

Draft Statement on the Blessings of Same-Sex Marriages in the  
Diocese of Western Massachusetts

The Mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ (*Book of Common Prayer*, page 855).

*Give to your Church, O God,  
a bold vision and a daring charity,  
a refreshed wisdom and a courteous understanding,  
that the eternal message of your Son  
may be acclaimed as the good news of the age;  
through him who makes all things new,  
even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The principle movement of the church is one of gathering individuals into the identity of Jesus Christ who, as fully human and fully divine, draws humanity into the life and fellowship of the Holy Trinity. In ancient catechetical rituals, when the candidate for Holy Baptism is asked what he or she seeks, the response is “Life in Christ.” It is through full incorporation into Christ’s very self that the Christian discovers one’s identity as a child of God who stands in life-giving relationship with God and others.

Paul employed two central images to describe our life in Christ: the Body and the Cross. When we share in the self-emptying love of God in Christ, exhibited most clearly by his sacrificial death on the cross so that all humanity may share in the Resurrection, we model, represent, and realize the abundant, fearless, and free love God desires for us to enjoy. When we find that “we live no longer for ourselves alone, but for the one who died and rose again for us” (Eucharistic Prayer A) we discover the divine life for which we are created.

This divine life is not lived in isolation, but in the Church, conceived as the Body of Christ. Because we are called by God into this Body in all its created diversity, the process of *theosis* or *divinization* is of necessity one of moving through the fear and anxiety of confronting the “other” to recognizing in the “other” the image of God, the *imago dei*. Furthermore, by recognizing “the other” the Spirit invites us into a new identity as members of the same Body. It is in this Body,

the Church, that we find our truest identity in relationship with those who differ from us and with whom our worship, service, and giving are offered to the Father, the Source of our unity.

As Paul describes in his letter to the Ephesians:

...now in Christ you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (2:13-14)

Paul's appeal to the Body of the crucified and risen Christ as the means of the restoration of a broken humanity speaks to the painful history and sinful tendency of the Church where encounters with the Other are first met with fear, hatred, spiritual, and even physical, violence. From its earliest days, the Church's failure to neither invite nor incorporate persons of different ethnicities, races, economic classes, genders, and sexual orientations has been detrimental to both the health and growth of the individual and to the entire Body of Christ. In recent years we have come to an awareness of the pain the Church has brought to our homosexual brothers and sisters in Christ. Though some still dispute that homosexuality is an orientation and not a preference, Christian prudence and charity, indeed, reason, would counsel the Church to listen to the growing consensus of social scientists, biologists, psychologists, that says that homosexuality is within a natural and healthy range of human sexual expression. The Church is now discerning a call to embrace the possibility that God's Spirit is now clearly urging us to deeper appreciation of human diversity in the sphere of human sexuality.

### Commitment as Means of Grace

To find our unity with God and each other in Christ restored, we discover that our lives are marked by holy practices. We recognize the "holy" in persons who strive toward unity with God and each other in Christ. Holy lives are exhibited in the practice and enjoyment of the

theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Paul refers to the saints being set apart, being distinguishable from the culture for their “fragrance of holiness.” Christians seek to turn away from lust and other vices in order to share in the divine nature. For this reason, we make every effort to support our faith with goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love. These qualities are but one “catalogue” of virtues scripture lists as marks of a Christian’s participation in the divine life. (2 Peter 1:5-7 ) The purposes of Holy Matrimony outlined in the Prayer Book-- mutual joy, help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity—emanate from the love that flows to every Christian from the inner life of God the Holy Trinity.

#### Biblical and Historical Considerations

Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth exhorted those who were in the Body of the Church to find their primary relationships within the Body of the Church. The ideal life of the Christian was to remain single, utterly devoted to a life of worship and service in the context of the church. There was an eschatological element to his preaching; the *parousia* was imminent; therefore, one should not willingly divert one’s affection and energies to the satisfaction of the needs of a partner. However, Paul’s recognition of the sexual nature of humanity leads him to concede that marriage can provide a kind of constraint to immorality: “. . . it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” (1 Corinthians 7:9)

Later, it became the custom of the church to elevate the estate of marriage to be the means by which holiness may be instilled in the married couple. This was accomplished both by the marriage providing a kind of constraint for sexuality (see Prayer Book of 1662) and as a kind of

reflection of the covenant between God and humanity; thus the trope of marriage symbolizing the union between Christ and his church.

Other research into the history of Christian marriage reveals that marriage did not begin as a sacrament and only started to be regularized by the church in the twelfth century. There were multiple views within the church on the form of marriage and what the sacramental and the contractual elements were and whether they should coexist. Equally important is the role that choice plays in Christian marriage, since it is still the case that a couple marries each other with the words of the presentation: “I take you.” The priest’s role is to witness and bless the union made by couple. Thus, we need to remember that changes to the institution of marriage have gone on literally for centuries lest we become mired in fear of change in what many Christians see as an immutable ceremony and institution. In addition, it is important to emphasize that the couple’s free will and choice is at the heart of Christian marriage, and the priest and gathered assembly support those decisions.

We have also become more conscious that it has been, for the most part, heterosexuals who have determined and maintained the interpretation of the sanctifying function of marriage to be limited to themselves. Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sexual orientation of homosexual was not even given official recognition in the Episcopal Church. Consequently gays and lesbians could not benefit from the same sanctifying blessings, privileges and constraints, that accrue to a heterosexual couple.

### Legal and Cultural Considerations

The church has rightly been reluctant to discuss marriage, for either straight or gay couples, using the language of rights such as is employed in legal discourse. Like the discussion of

ordination of women in the 1970s, we have held to the language of vocation. A couple is “called” to the estate of marriage, and this calling is first heard by the couple. When the blessing of the Church is desired, this calling is tested by the community, in the representative of the priest, and then, more broadly, if “banns” are published. The publishing of banns invites the community to affirm and pray for the couple as they prepare for their vows and also allows the community to assert concerns if one’s history would indicate that marriage is inadvisable. In the view of the Church, Christian marriage is not a right in the sense that civil rights are understood. Rather, in the Church, marriage is seen as a particular calling, discerned initially by two persons and then confirmed and supported by the prayers, material and emotional support of the church. Marriage is understood as one means by which a person pursues a course toward holiness -- as one learns to live together in times of both prosperity and adversity, sickness and health, harmony and conflict, one has the opportunity to grow more and more into the full stature of Christ.

We find the deliberation of the marriage or blessing of partners of the same sex tends to devolve into the contentiousness of the society at large when we forsake the language of the Spirit’s calling two persons to a holy covenant for the language of two persons demanding their rights in the church. Such language is foreign both to the scriptures and the tradition of the Church.

Consequently, we have come to an awareness that marriage between two people is a gift from God bestowed in order to further the mission of the church: to restore us to unity with God and each other in Christ. Seen in this light, Christian marriage is a powerful and effective “school for Christian holiness” where unity can overcome estrangement, shame, isolation so pervasive our culture.

As even Paul came to argue that there was insufficient impediment for two heterosexuals to marry in the community of Corinth, we, in a similar spirit, see insufficient reasons for not allowing two persons of the same gender to enter into a covenant marked by commitment to holiness, Christian service, forgiveness, healing, and the restorative purposes that we celebrate and uphold in marriage. By setting forth the same hopes and expectations the Church holds for all marriages, we affirm that the opportunities to grow in the love and stature of Christ in the bonds of holy matrimony are open and available to homosexuals as they have been to heterosexuals.

#### On the Signing of Marriage Licenses

We note that the authorization of clergy to sign the civil license for a wedding is a breach in the separation between church and state, a Constitutional boundary we wish to maintain. Separating these actions clarifies the Church's purpose to care for souls. Refraining from the signing of these legal documents allows the church to maintain independence from the vicissitudes of the political process. That is, this makes it possible for the church to define the appropriateness of a union for itself independent of the state.

Thus, we advocate for designation of a civil witness, ideally a lay member of the local church congregation, who would be authorized by the state to sign the marriage license issued by the municipality. We advocate adopting this practice for all marriages, straight and gay.

#### On Blessings in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts

Making provisions for blessing a union between two persons of the same sex is not be understood as a requirement of all parishes within the diocese; it will provide a generous pastoral response to the meet the needs of faithful members of this church. We recommend that blessings be conducted with the knowledge, consent, and support of the local vestry and congregation.

Ideally, we would like to see the practice occur as a normal part of the congregation's sacramental life: without the need of the bishop's knowledge or consent unless, as is required by canon, in the case of a second marriage after a divorce. We recognize that as we find ourselves in a period of transition in this matter, some further discernment and consideration is called for with our Bishop, the Standing Committee and Diocesan Council. In the case of re-marriage after divorce, we expect the same protocol to be followed as required by the constitution and canons regarding counseling and episcopal permission before the solemnization of marriage can take place.

#### On the Care and Nurture of Children

The rite of Holy Matrimony states as one of the purposes of marriage "the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord." The modern social situation and advances in technologies related to reproduction extend the concept of "procreation" well beyond the fruit of sexual union between a man and a woman. We have also come to see families created by adoption and remarriage as more prevalent. We therefore hold that the nurturing of children in the knowledge and love of the Lord is a calling open to all couples called to marriage. Furthermore, it is a calling in which the Church has great interest. Not only we must always preferentially protect the weak and innocent, we desire to support parents in their challenging calling to raise children, and to help especially in their spiritual nurture and care of their souls. The Church, through her clergy and trained laity, stands ready to assist all couples in discerning their call to parenthood, and to support couples as they nurture their children to the abundant life promised them in Jesus Christ.

## Task Force on the Blessing of Same Sex Unions in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts

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