

The Diocese of Southeast Florida

Pastoral Guidelines for

Blessing of Civil Marriages

Between Same-Gendered Couples

Fall 2010

Introduction and Background:

The Book of Common Prayer declares that the “mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” (BCP p. 855). Through the power of the Holy Spirit conferred in Baptism, all members of the Church are called to this ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18) and empowered for a life of justice, forgiveness and endless compassion for all persons and conditions of life (BCP p. 304-305). In Christ, the gift of reconciliation reveals both the diversity and unity of the Church. In Christ, there is no Greek, no Jew, no free, no slave, no male, no female (Galatians 3:28). The Church includes children, women, and men throughout the globe, of different races and ethnicities and various socio-economic backgrounds. Through God’s action in Jesus Christ, all persons are welcomed and incorporated into the Body, the Church.

“*The Episcopal Church welcomes you*” is our denomination’s compelling invitation to all persons for inclusion and full participation in the Body of Christ. In recent years the Episcopal Church has responded to God’s call to include sisters and brothers who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered into the full life and ministry of this church. The ways in which these persons are to be fully included remain a topic of ongoing conversation in the wider Church. In 2009 The General Convention of the Episcopal Church passed a resolution calling the church to be more intentional, more reconciling and more Christ-like in responding to gay and lesbian members of our church who are living in faithful, monogamous and life-long partnerships.

This resolution acknowledged *“the changing circumstances in the United States and in other nations as legislation authorizing or forbidding marriage, civil unions or domestic partnerships for gay and lesbian persons is passed in various civil jurisdictions that call forth a renewed pastoral response from this Church, and for an open process for the consideration of theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same gender relationships.”* This resolution further resolved that bishops may provide a *“generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church.”*

In response to this resolution, our diocesan Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Leopold Frade, has authorized the development of liturgical materials for the blessing of a civil marriage that has been performed in one of the states or countries that legally authorize marriages of same-gendered couples.

This document outlines the pastoral guidelines and liturgical resources authorized for use in the Diocese of Southeast Florida. By way of introduction, there are several issues to highlight:

- It is strongly recommended that prior to the initial scheduling of this liturgy a discussion take place between the clergy and vestry regarding its intended use and purpose.
- Although some of the pastoral guidelines are recommended, there is an expectation that following these guidelines will be the normal pastoral practice.
- The intention of this liturgy is to bless an action that has already occurred, i.e. the civil marriage.
- These liturgical materials are a pastoral resource for our diocese.

- As in Marriage, no priest is required or expected to perform this ceremony.
- This document will be reviewed and updated based on any future actions of the General Convention and the pastoral judgment of our bishop.

Addendum: The complete text of CO 56

FINAL VERSION - Concurred

Resolution: **C056**
Title: **Liturgies for Blessings**
Topic: **Liturgy**
Committee: **13 - Prayer Book, Liturgy and Church Music**
House of Initial Action: **Bishops**
Proposer: **Diocese of Missouri**

Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, That the 76th General Convention acknowledge the changing circumstances in the United States and in other nations, as legislation authorizing or forbidding marriage, civil unions or domestic partnerships for gay and lesbian persons is passed in various civil jurisdictions that call forth a renewed pastoral response from this Church, and for an open process for the consideration of theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same gender relationships; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, in consultation with the House of Bishops, collect and develop theological and liturgical resources, and report to the 77th General Convention; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, in consultation with the House of Bishops, devise an open process for the conduct of its work inviting participation from provinces, dioceses, congregations, and individuals who are engaged in such theological work, and inviting theological reflection from throughout the Anglican Communion; and be it further

Resolved, That bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-gender marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church; and be it further

Resolved, That this Convention honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality; and be it further

Resolved, That the members of this Church be encouraged to engage in this effort.

PASTORAL GUIDELINES for
BLESSING OF CIVIL MARRIAGES
BETWEEN SAME-GENDERED COUPLES

Currently the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer does offer a rite for the Blessing of a Civil Marriage (BCP, p. 433). However neither the BCP nor the Canons of the Church provide pastoral guidelines for these blessings. As the Diocese of Southeast Florida begins authorizing the blessing of civil marriages which have taken place between same-gendered couples, this committee proposes the following pastoral guidelines be followed by clergy officiating at the blessing of all civil marriages, whether between heterosexual or same-gendered couples.

Rationale:

1. This will insure equity in the theological approach to all civil marriages.
2. The BCP rite on page 433 should not be used as a way to avoid the canonical requirements of Holy Matrimony.

I. Pastoral Guidelines (adapted from Title I Canon 18, Sections 2 and 3):

1. Before officiating at the Blessing of a Civil Marriage the Member of the Clergy shall have ascertained:
 - a) That both parties understand that Holy Matrimony is a physical and spiritual union between two adults, entered into within the community of faith, by mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, and with intent that it be lifelong.
 - b) That both parties freely and knowingly have consented to such marriage, without fraud, coercion, mistake as to identity of a partner, or mental reservation.
 - c) That at least one of the parties has received Holy Baptism.
 - d) That both parties have been instructed as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of Holy Matrimony by the Member of the Clergy, or that they have both received such instruction from persons known by the Member of the Clergy to be competent and responsible.
2. No Member of the Clergy of this Church shall officiate at the Blessing of a Civil Marriage unless the following procedures are complied with:
 - a) There shall be present at least two witnesses to the Blessing of a Civil Marriage;
 - b) The Member of the Clergy shall record in the proper register the date and place of the Blessing of the Civil Marriage, the names of the parties and their parents, the age of the parties, their residences, and their Church status; the witnesses and the Member of the Clergy shall sign the record;
 - c) The Member of the Clergy shall have required that the parties sign the following declaration:

“We, A.B. and C.D., desiring to receive the Blessing of a Civil Marriage in the Church, do solemnly declare we hold marriage to be a lifelong union between consenting adults

“We believe that the union of two consenting adults, in heart, body, and mind, is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and when it is God’s will, for the nurture of children and their growth in the knowledge and love of the Lord.

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

3. It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to officiate the Blessing of a Civil Marriage.

II. Of Regulations Respecting a Civil Marriage which has been Blessed by the Church:
Concerning Preservation of Marriage, Dissolution of Marriage, and Remarriage (Guidelines adapted from Title I, Canon 19, Sections 1-3).

1. When marital unity is imperiled by dissension, it shall be the duty, if possible, of either or both parties, before taking legal action, to lay the matter before a Member of the Clergy; it shall be the duty of such Member of the Clergy to act first to protect and promote the physical and emotional safety of those involved and only then, if it be possible, to labor that the parties may be reconciled.
2. Any member of this church whose marriage has been annulled or dissolved by a civil court may apply to the Bishop of Southeast Florida for a judgment as to his or her marital status in the eyes of the Church. Such judgment may be a recognition of the nullity, or of the termination, of the said marriage; Provided, that no such judgment shall be construed as affecting in any way the legitimacy of children or the civil validity of the former relationship.
3. Every judgment rendered under this section shall be in writing and shall be made a matter of permanent record in the Archives of the Diocese of Southeast Florida.
4. No Member of the Clergy shall officiate at the Blessing of a Civil Marriage of any person who has been the husband, wife, or civilly married partner of any other person then living, nor shall any member of the Church seek the Blessing of a Civil Marriage when either of the contracting parties has been the husband, wife, or civilly married partner of any other person then living, except as hereinafter provided:
 - a. The Member of the Clergy shall be satisfied by appropriate evidence that the prior marriage has been annulled or dissolved by a final judgment or decree of a civil court of competent jurisdiction.
 - b. The Member of the Clergy shall have instructed the parties that continuing concern must be shown for the well-being of the former spouse/partner, and of any children of the prior marriage.
 - c. The Member of the Clergy shall consult with and obtain the consent of the Bishop of Southeast Florida prior to officiating at the Blessing of a Civil Marriage, and shall report to that Bishop, the Blessing of any marriage under this Section.

Concerning the Service

The blessing of same-sex covenanted relationships is a solemn and public ceremony in the presence of God. The Episcopal Church is committed to support those whose relationships, whether homosexual or heterosexual, to standards of life-long commitment, characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication and the kind of “holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God” (6.2)

When same-gendered couples are married under civil law, a priest or a bishop normally presides at the blessing of the couple’s commitment to one another. Such ministers alone have the function of blessing and presiding at the Eucharist.

It is essential that the persons seeking to have a marital relationship blessed and renew a commitment to each other prepare in advance, in consultation with the celebrant.

When both a bishop and a priest are present and officiating, the bishop should pronounce the blessing and preside at the Eucharist.

A deacon, or assisting priest, may read the Gospel, and perform other assisting functions at the Eucharist.

As in marriage, no clergy person is under obligation to provide this service if anything about the relationship violates his or her conscience.

It is desirable that the Lessons from the Old Testament and the Epistles be read by lay persons.

In the opening exhortation (at the symbol of N.N.), the full names of the persons in relationship to be blessed are declared. Subsequently, only their Christian names are used.

The Celebration and Blessing of a Civil Marriage

A hymn or anthem may be sung as the liturgical ministers enter.

The following acclamation, or another acclamation from the Book of Common Prayer or Enriching Our Worship begins the rite.

Celebrant Blessed be the One, Holy, and Living God.
People Glory to God forever and ever.

The Celebrant faces the people and the two persons to be joined in holy union stand before the Celebrant, who says

Dear people of God: We have come together to witness and bless the marriage vows of love and fidelity which NN1 and NN2 have made with each other. This covenant shows us the mystery of the union between God and God's people and between Christ and the Church, and the Holy Scriptures point to the offering and receiving of love as the principal sign of God's presence.

The Declaration of Consent

Celebrant

N1, you have taken N2 as your partner (spouse). Do you promise to love him/her, comfort him/her, honor and keep him/her, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others, to be faithful to him/her as long as you both shall live?

N1 I will.

Celebrant

N2 you have taken N1 as your partner (spouse). Do you promise to love him/her, comfort him/her, honor and keep him/her, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others, to be faithful to him/her as long as you both shall live?

N2 I will.

The Celebrant addresses the congregation:

Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to support these two persons in their covenant?

People We will.

The Ministry of the Word

Celebrant The Lord be with you.

People And also with you.

Celebrant Let us pray.

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

or

Holy and loving God, in our baptism you call us into relationship with you and the whole creation. We thank you for giving us signs of your steadfast love in the covenant of fidelity two people make

with one another, and we pray that, in your mercy, you will give your blessing to N. and N. who come before you, and strengthen them day by day with the love of your Holy Spirit that they may be a blessing to each other and to the world; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen.*

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

Ruth 1:16-17 (Where you go, I will go)
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (Two are better than one)
Song of Solomon 2:10-13 (My beloved speaks)
Micah 4:1-3 (Let us go up to the house of the God of Jacob)
Zephaniah 3:14-20 (I will bring you home)
Tobit 8:5-8 (The she and I may grow old together)

Romans 12:9-19 (Let love be genuine)
1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (Love is patient and kind)
2 Corinthians (Everything old has passed away)
Ephesians 3:14-19 (The love of Christ surpasses knowledge)
Colossians 3:12-17 (Love which binds everything together)
1 John 4:7-16 (Let us love one another for love is of God)

Matthew 5:1-10 (Beatitudes)
Matthew 5:13-16 (You are the light...let your light so shine)
Matthew 7:21, 24-29 (Build your house on rock)
Mark 10:6-9, 13-16 (They are no longer two but one)
Mark 12:28-34 (Greatest Commandments)
John 2:1-11 (The wedding in Cana)
John 15:9-12 (Love one another as I have loved you)

A homily and/or music may follow

The Covenant

The couple face each other. Holding the partner's right hand, each in turn says:

In the name of God, I, N1, make this covenant with you, N2, before God and the Church, that I will love you in all the circumstances of our lives. With God's help, I will be faithful to you as long as we both shall live, as a companion in faith, hope, and love for the glory of God and the life of this world.

In the name of God, I, N2, make this covenant with you, N1, before God and the Church that I will love you in all the circumstances of our lives. With God's help, I will be faithful to you as long as we both shall live, as a companion in faith, hope, and love for the glory of God and the life of this world.

Blessing of the Ring(s)

The Celebrant takes the hand(s) of the partner(s) wearing ring(s)

Bless, O God, this/these ring(s) as an enduring sign of the covenant that N. and N. have made to each other. *Amen.*

or

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

Celebrant Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.
People Amen.

The Prayers

The prayers may be led by the Celebrant, a deacon, or someone chosen by the couple. At the end of each petition, all respond, Amen.

Almighty and everliving God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer, clothe *N.* and *N.* with your Spirit; seal the bond of their union; and create one flesh and one spirit together. *Amen*

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

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

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

| Bestow on them, if it be your will, the gift and heritage of children, and the grace
| to bring them up to know you, to love you, and to serve you. *Amen.*

| Bless *N.*, the child of *N.* and *N.*, that their newly formed household by be a place of
| nurture and strength. *Amen*

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

The Blessing of the Marriage

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

Celebrant

Most gracious God, it is right to give you thanks and praise for the unfailing love and care and for the great joy and comfort you have bestowed upon us in the gift of human love. We give you praise and thanks for *N.* and *N.*, and for the covenant of love and faithfulness they have made. Pour out the abundance of your grace upon them. Keep them in your steadfast love; protect them from all danger; fill them with your wisdom and peace; lead them in holy service to each other and the world; and finally, bring them to that table where all your saints feast for ever; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit...

or

God the Source of Life, the Word of Love, and God the Spirit of Truth...

Bless, preserve and keep you.: God mercifully look upon you and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that you may faithfully live together in this life, and in the age to come have life everlasting. *Amen.*

The Peace

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

The couple then greet each other, after which greetings may be exchanged throughout the congregation.

When Communion is not to follow, the wedding party leaves the church. A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.

If there is to be a Communion, the service continues according to Rite One or Rite Two in the Book of Common Prayer, or according to the Order on page 401 of the BCP or other forms allowed by the Bishop.

At the Eucharist

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

Preface

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

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

In place of the usual postcommunion prayer, the following is said by the Celebrant

O God the giver of all that is true and lovely and gracious: We give you thanks for binding us together in these holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that by your Holy Spirit, N. and N., now joined in holy union, may become one in heart and soul, live in fidelity and peace, and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love you; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

As the wedding party leaves the church, a hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung or instrumental music may be played.