and share each other's joys. Look with favor on *N.* and *N.* whom you have brought together in love. Grant them faithfulness, wisdom, and strength. Protect them from all trouble and danger, and bring them together to the heavenly banquet of your eternal reign, through Jesus Christ, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Or

Blessed are you, Holy One, for you are pleased to dwell among us and to fill our lives with your presence. May *N.* and *N.*, who seek your blessing

upon their covenant, be filled with your love. May their life together be to us a sign of your promised reign of justice and peace. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

THE MINISTRY OF GOD'S WORD

Two or three readings, including a Gospel reading, shall normally be read. If the Holy Eucharist is celebrated, then a Gospel reading must be included. Members of the family and friends may be invited to read the lessons. It is appropriate to respond to a reading with a psalm, canticle, hymn, anthem, instrumental music, or silence.

The following readings are appropriate for the celebration of a covenant. Other readings may be chosen in consultation with the priest.

Ruth 1: 16-18 (where you dwell, I shall dwell...)

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13 (the voice of my beloved...)

Song of Solomon 8: 6-7 (set me as a seal upon your heart...)

1 Samuel 18:1-3; 20: 16-17, 42a (Jonathan made a covenant with David...)

Ecclesiastes 4: 9 – 12 (two are better than one...)

Psalm 67

Psalm 100: 1-5

Psalm 107: 1-9

Psalm 111

Psalm 112:1-6

Psalm 126: 1-3

Psalm 133:1-3

Psalm 139: 1-18

Psalm 145

Psalm 146

Psalm 149

Romans 12: 1-2, 9-21 (let love be genuine)

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13 (love is patient, love is kind...)

2 Corinthians 5: 16-20 (in Christ there is a new creation...)

Galatians 5: 13-14, 22-26 (called to freedom...fruits of the spirit...)

1 John 3: 18-24 (let us love in truth and action...)

Colossians 3: 12b-16a (Be clothed in sincere compassion...)

1 John 4: 7-12 (beloved, let us love one another...)

Matthew 5: 1-16 or Luke 6: 20-23 (beatitudes...)

Matthew 22: 35-40 (love the lord your God...)

John 2: 1-12a (The feast at Cana...)

John 15: 9-17 (This is my commandment that you love one another...)

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

At the conclusion of the readings from Hebrew Scripture and the New Testaments writings other than the Gospels, the reader says,

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.
Thanks be to God.

All stand for the Gospel. The Deacon (or in the absence of a deacon, the priest) says:

The Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ according to...
Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

At the conclusion of the Gospel:

The Gospel of Christ.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

The Sermon or Homily

The Covenant Blessing

The priest invites the couple to stand in the full view of the gathered community and addresses the couple in these or similar words:

A covenant is an ancient form of promise, a public declaration of commitment that binds people in an enduring relationship. Holy Scripture tells of God's covenant with human beings.

This covenant with Israel was the basis of the people's liberation from slavery and exile. God's covenant with the followers of Jesus brings us into a new community where there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but one people united in Christ.

All our covenants with family and friends are signs of God's faithfulness and love. They are living expressions of God's promises to us and sources of hope to others.

The Examination

We gather to witness and to bless the public commitment of *N.* and *N.* to such a covenant.

N. and *N.*, do you believe God has called you into a life-long covenant of love and fidelity?

We do believe.

Will you live together in love?

We will, with God's help.

Will you be faithful one to another?

We will, with God's help.

Will you support one another in love so that you may both grow into maturity of faith in Jesus Christ?

We will, with God's help.

Will you do all in your power to make your life together a witness to the love of God in the world?

We will, with God's help.

The Pledge

The presider invites the couple to stand in full view of the congregation and to face each other. Taking each other by the hand(s), each says to the other in turn:

N., I give myself to you. I love you, trust you, and delight in you. I will share your burdens and your joys. I will go with you wherever God calls us. This is my solemn promise.

Or

N., today I make a covenant with you to be my partner in life. Whatever life may bring, I will love and care for you always.

Affirmation of Support

The presider then addresses the community as follows:

You, who witness to this covenant, will you support them in the promises they have made?

We will.

Will you celebrate the goodness of God's grace evident in their lives?

We will.

Will you stand by them, encourage, guide, and pray for them in times of trouble and distress?

We will.

Do you give them your support and blessing?

We do.

N. and *N.* have been duly prepared to enter into this covenantal relationship. They have exchanged solemn promises, and in token of this, they now exchange symbols of those promises. We pray with them that by God's help they may fulfill God's purpose for the whole of their earthly life together.

Let us ask God to bless these symbols of the covenant promises made this day. *(Silence)* Blessed are you, God of steadfast love, source of our joy and end of our hope. Bless these symbols of love given and received through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

***N.* I give you this _____, as a sign of our covenant and my love founded in the love God has for us.**

The Blessing

O God our Creator, lover of heaven and earth, you have taught us to love each other as Christ loved us, to bear each other's burdens, and to share each other's strengths. Look with favor upon *N.* and *N.*, whom you have brought together in love. Grant them sincere love and unfailing strength. Protect them in their lives and in their work, and lead them with us and all creation into your realm of justice and peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Bless, O Lord, this relationship that it may be a sign of your love to this broken world. May *N.* and *N.* in their life together be a blessing to us and the whole community. This we ask through Jesus Christ, our Savior. **Amen**

Or

May you flourish together and rejoice in your friends. May God grant you the good that endures and bring you to everlasting joy. And the blessing of the Living God, The Source, the Word and the Spirit, One God, be with you now and forever. **Amen.**

Prayers of the People

The Prayers of the People may be led by friend(s) or member(s) of a family of the couple, or by another minister.

Deacon or other minister: Let us remember before God this couple, this community and the whole world, saying, "Hear our prayer."

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

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

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

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

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

I ask your prayers for all human communities, for justice, peace, reconciliation and a respect for the dignity of every human being throughout the world. Pray for all people throughout the world.

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

I ask your prayers for our country, for those who govern and for all in authority that they may work diligently for an end to prejudice and racism. Pray for justice and peace in our own land.

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

I ask your prayers for the concerns of our neighborhoods, for the people of this city and state, and for the yearnings of our hearts which we now present to God. Pray for our community.

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

I ask your prayers for those we love easily and for those with whom we struggle, for those different from us and for those familiar to us, that we might be instruments of God's peace in all our relationships. Pray for an end to hatred.

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

I ask your prayers for those who suffer. Pray for those who are sick, those who are poor, those who are destitute, those who are unemployed, homeless, lonely, bereaved, who struggle with addiction, those who are victims of violence, hatred and intolerance. Pray for those who bear pain in our world.

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

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

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

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

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

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

O God, source of all life, **hear our prayer.**

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

The Exchange of Peace

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

or

The peace of Christ be always with you. **And also with you.**

The couple greet each other and then greet their families and friends.

If there is no celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the liturgy continues with the Lord's Prayer and the Blessing and Dismissal.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

During the preparation of the bread and wine, a hymn, canticle, or psalm may be sung or instrumental music played.

Any of the Great Thanksgiving Prayers in the BCP 1979 or EOW (Enriching our Worship – General Convention 1997) are appropriate for this occasion. If a proper preface is needed, then the following may be used.

... For you are gracious, Creator of heaven and earth; you are the source of light and life for all your creation, you made all of us in your own image, and call us to new life in Jesus Christ our Savior. ...

The Lord's Prayer

Presider: With confidence in God's love for us let us pray as the Savior taught us: **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial,**

and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

The Breaking of the Bread

The disciples knew the Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread and in the sharing of the cup. **The bread which we break and the cup which we drink is communion in the body and blood of Christ.**

The gifts of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

The Communion

The presider invites all baptized, to come forward and share in the Holy Eucharist.

The Post-communion thanksgiving

One of the prayers from the BCP 1979 or EOW may be used or either of these options.

Let us pray. **Gracious God, may N. and N., who are joined together in these holy mysteries, become one in heart and soul. May they live in fidelity and peace and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Or

Let us pray. **Eternal God, whose Son at supper prayed that his disciples might be one, as he is one with you: draw us closer to him, that in common love and obedience to you we may be united to one another in the fellowship of the one Spirit, that the world may believe that he is Lord, to your eternal glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Or

Let us pray. **God of power, whose Holy Spirit renews your people in the bread and wine we bless and share: may the boldness of that life-giving Spirit transform us, and the gifts of the Spirit equip us to serve and worship you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

THE BLESSING & DISMISSAL

The presider may bless the people. .

Priest: May God preserve and keep you and the Lord mercifully look with favor upon you, filling 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. **Amen.**

Or

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost be among you and remain with you always. **Amen**

The deacon or other minister, dismisses the people in these or similar words.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

APPENDIX

Acknowledgments: Texts for this service have been adapted from:

Anglican Diocese of New Westminster, Anglican Church of Canada. *A Rite for the Celebration of Gay and Lesbian Covenants*.

All Saints Church, Pasadena, CA, Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. *Same-Gender Blessing Liturgy*.

Enriching the Liturgy: Prayers and Sentences with the New Lectionary. Cambridge: SPCK. 1998.

Report to the Bishop of Long Island from the Commission on Liturgy and Church Music, the Rev. Canon Denis C. Brunelle, Chair.

William G. Storey. *A Book of Prayer: For Gay and Lesbian Christians*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company. 2002. pp.129-137.

Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild. *Human Rites: Worship resources for an age of change*. London: Mowbray. 1995. p. 98.

Supplemental Collects for p. 4

Searching and saving God, whose unfailing love alone can satisfy our longing, in your mercy you befriend those who wander in loneliness and shame, those oppressed because of difference, those who do not know the value of their unique and sacred gift. By your Holy Spirit you awaken in them the dignity of being human and the responsibility of embodied love, as perfected by Jesus Christ, who loved and gave himself for us all, showing us the way to intimacy with you and with one another. We offer praise and thanks to you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giver, for your love endures for ever. *Amen*.

Or

Blessed are you, loving God, for you awaken our desire for companionship and our hope for community with you and with one another. In your mercy you call us out of solitary darkness and redeem us to love you with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Renew in us a

sense of true belonging and call us to love our neighbor as ourselves. We pray that the covenant of faithfulness and love we celebrate today will reflect your unending faithfulness and great love for the world. May *N.* and *N.* so love one another that they may be a blessing to you and all whom they encounter. We ask these things in thanksgiving and praise to you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, one God now and for ever.
Amen.

Supplemental Blessing for p. 7

The presider and sponsors may lay hands on the couple, who stand or kneel. If desired, the couple may stand with right hands joined upon the Gospel Book or a Bible.

The presider then says one of the following blessings:

Let us pray. *(silence)* We give thanks and praise to you, O gracious God, for your unfailing love and wonderful deeds among us: for the splendor of creation, the beauty of this world, the mystery of our lives and the surprises of human love. We give you thanks and praise for *N.* and *N.*, because you create in them the desire for intimacy and companionship, calling them out of isolation and exile, strengthening them against prejudice and fear, and embracing them in a family of friends and loved ones.

Pour out your abundant blessing upon *N.* and *N.* May they grow in love for one another and for all your creation. Lead them into accomplishments that satisfy and delight. Grant that in the years ahead they may be faithful to the promises they make this day, and that in the strength of the Holy Spirit they may grow together in the love, joy, and peace of our Savior Jesus Christ.

**All: Blessed are you, O gracious God, source of all love, now and for ever.
Amen.**