

## ***Draft Guidelines for the Blessing of a Covenant between Two Persons of the Same Gender***

### Introduction – Concerning the Maine State Referendum on Civil Marriage Equality

The decision by the people of Maine not to uphold the state law legalizing same gender marriage has made it unlikely that marriage will be available to same gender couples in Maine for some time.

Earlier this year I called together a small study group to work with me in crafting guidelines for use in congregations where same gender couples might seek the support and blessing of their church for their relationships. The study group has determined that our Diocese would be helped by a thorough conversation about the nature and meaning of marriage, and will be proposing such at our upcoming Convention.

In the meantime, I have been asked to create interim guidelines which may be used by the clergy as we all continue to wrestle with the issue. The guidelines listed below take advantage of the work that was done during the period leading up to the referendum.

### Some Reflections on the Theology of the Covenant of Marriage

Although the Blessing of a Covenant between two persons of the same gender is not marriage, the standards to which we should hold the partners in the relationship are the same. The Church calls same gender couples to the same vocation to which we call heterosexual couples.

The Episcopal Church understands marriage to be a reflection both of God's intentions in creation and of Christ's relationship with the church.

Marriage is intended to reflect God's desire that people should be made whole by being joined to an Other. Although each person is whole in his or herself, there is a greater transcendence, a greater wholeness, to be found in reaching beyond oneself to an Other. Thus God, in one story in Genesis, created male and female as equals, and in the other, created *adam*, the earthling, and drew an *ezer*, a helper, a companion, from the earthling. In marriage we believe there is the joining of fit companions to create a new wholeness, a new being.

We also understand marriage to be an expression of the body of Christ, a relationship of mutual self-offering on behalf of the other. A marriage covenant creates the smallest Christian community, and its purpose is to help the participants grow up into Christ. That growth, that self-transcendence, is described in the marriage service in three ways: mutual joy, help and comfort, and, if it is God's will, the creation of families. I understand joy to be participation in God's joy in creation and God's joy in our abundant life. Help and comfort is, I think, self-evident. And the creation of families means, whether by procreation or adoption, the bringing of children into the joyous and mutually supportive community created by the parents.

Marriage thus expresses the goal, in intimate and familial terms, for all Christian community and the standard by which we measure all human relationships.

There is, of course, the question of whether an Other can be found in a person of the same gender. Are male and female the only God-created differences that are joined again in marriage? That's a part of the current debate. For myself, I believe there are other God-created differences and among them are race, culture, family of origin, personality, age and sexual orientation. In the joining of two persons, there are many, often profound, differences that pull us beyond ourselves.

What I'm discussing here is an ideal of marriage. The reality, as all of us know, is marred by human weakness and sinfulness. Even successful marriages require a great deal of hard work, a lifetime of practice, and a capacity to forgive self and Other.

### Guidelines for the Blessing of Same Gender Covenant

With the forgoing in mind, I offer the following as guidelines for work with same gender couples.

- i. My expectation is that our primary work will be with faithful members of our own congregations.
- ii. There is no expectation on my part that any priest or deacon should or must preside at a service for same gender couples or for any couple, for that matter. As is the case with marriage, the decision to preside is a matter of the sole discretion of the priest or deacon who has been asked to preside. No reason need be given for refusal to preside.
- iii. You do not need my permission to preside at the blessing of a same gender covenant. You are in the best position to make that pastoral judgment.
- iv. Before any service of the blessing of the covenant of a same gender couple, I ask that the leadership of the parish be fully consulted. Clergy should honestly and sensitively address the culture of the r congregations.
- v. Couples must undergo the same regimen of pre-covenant counseling currently required of heterosexual couples. There should be no shortcuts. Pre-covenant issues for same gender couples are much like those of heterosexual couples, although same gender couples may feel a particular vulnerability in the our currently charged environment. Province I has produced an excellent guide to assist clergy in counseling same gender couples. That guide is available through my office.
- vi. I expect your normal standards and policies regarding fees and use of the facilities would apply.
- vii. As is the case for marriage, one member of the couple must be baptized Christian.
- viii. If either member of the couple has been previously married and divorced, the scrutiny called for in Canon I.19.3 is required. I will want to see the appropriate forms. For per-

sons who have previously lived in legal civil unions or covenanted relations with other persons, but for whom divorce is not a legal option, I ask you to pursue a similar discipline, especially in regard to minor children. You need to bring your best judgment to bear, and I will be available for consultation.

- ix. *The Book of Common Prayer* may **not** be used for the blessing of same gender covenants. Alternative liturgical resources are available in several places and links to those resources may be found on the Diocese of Maine website. *The Book of Common Prayer* and *Enriching our Worship* may be used for the Celebration of Holy Eucharist.
- x. The covenant service may take place in the church. **If the service occurs in another place, it should still be recorded in the service book.**

#### Transparency and Accountability

Please inform me of your intention to preside at a service of blessing. I ask you to keep a small confidential record of each such service listing the date, place, church where the couple worship, rite used, and source of rite. Please do not include the names of the couple. I will provide a standard report form and will compile your reports into a diocesan report. I want to honor my obligation to be accountable to the larger church.

#### Closing Thoughts

We continue to be in a process of conversation with the rest of the church. It is important that we honor that process and exercise our pastoral care with integrity. Our work may provide the church with helpful experience and insight, but only as we are careful, thoughtful, compassionate and mutually supportive of one another. You will undoubtedly have many questions. I am open to specific and private conversations about all these matters. About any number concerns, I may not have a certain response, but I'm confident that, with God's help, we can work it out together.

Please keep the whole church in your prayers as we together seek to be faithful to God's call in this work.

+Stephen T. Lane

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