



ST. BARNABAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
1280 Vine Street
Denver, Colorado 80206
(303) 388-6469

The Parish Church of Capitol Hill

Final Report

Parish Commission on the Solemnization of Relationships

**St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Denver, CO**

Ms. Pamela Bliss
Ms. Lucille Bollinger
Mr. Garry Horle
Dr. Steve Kick
Mr. Terry Lewis
Rev. Dr. Paula Nesbitt, Chair
Dr. Conrad Riley
Mr. Jim Schefe
Mr. Jim Steed
Mrs. Judy Ward

February 8, 1993



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Summary recommendation

We consensually agree that the Christian blessing of the holy union of faithful couples committed to life-long, loving monogamous relationships not be limited on the basis of sexual orientation. Because marriage has legal as well as ecclesial status, we recommend that this term be used only for those (heterosexual) couples that qualify for its dual status. Furthermore, because of our great concern for our homosexual parishioners in this current hostile political climate, and for our Bishop's support in an ambivalent diocesan climate, we recommend for the short-term those types of blessings such as can currently be done within the context of our authorized liturgies.

Short-term recommendations

1. This parish continue as a safe haven for all, in worship and pastoral care.
2. St. Barnabas study other liturgies, such as that authorized by Bishop Swing (Cal), and recommend one or more to Bishop Winterrowd for authorization.
3. Through Prayers of the People, St. Barnabas pray for the day when homosexual persons can enjoy fullness of Sacramental life within the Church.
4. All wanting their relationship recognized as a union in a parish liturgy go through pre-union counseling. The decision to recognize the union lies with the rector.
5. Vestry authorize clergy to encourage authorized "blessing" occasions, such couples celebrating anniversaries, rings, etc., irrespective of sexual orientation, during Holy Eucharist and other services.
6. Under the rector's guidance, any other means of recognizing and blessing unions currently not in explicit violation of the national Church or Diocesan Constitution and Canons be available for use within the parish.
7. Parish education on human sexuality undertaken in accord with the Diocesan Commission on Human Sexuality be continued and the material studied by the Commission be discussed reflected upon.
8. Both clergy and same-gender couples involved in any public blessing should be willing to undertake possible ramifications in a prophetic spirit.
9. Both clergy and laity develop a concrete timetable and work publicly toward being able to hold Holy Union liturgies without fear of Church or community retribution.
10. Vestry adopt these recommendations, and share the report with the parish, Diocese, and National Church.

Long-term recommendation

Since the moderate position we recommend is intended for the short-term only, we encourage the rector and worship committee to collect and study liturgies of Holy Union that have been done elsewhere in the Episcopal Church so that we may be able to pro-actively lead the diocese and serve in a consulting role to other churches and their leaders on this very important topic.

Where either of the couple has children or, as a couple, they foresee the possibility of adopting children, a commitment to rearing and caring for children should be part of all Holy Union liturgies, as should a commitment to add to the common life together as the Body of Christ and the Church.

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Preface

We as a Commission have been concerned about gay and lesbian members of St. Barnabas who have experienced social marginalization because of their sexual orientation, both within the Episcopal Church and in the Denver community. We believe that this discrimination is neither just nor God's intention for our growth as a parish community.

We also have been concerned that whatever actions we recommend not serve, in the hostile environment of the passage of Amendment 2, either to target any of our parishioners for harassment or St. Barnabas itself and consequently threaten the parish as a safe haven for all who come within its walls. The Commission's decision takes into account these interests in seeking to recommend what actions the Vestry should take.

We recognize that profound change is occurring in both the Church and society regarding some of our traditionally held assumptions about sexual orientation. These not only have been the result of scientific and technological advances, but they involve a recognition and a shift from a definition of unity as uniformity to one of unity through diversity. We affirm this shift as one in which the Holy Spirit is leading us to greater revelation of God's intention for humanity through Christ. No longer should gay and lesbian people be marginalized within the Church, or in society, as in the past when their alternative may have forced them to wear a false or hypocritical public persona.

We are aware of the difficulty for some people to understand new perspectives on sexuality and sexual orientation. Yet our learning from others who may be different from ourselves must continue. We acknowledge that our tradition may be subject to change, as has all historically-based knowledge over human history. The frontier of our learning and growth today is how to value the integrity of human diversity in the area of sexual orientation within our Christian community.

Introduction

Commission charge

Early in 1992, the Vestry of St. Barnabas passed a motion to establish a parish community task force, subsequently called the "Commission," on the solemnization of relationships to provide the vestry and the rector with a written report based on perceptions and recommendations from the parish community regarding circumstances and occasions appropriate for the solemnization of relationships, particularly in relation to same-gender relationships. Currently, the only liturgical ceremony in the Episcopal Church for holy union is the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Because marriage is a legal status as well as a Church sacrament, it legally can be entered into only by heterosexual couples. The church has no sacrament or ceremony available to homosexual couples.

This charge by the Vestry also supports the 1991 General Convention's request that parishes and dioceses study and discuss issues of sexuality, and to report to a national steering committee by Spring, 1993. We hope that the Vestry will consider communicating the content of this report to both the Diocese and to the national steering committee as part of our parish effort to fulfill the General Convention's stipulation. We also hope that our process, if not the result, may be a model for other parishes to consider in the development of their own discernment processes on issues related to human sexuality.

Process of study, evaluation and recommendation

I really believe that one reason we can't solve our current problems about such matters as homosexuality, abortion, and even the role of women in the church, is that we aren't clear about what it is that divides us,¹

said Colorado Suffragan Bishop Wolfrum. He believed that at the heart of such situations has been a difference in perception of the church's purpose and role.

Among the most divisive aspect of the 1991 General Convention was the debate over issues related to sexual orientation. Debate in the House of Bishops was particularly heated, and resulted in concern within the House as to how well the bishops could continue to work together. They met in March 1992 to find ways of rebuilding damaged relationships, including a reconsideration of the role of the House in both the life and ministry of the Church. Through prayer and worship, they sought to strengthen the bonds of their shared episcopal ministries. At the conclusion, a statement was issued, proclaiming:

...we resolve to define ourselves primarily as a community of prayer, worship, and biblical and theological reflection in which to give and receive one another's gifts, and to seek God's will for our lives and our work as the servants of the Church.

Whenever we meet we will strive to prize the vows of our ordination and the bonds that unite us above the issues that divide us. While absent from one another from meetings as a House, we will hold one another and our communities of faith across the Church in daily prayer -- that we and all our people may experience a new birth of love for God and one another to the glory of Christ

¹ Wolfrum, Rt. Rev. Wm. H. "Identity crisis in the church." *The Colorado Episcopalian*, March, 1992, p.2.

whose name we bear as ambassadors of the Gospel, one with the apostles in proclamation, service and witness.²

In recognition of the power to build unity amid diversity, which the House of Bishops chose to model, this Commission patterned the approach to its charge on this episcopal commitment. Before various positions could be discussed creatively and compassionately, prayer, study and reflection needed to occur around the underlying theological and spiritual themes. The study needed to explore intentionality as well as content in Biblical scripture and other writings. This concern for intentionality would help us to discern what parts of scripture as well as church tradition held enduring authority as God's resolve for humanity through the Church, and which aspects have been the product of human interpretation through particular--and limited--historical and cultural lenses. Reasoned reflection represented the third aspect of authoritative guidance in our Anglican tradition. As part of our reflection, the Commission sought to consider those people who would be affected both directly and indirectly by the issue of same-gender unions, in an attempt to discern their interests and concerns. As faithful commitment to the House of Bishops' model, our meetings opened and closed with prayer and all discussion prior to November focused on interests--shared and diverse--rather than on debating positions.

The Commission's task was fulfilled in three phases over a seven-month period:

April to June: Reading, reflection and discussion of Biblical, Anglican traditional and contemporary readings on related theological and practical concepts. Meetings were held twice monthly.

July and August: Listening, reflection and discussion of the experiences of those affected by the decision: clergy and same-gender couples. Those invited included both traditional and progressive perspectives. Meetings were held twice monthly.

September and October: Reflection and discussion of the various "stakeholders," those affected by the position taken, including pastoral responses to their interests given different possible positions the commission might take. Meetings were held monthly.

November: Reflection, discussion and decision as to the position that the commission would recommend to the vestry.

Summary of Commission's recommendation

In recognition that different sexual orientations may result in varied lifestyles maintained with integrity that accord with the deepest intentions our Christian faith, we consensually agree that the Christian blessing of the holy union of faithful couples committed to life-long, loving monogamous relationships not be limited on the basis of sexual orientation. Because marriage has legal as well as ecclesial status, we recommend that this term be used only for those (heterosexual) couples that qualify for its dual status. Furthermore, because of our great concern for our homosexual parishioners in this current hostile political climate, and for our Bishop's support in an ambivalent diocesan climate, we recommend for the short-term those types of blessings such as can currently be done within the context of our authorized liturgies.

² "A Statement of the House of Bishops," March 7, 1992.

Theological themes related to the blessing of unions

Love

Theological and social ethicist James Nelson defines love as "the Bible's supreme way of articulating God's purposes for and actions toward humankind."³ Love is a gift of God, given for our joy. It is all-embracing. God's love, for example, sees us as we are, rather than as we might prefer ourselves to be. Our human experience of love can be said to be a foretaste of heaven.

God, loving us personally and intensely, wants to be known to us as our divine lover.⁴ God's intention for us regarding love is summed succinctly in the Two Great Commandments:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' (Matt.22:37-39).

We love because we first have been loved. Central and significant in our understanding of God's will for humanity expressed through Jesus' teaching is the importance of loving God and loving others with all the integrity and respect that we would seek in love for ourselves. When our acts and commitments are made in love, they indeed are holy. Loving another as oneself implies that at the core of love is both honor and integrity so that one doesn't use another person for one's own ends. Nelson points out that love must always be expressed through the perspective of justice, in order to keep it from becoming self-centered or shallow.⁵ Consistently, love and fidelity have been linked.

Sexual activity can be a means of expressing love between two people in an intense and powerful way. We believe that sexual love is from God, and is part of God's gift to us. As such, it is part of God's will for humanity. It is a unique, God-given form of intimacy. This *gift* of sexual expression, however, exists only when grounded in love, and not apart from love.

There are some instances when the sexual expression of love isn't acceptable, for instance between parent and child (ie. incest), because of the disproportionate power in the relationship that results in severe abusiveness (ie. of the child).⁶

The relationship between God's love and human love in marriage can be seen in the Biblical notions of

³ Nelson, p.109. Nelson, James Bruce. *Embodiment*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978.

⁴ Shaw, p.19. Shaw, Thomas, SSJE. "The Way of Celibacy," in *Love and the Single Christian*, pp.15-21. Cowley Sermons, Number 2. Cowley Publications.

⁵ Nelson, p.126.

⁶ The incest of Lot and his daughters (Gen.19:30-38) is a rare exception, and only in as much as the power dynamics of the relationship in this unusual circumstance were very different.

covenant expressed through the Prophetic books.⁷ In marriage, for example, sexual intercourse has been a means of an ever-deepening of the love relationship⁸ as well as of procreation. If marriage presents unique opportunity in our tradition for the growth of two persons in their love, if such growth reflects God's love and if it enables people to reach toward their highest nature or capabilities, then the focus on companionship that manifests such growth should take precedence over all other factors in a relationship, including procreation.⁹ Over a long marriage, love ebbs and flows. The romance may decrease and the intimacy of love increase. This can bring a sense of security (*caritas*). Marriage is more than love, though. It is commitment.

This is not to say that those who choose celibacy aren't able to enjoy love. Thomas Shaw, SSJE, has pointed out that celibacy can be "fertile ground in which to discover and nurture God's personal love of us."¹⁰

Conclusion

If we say that our love for one another is God-given and that sexual expression is one form of this love, then that will lead us to certain conclusions, especially that such expression of love be available to all who freely and mutually enter into enduring, committed loving relationships.

Sexuality

All human affection, whether between friends, significant others or spouses, "draws on sexual energies within us," writes Martin Smith, SSJE.¹¹ Some energies are expressed directly through sexual intimacy while others are sublimated through emotional affection. Smith contends that by perceiving this, we can understand better those who differ from us in sexual orientation.

James Nelson affirms that sexuality is at the very heart of our response to life.¹² He describes God as One "who delights in the creation of human sexuality," and yet calls us to unity and quality beyond social roles, particular affections and relationships.¹³

⁷ Baker, p.105. Baker, John P. "Biblical Attitudes to Romantic Love." *Tyndale Bulletin*. Vol. 35, 1984, pp.91-128.

⁸ Eickhoff, p.43. Eickhoff, Andrew R. *A Christian View of Sex and Marriage*. New York: The Free Press, 1966.

⁹ Eickhoff, p.42.

¹⁰ Shaw, p.19.

¹¹ Smith, p.12. Smith, Martin, SSJE. "Homosexual partnership," pp. 9-14, in *Love and the Single Christian*, Cowley Sermons, No. 2. Cambridge: Cowley Publications.

¹² Nelson, p.104.

¹³ Nelson, p.125.

Social scientific research has helped to confound our traditional understanding of gender. For instance, although the Bible speaks of two distinct genders, male and female, other cultures have understood gender differently. For example, the berdache of indigenous tribes in North America and in the South Pacific constituted a third gender category. In gender research, there is substantial controversy over whether gender identity and sexual orientation are essential, or innate, or whether they are socially developed and constructed. Science, relying on physiology and biochemistry, has not been able to provide ultimate, definitive criteria to clarify this controversy. For instance, among people who undergo gender reassignment, at what point do they become another gender? The point is that 1) we do not have indisputable clarity as to what constitutes gender and sexual orientation, and 2) that Biblical peoples without benefit of science had even less objective clarity. For instance, when an infant was born in Biblical times, simple visual inspection led to a gender assignment as male or female. Today, we know that such a method can occasionally lead to error. With integrity, we cannot assume falsely the simplicity of Biblical understandings when we know that science has rendered such understandings anything but simple, or clear.

For many reasons, the understanding of the purpose of sexuality in Biblical times had a somewhat different focus than today. In the Hebrew scriptures, sexual activity that was blessed by God was directly linked with procreation.¹⁴ Throughout Church history, the Roman Catholic Church position, based on natural law reasoning, has upheld this perspective, arguing that the basic purpose of marriage is procreation--an argument that also undergirds its position on birth control and abortion. Since Vatican II, the role of companionship in marriage has been given a new emphasis.¹⁵

In the Anglican tradition, heterosexual marriage has been considered the "proper context" for the sexual expression of love. Many contemporary Church leaders uphold this understanding, but also are hesitant to declare that it is the only context.¹⁶ Until the 1928 revision of the Book of Common Prayer, however, Christian marriage was perceived as an alternative, or remedy, for sin; as a means to help people not having the gift for celibacy to avoid fornication.¹⁷ There were sharp gender differences, however, in the permissiveness for sexual expression even within the context of marriage. Husbands were to see marriage as a fulfillment of their desire and enjoyment, while for women the objective was acquiescence and pregnancy.¹⁸ A more contemporary expression of sexuality in Christian marriage, in both the U.S. Episcopal Church and the Church of England, has emphasized union in heart, body and mind, a union intended by God for the couple's mutual joy, mutual help and comfort, and tenderness in love, with procreation only secondary.¹⁹

¹⁴ Spong, p.145. Spong, John Shelby. *Living in Sin?* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.

¹⁵Eickhoff, p.36.

¹⁶ For example, Avis, p. 146. Avis, Paul. *Eros and the Sacred*. London: SPCK, 1990.

¹⁷ Welch, p.155. Welch, Mary, "Theology of Marriage," in *A dictionary of Pastoral Care*.

¹⁸ Welch, p.155.

¹⁹ Welch, p.155; Williams, p.140. Williams, Robert. "Toward a Theology for Lesbian and Gay Marriage, *Anglican Theological Review*, Vo. 22, No.2, pp.134-157.

Diocesan discussions on the changing patterns of sexuality and family life have been held over the past decade, in an attempt to discern which are compatible with Christian intention. One of the most comprehensive was that produced by the Diocese of Newark, which concluded that "by suppressing our sexuality and by condemning all sex which occurs outside of traditional marriage, the Church has thereby obstructed a vitally important means for persons to know and celebrate their relatedness to God." It also stated that "[o]ur sexuality goes to the heart of our identity as persons....Thus our sexual identity and behavior are means for our experience and knowledge of God."²⁰

Given that our sexuality is from God, it in itself is not an affliction despite mixed messages from both scripture and tradition.²¹ The more critical test is *how* sexuality is used.

Several scholars and writers have pointed out how the Biblical passages equating homosexuality with sin have been misinterpreted.²² In each Biblical citation mentioned by those who believe it is a sinful state, others have countered by evaluating the context and underlying issues that situate the passage. For instance, in the story of Sodom and Gommorah (Gen.19), the significant issues included inhospitality (considered a grievous sin in Genesis), the abusive use of power over another individual, and the rejection of everything associated with Canaanite cults. Biblically, homosexual behavior was condemned on the basis that it was part of pagan religious activities, against which Israel sought to define itself.²³

In other Biblical instances, such as those in the Pauline epistles, Bishop Spong has argued that any human abnormality, physical or otherwise, was perceived as a sign of divine judgment and punishment.²⁴ This perspective undergirded Paul's perception that homosexual activity was a punishment given to those unfaithful to God, rather than as sin.²⁵ In other examples, Paul was more concerned about issues such as licentiousness, involving the use of an individual for another's gratification without loving relationship.²⁶ Such issues affect the appropriate use of sexuality, rather than matters of sexual orientation itself.

Despite the deeper Biblical contexts, many gay and lesbian people in the church have been led to believe that any sexual expression for them is sinful, no matter how loving and committed the relationship may

²⁰ Melton, p.75. Excerpts from the "Report of the Task Force on Changing Patterns of Sexuality and Family Life" (1987), pp. 71-83, in Melton, Gordon, *The Church Speaks on: Sex and Family Life*. Detroit: Gale Research.

²¹ Jarrett, pp.3,5. Jarrett, Emmett, "Mixed Messages," in *Love and the Single Christian*, Cowley Sermons, No. 2, Cambridge: Cowley Publications.

²² For example, in the appended bibliography, see Smith and Shaw in the Cowley sermon series *Love and the single Christian*, and Spong.

²³ Melton, p.75.

²⁴ Spong, p.146.

²⁵ Spong, pp.149-150.

²⁶ For example, see Smith, p.12.

be. From a catholic perspective, sin is defined as an act that is freely chosen (ie. a choice made consciously and freely.) Where there is no freedom of choice there is no sin.²⁷ Where sexual orientation is not a matter of choice, than it cannot be a matter of sin. Avis, Spong and others ranging from moderate to liberal church leaders argue against using a literalist Biblical standard for what is considered moral or immoral sexual expression, since polygamy, concubinage, rape of women, and a double standard based on gender for punishment of sexual sins such as adultery were condoned.²⁸ Furthermore, reason states that our human condition of being born into sin is universally shared--some aren't born into more sin than others.

In social scientific as well as religious arenas, there has been much discussion as to whether sexual orientation is innate or socially constructed. Many, such as Bishop Spong, believe that it is innate.²⁹ Others, such as theologian Margaret Miles, argue that all sexual orientation, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is socially constructed.³⁰ About 10% of the population is estimated to be predominately or exclusively homosexual.³¹ Sexual orientation well may be innate in some instances, chosen in others, or somewhere in between. For instance, one might choose to live a heterosexual lifestyle and at some point realize that one was gay. Orientation also might be the result of a coerced choice, such as the outcome of childhood abuse and resultant inability to relate lovingly to members of the other sex. Bisexual orientation might be a situation of "both/and." Yet another example of chosen sexual orientation is "homophobia"--a fear of examining deeply one's own sexual orientation. Although arguments have been presented on both sides of the controversy, neither side has been able to provide conclusive evidence. Crucial to this argument, however, is the implicit moral judgment that for those whom sexual orientation may be developmental rather than inherent, to insist that they attempt to choose heterosexuality over homosexuality implies that latter in itself is less good.

Argues Hartinger,

moral condemnation of homosexual sexual behavior is often founded on the belief that sex and marriage are--and should be--inexorably linked with child-rearing....But since moral sanction is not withheld from infertile couples or those who intend to remain childless, this standard is clearly being inconsistently--and unfairly--applied.³²

²⁷ This perspective is summarized with a conversation between the Commission and a guest, Rev. Michael Chamberlain, former vicar general of the Archdiocese of Colorado, and currently rector of Mother of God Church in Denver and instructor in Canon Law at St. Thomas Seminary.

²⁸ For example, see Avis, p.147.

²⁹ Spong, p.198.

³⁰ Miles, p.163. Miles, Margaret R. "Beyond Biological Determination," *Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. 72:2, pp.161-164.

³¹ Hartinger, p.681. Hartinger, Brent, "A Case for Gay Marriage," *Commonweal*, November, 22, 1991, pp.681-683.

³² Hartinger, p.683.

In the Episcopal Church, the 1976 General Convention adopted resolutions stating that,

homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church; and homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens.³³

Currently, there is no Church sanction for sexual intimacy outside a marital union. This completely cuts off homosexual persons from any opportunity for legitimate sexual expression with loved ones. At the 1991 General Convention the Church reaffirmed that "physical sexual expression is appropriate only within the lifelong, monogamous relationship of marriage," but it also resolved to qualify this support in proposing that the Church "reconcile" the "discontinuity" between traditional teachings and the experience of many faithful Episcopalians.³⁴

Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning has written that,

It is our responsibility to promote societal values that make imperative the working toward the good of the community, and the support of the whole human family. Let us not allow the rather superficial category of 'family values' to squeeze between and overshadow our Christian understanding of both individual responsibility to every person and connectedness to the whole human family that is all of God's children.³⁵

Bishop Spong concludes that homosexual orientation may be a minority, but nonetheless it is a natural characteristic of human sexuality.³⁶

Not all faithful Christians are part of a life-long committed relationship. With the emphasis on marriage as the natural human state, and its traditional underlying purpose of procreation, those who are single largely have been looked down upon since Biblical times. In Hebrew, there was no word for 'bachelor,' and the single adult person in Hebrew scripture is rare.³⁷ The early Christian perception of John the Baptist and Jesus as single and celibate lifted celibacy as a desired state, especially during millennialist periods when communities believed in Jesus' immanent return. St. Paul, for example, believing that Jesus' would return to earth within that generation, upheld celibate singleness as the ideal, with marriage viewed as an acceptable alternative for those who did not have the gift of celibacy. He readily acknowledged, however, that the gift of celibacy was an exception rather than the norm (1Cor.7). Although in Roman Catholic tradition celibacy was revived as a requisite for entry into religious orders and subsequently for ordination, marriage was held to be the ideal state for the laity. Anglican and

³³ Winterrowd, p.1. Winterrowd, William J. "Winterrowd opposes Amendment #2, cites Baptismal Covenant," *The Colorado Episcopalian*, October-November, 1992, p.1.

³⁴ Radner and Sumner, p.910. Radner, Ephraim and George Sumner, Jr. "Waiting on the Spirit," *The Christian Century*, October 9, 1991, pp.910-912.

³⁵ Winterrowd, p.1.

³⁶ Spong, p.198.

³⁷ Baker, p.123.

Protestant traditions likewise have emphasized the importance of marriage. Singleness traditionally has been associated with misfortune, and regarded as undesirable.³⁸ Among those for whom marriage is not a viable choice, Weil notes that there is no evidence that homosexual people have been endowed with the gift of celibacy in any greater proportion than heterosexuals.³⁹

Promiscuity has been said to be an issue in both heterosexual and homosexual communities. Promiscuity can be defined as "engaging in brief sexual encounters with a large number of sexual partners."⁴⁰ Statistical data shows about the same rate of promiscuity among both heterosexual and homosexual individuals, and that women tend to be less promiscuous due to socialization toward monogamy.⁴¹ There also may be a relationship between promiscuity and the need for intimacy. Whether or not promiscuity should be viewed negatively has been sharply debated as a social rather than religious issue. Some advocate that there might be a responsible way to be sexually active that is distinct from a committed relationship. The majority however agree that all sex without relationship is wrong.

"Sexuality, like every other important aspect of human life, should be clearly related to the center and goal of that life, the reign of God," argues Countryman.⁴² Nelson also is concerned that the physical expression of sexuality needs to be appropriate to the level of love and commitment in a relationship. The intention of sexual expression should be for human fulfillment and wholeness, that which God lovingly intends for humanity. He believes that all sexual expression should be grounded in ethics, that people are responsible for their relationship and its commitments, including responsibility toward the partner's needs and accountability of the relationship to the community.⁴³

Conclusion

Sexuality itself, as part of our humanity from God, is moral. The concern is in how it is expressed. When mutual love expresses itself sexually, and where mutual fidelity is not being compromised, sexual expression is not sinful. We have been impressed with the growing scientific evidence and testimony of homosexual persons that sexual orientation is, in most instances, determined by birth, rather than as a chosen lifestyle. We affirm that sexual orientation itself is neither good nor evil, nor a matter of sin or righteousness. Yet to ask one group of people to suffer for the sake of their human condition is not unlike asking slaves to remain as such because of their skin or heritage. Today, we know that this is both wrong and unjust, and consequently we cannot condone a double standard applied on the basis of sexual orientation.

³⁸ Jarrett, p.2.; Turner, p.27. Turner, Philip, "Divorce and Remarriage," in *Love and the Single Christian*, Cowley Sermons, No. 2, Cambridge: Cowley Publications.

³⁹ Weil, p.174. Weil is professor of liturgics at CDSP. Weil, Louis, "The Church Does Not Make a Marriage," *Anglican Theological Review*, 72:2, pp.172-174. Also see Countryman, p.245. Countryman, L. William. *Dirt, Greed and Sex*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

⁴⁰ Williams, p.139.

⁴¹ Williams, p.139.

⁴² Countryman, p.266.

⁴³ Nelson, pp.127-128.

Relationship and Union

Relationship can be defined along a continuum, ranging from societal relations to business relations, to casual friendships, and to committed friendships. The latter may develop into deepest friendships and/or union, depending on a variety of factors including sexual orientation and availability of the individuals. The issue of sexual intimacy depends upon the character of the relationship. Where there is both union and deepest friendship, a true spiritual union occurs.

Union traditionally has been understood in the context of marriage, as the "union of one woman with one man, mutually undertaken as a life-long commitment," an understanding which is based on the biblical notion of husband and wife being 'one flesh' (eg. Gen.2:20, Mk.10:7).⁴⁴ In marriage, the focus on companionship is a recent historical development. Although St. Paul and the very early Church perceived the importance of the relational aspects of marriage (eg. 1Cor.7, Eph.5), love and companionship were not emphasized until the 16th Century when it was developed by Anglican and Puritan divines. Relationality has characterized the Anglican perspective since. Biblical scripture has been reinterpreted to emphasize the companionship aspects (eg. Genesis 2:18-24), with companionship seen as a good for remedying human loneliness.⁴⁵ This shift in emphasis has resulted in a Western approach to marriage based on romantic love, rather than the traditional notion of parental arrangement.

A union implies the potentiality for full sexual expression based on mutual love in the relationship. For Christians, it's important theologically that union also relate to Christ and the Church. According to Smith, the criteria for a Christian sexual relationship are mutual unitive intention, readiness for mutual trust and self-giving, mutual love, the availability for following through with commitment, and integrating the life of Christ within it.⁴⁶ The celebration of any union, understood covenantally as a life-long, faithful commitment to another, is relevant both to the church community and to its witness before God. States the Diocese of Newark report, "As means of communion with other persons our bodies sacramentally become means of communion with God."⁴⁷

Central to a holy relationship, or union, is the production of "fruits of the spirit--love, joy, peace, patience, and self-sacrifice," says Bishop Spong.⁴⁸ These qualities determine a relationship's potential for enriching the couple as persons who are responsive to the realm of God, in ways such as the capacity for compassion, healing, reconciliation, mutuality, and concern for other people beyond one's immediate relationship or circle of friendships. The relationship also should strengthen the couple for discipleship in the wider Christian community, including helping them accept and love people very different from themselves. In short, it should be life-enhancing, grounded in fidelity, and based on love.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Welch, p.154.

⁴⁵ See Williams, pp.140-141.

⁴⁶ Smith, p.13.

⁴⁷ Melton, p.75.

⁴⁸ See Spong, p.154.

⁴⁹ Melton, pp.77-78.

Furthermore, the key ethical criterion is the degree to which the couple reflects "mutuality, love and justice."⁵⁰ Sexual relationships are an ethical issue, in that people must not use one another--a concern with both casual and promiscuous relationships. Countryman points out that except for the possibility of conceiving children, the "interior goods" of the relationship are the same regardless of whether the union is heterosexual or homosexual.⁵¹

The relational aspect of the marriage ceremony is the mutual vow of unconditional responsibility toward each other unto death. The vow is a witness made before God and in community. It also is an act that becomes foundational in the marriage, and can be relied upon when the relationship goes through difficult or strained periods.

The Commission concluded that to force homosexuals to enter a heterosexual marriage against their nature or inclination not only is tyrannical but does violence to the heterosexual partner and makes a mockery of the concept of marriage. Ultimately it blasphemes the spirit of love and loving sexual expression.

It is estimated that about 50 percent of gay men and 70 percent of lesbian women are in committed, long-term same-gender relationships.⁵² Writes Williams,

My experience in pastoral ministry with the lesbian and gay community...leads me to believe the goal of a "lifelong union" is one most lesbians and gay men desire.⁵³

In a 1979 report produced by the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility, the authors declared that,

we do not think it possible to deny that there are circumstances in which individuals may justifiably choose to enter into a homosexual relationship with the hope of enjoying a companionship and physical expression of sexual love similar to that in which is to be found in marriage.⁵⁴

Bishop Spong has advocated that the Church needs to find ways to affirm people as they "faithfully and responsibly choose and live out other modes of relationship" than that of traditional marriage.⁵⁵ Currently, where no public vows have been witnessed by the faith community, same-gender partners must find alternative ways to stay within the relationship during stressful periods, in an attempt to work out

⁵⁰ Melton, p.75.

⁵¹ Countryman, p.263.

⁵² Hartinger, p.681.

⁵³ Williams, p.139.

⁵⁴ *Homosexual Relationships*, p.52 (cited in Avis, p.147). The report was not officially endorsed by the Church of England.

⁵⁵ Melton, p.77.

the issues or problems--a process that Smith calls "covenanting." He emphasizes this difficulty in a culture lacking social supports and sanctions for same-gender couples.⁵⁶ "The heterosexual community needs to see and experience homosexual unions that are marked by integrity and caring and are filled with grace and beauty," continues Spong, criticizing those heterosexuals who rely on stereotype and distorted rumor to make qualitative differences in the love, caring and sense of mutual responsibility and commitment evident in a relationship based on sexual orientation.⁵⁷

Hartinger advocates the concept of gay marriage, both legally and in the church, as a "conservative measure" to encourage people to live more conventional lifestyles (ie. in a committed, long-term relationship), and to reduce the number who marry heterosexual partners due to social pressure.⁵⁸ He believes that such a measure would strengthen overall commitment to the notion of "family". Church sanction as a means of supporting such unions would lend moral legitimacy to them.

Others disagree that homosexual union should be called "marriage," in that this is an exclusive concept, as well as a sacrament, connoting both legal status and sanction for the procreation of children.⁵⁹ Some question why homosexual couples would want to utilize the marriage vocabulary at all in the expression and symbolization of the nature of union.⁶⁰ For instance, the Metropolitan Community Church, which blesses same-gender relationships, uses the term "Holy Union" in order to distinguish it from the legal status of marriage.⁶¹ The Rev. Dr. Charlie Arehart, minister of Metropolitan Community Church of the Rockies, having performed 385 Holy Union ceremonies in Denver over the past 19 years, reserves the word "matrimony" for heterosexual couples because of the legal aspect of marriage. Other than that, he uses the same criteria in pastoral discernment and theological meaning of the union regardless of the couple's sexual orientation.

Williams, however, states that arguments made against homosexual marriage also can be made against heterosexual marriage⁶² where biological procreation is not a factor. However, the perspective is widespread even among those against "gay marriage" per se, that those excluded from the traditional "familial intergenerational ideal" should not be denied a legitimate designation for their long-term,

⁵⁶ Smith, pp.13-14.

⁵⁷ Spong, p.202.

⁵⁸ Hartinger estimates that 20 percent of all homosexual people do so, pp.682-683. Also see Williams, p.148.

⁵⁹ cf. O'Brien, p.684. O'Brien, Dennis, "Against Gay Marriage--I", *Commonweal*, November 22, 1991, pp.684-685.

⁶⁰ Weil, p.173.

⁶¹ Williams, p.135n.

⁶² Williams, p.135.

committed relationships.⁶³ Episcopal theologian and ethicist Ann Lammers believes that the core theological meaning of marriage would be upheld if marriage were extended to homosexual couples, nor would harm be done to children or the concept of family, nor to the mission of the church.⁶⁴ Several studies have shown, for instance, that children raised in nontraditional households, such as single-parent, gay or lesbian, are just as likely to be heterosexual, "normal" or "well-adjusted" as those raised in traditional households.⁶⁵

Although statistics do not show any significant difference in the proportion of break-up among heterosexual or homosexual couples in committed, lifelong relationships, the problem created by the absence of healing ways to deal with broken relationships in the church would be exacerbated if same-gender unions were sanctioned and celebrated. Historically, in Christian countries, the Church exercised careful control over marriage, divorce and remarriage. Where remarriage was granted, in both the Eastern and Reformation Churches, it was viewed as "a concession to human weakness."⁶⁶ Today, in the Episcopal church, divorce and remarriage are permitted, although remarriage is dependent upon the bishop's approval. There is no liturgical vehicle however, other than through Prayers of the People, to recognize the dissolution of a marriage and promote healing within the context of a church community. "One of the Church's present deficiencies is its exclusionary posture toward those who have "failed" in the conventional arrangement of marriage and family..." states the Diocese of Newark report.⁶⁷ It also advises the Church to be more inclusive of single, separated, widowed and divorced individuals.⁶⁸ This situation points to the need for the theological problem of break-up to be addressed more fully rather than as a justification for refusal to support same-gender unions.

The challenge for the Church is to be able to affirm the traditional understanding of holy union, through marriage, while also affirming alternative holy union arrangements for gay and lesbian persons.⁶⁹ The importance of pre-union counseling, counseling where the relationship and consequently the union was in trouble, and the affirmation of families based on loving relationality rather than the number of adults in the household or their gender are a few ways that this can come about. Of those clergy with whom the Commission talked, all supported counseling before any marriage or union was both undertaken or dissolved. Where such a marriage or union was not the first, the importance was emphasized of determining whether an individual had reflected sufficiently so that a situation wouldn't be repeated.

⁶³ See Elshtain, p.686. Elshtain, Jean. "Against Gay Marriage--II", *Commonweal*, November 22, 1991, pp.685-6.

⁶⁴ Lammers, p.158. Lammers, Ann C. "Whom God Joins, The Church Should Bless," *Anglican Theological Review*, 72:2, pp.158-160.

⁶⁵ Williams, p.144, notes several references.

⁶⁶ Turner, p.28; cf. Lammers, pp.158-159.

⁶⁷ Melton, pp.76-77.

⁶⁸ Melton, p.77.

⁶⁹ See a similar statement by the Diocese of Newark, Melton, p.77.

Conclusion

Union is a sexual expression, an interweaving of our lives. It involves symbol and ceremony, which serves as an announcement and celebration within the larger community. Union also implies fidelity and exclusivity to the relationship, in both loving commitment and sexual expression. Regrettably, in the past gay and lesbian persons either have felt pressure to enter into a heterosexual marriage for the sake of "social acceptability" or to obscure from public knowledge any participation in loving, same-gender relationships. Such pressures have encouraged people to lie, deceive or feel ashamed about their orientation. We do not believe that such pressures, which are both hypocritical and unethical, are part of God's loving intention for humanity. Therefore we believe that it is both morally just and theologically appropriate for the concept of holy union to be based on the intentionality, mutuality and exclusivity of love underlying the relationship regardless of the gender of those involved.

Sacrament and Blessing

According to our Catechism, sacraments are

"outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace."⁷⁰

The sacramental rites include Holy Baptism, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Ordination, Holy Matrimony, Reconciliation of a penitent, and Unction, although we are taught that God's activity is not limited to these rites.

A major aspect of any sacrament is the upholding of persons. One manifestation of this which accords with Christ's teachings, is the sacred nature of loving, human relationship. Traditional sacramental wording points out that a "union is called to be a sign, a manifestation of the sharing of our common humanity at the deepest levels of our nature."⁷⁰

Sociologically, the objectives of marriage have been to clarify social and legal roles, functions, inheritance patterns, and as a public sanction for sexual intimacy and the procreation of children. Biblically, marriage involved a relationship expressed through a binding contract between two families who could reliably support the couple during the coming years.⁷¹ Thus, the marriage focused on the entire family network. Marriage, in New Testament times, was the celebration of a secular arrangement or contract. In the Middle Ages, the Church took a more active part in solemnizing the event,⁷² and in

⁷⁰ 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, pp.857-861.

⁷⁰ Weil, p.174.

⁷¹ Baker, p.96.

⁷² Countryman, p.262.

1439 it was proclaimed to be a sacrament.⁷³

From a Roman Catholic perspective, the sacramentality of marriage is viewed as mirroring the life of Christ and the Church.⁷⁴ In its decision to open the sacrament of ordination to women, the Episcopal Church has affirmed its christological understanding to be based on the Resurrected Christ. Therefore,

there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal.3:28).

Thus, the relationship between Christ and the Church is perceived to be one of the divine and the human, incarnated through the Holy Spirit. As such, issues of specific gender identity are not at issue if the relationship embodies the love of Christ.

Beyond its status as a sacramental rite, Williams describes how marriage can be regarded as a sacrament of God's redemption, God's justice and God's incarnation. He perceives it as a sacrament of redemption by "God's self giving (in Christ) as Love-in-Act," which replaces our estranged human condition with loving human relationship and restores our ability to love others "in Christ".⁷⁵ He argues that it is the recent emphasis on mutuality that makes marriage a sacrament of God's justice. And in sexual expression as union, he contends that marriage can be considered to be a sacrament of incarnation.⁷⁶ Integral to the sacrament of marriage are the couple's vows made in public, witnessed by the priest and community of faith. Rev. Arehart, when meeting with the Commission, agreed that for most couples, a formal ceremony is extremely important in that a public declaration of their love will help them work out whatever issues may be involved in remaining together as a couple.

The Church's role is to bless the union--a union established by the couple.⁷⁷ The church adds its blessing to their vow of commitment.⁷⁸ Among the critical factors that have made long-term marriages work, according to those who spoke at commission meetings, was the vow, or ceremonial commitment. It reinforced their efforts to make the union work. Also mentioned as important was the marriage ceremony itself, with Christ bearing witness to their vows made in the church. The blessing by the Church puts the commitment into a spiritual realm.

Blessing, as does sacrament, ultimately comes from God. The Jewish understanding of blessing is "an

⁷³ Excerpt from the "Report of the Task Force on Changing Patterns of Sexuality and Family Life" (1987), in Melton, p.75.

⁷⁴ Rev. Michael Chamberlain, discussion with the Commission, September 2, 1992.

⁷⁵ Williams, pp.150-151.

⁷⁶ Williams, pp.153,156.

⁷⁷ Weil, p.172.

⁷⁸ Spong, p.200.

acknowledgement of God's creative and redemptive work in the lives of the faithful,"⁷⁹ a perspective that has been carried through Christianity. If a priest gives a blessing, then through ordination and the authority of the Holy Spirit, which is granted by the laying on of hands,⁸⁰ it becomes a sacramental event. Among the various items the Church has blessed are fields, houses, hounds for the hunt, MX missiles, and warships.⁸¹ A blessing of "relationship," such as in anniversaries or in the Holy Matrimony ceremony itself, is at the core value of blessing in the Episcopal Church. The Church's blessing of a relationship is also a profession of community.

Rev. Arehart said that 99 percent of the couples coming to him for holy union blessing have been together one to three years and they want a monogamous relationship.

Avis argues that if homosexuality in itself is not a sin,⁸² and if homosexual committed relationships include the physical expression of affection with "the potential to mirror the sacred and become channels of God's love, as [Avis] ha[s] argued,"⁸³ homosexuals in such relationships should not be denied access to those sacramental rites to which heterosexuals have access.

For a gay couple who had their holy union ceremony last summer and who shared their experience with the Commission, the blessing of the Church was very important to them. Both have been deeply committed to a Christian life and to witnessing to that commitment. They believe that public recognition and community support of their vows are vital to the communal aspect of Christianity, and therefore to the covenant of their union. The public affirmation allows for sustained support from the community since it is aware of the significance of their commitment. Such affirmation also holds persons responsible to God for the fulfillment of their commitment.

A priest blessing same-gender unions is doing so as an official of the church. The objective of blessing same-gender couples should be, claims Williams, "because the Church wants to celebrate and bless the life of that couple in the life of the church."⁸⁴ Anything short of this would be hypocritical, and not take seriously the role of blessing. States Lammers, "the Church blesses a marriage union because we think that God blesses it."⁸⁵ If the Church chose not to bless committed same-gender relationship, it would be because it believed them to be theologically and morally wrong.⁸⁶ If, as has been argued above, the

⁷⁹ Weil, p.174.

⁸⁰ *1979 Book of Common Prayer*, pp.860-861.

⁸¹ Spong, p.201.

⁸² See *Sexuality* section above.

⁸³ Avis, p.151. He is referring to the right for practicing homosexuals to be ordained.

⁸⁴ Williams, p.148.

⁸⁵ Lammers, p.158.

⁸⁶ cf. Monti, p.154. Monti, Joseph. "The Norm of Heterosexual Marriage," *Anglican Theological Review*, 72:2, pp.165-167.

intentionality underneath them is not considered wrong, then the arguments against such blessings are invalid. Bishop Spong has publicly stated his support of the church's blessing of same-gender couples as "inevitable, right, and a positive good."⁸⁷ In Canada, pastors have done house blessings, including those who live in it—which has been used as an implicit way to bless the relationship of the gay or lesbian couples who resides there.⁸⁸

Williams believes that expanding the concept of marriage to couples regardless of sexual orientation is preferable to developing a new status of blessing for same-gender relationships.⁸⁹

Conclusion

We recognize that evolution of our understanding of God's will for humanity is still taking place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our church tradition, likewise, evolves. In this sense, our human understanding is historically conditioned, and open to transformation. Certain life events belong in the realm of the church (baptism, marriage, unction, burial), regardless of sexual orientation, and these events need to be recognized, as the Church is the only place for genuine spiritual transformation. The bearing of witness to a relationship is important as a basis for deepening the love within the relationship, the commitment to exclusivity, and of its relation to Christ and the Church. The value of such blessings is that they strengthen the spiritual nature of the relationship, that of the parish community and that of the Church. We believe that the Episcopal Church should solemnize same-gender relationships in the same spirit that it does opposite-gender relationships in the rite of Holy Matrimony. We also suggest a name other than Holy Matrimony, as concluded earlier. Even if the Church overall is not yet ready to designate this service as a formal sacramental rite, it is nonetheless most appropriate to begin by blessing these relationships, much as did the early Church for marital unions. Solemnization as a sacrament may evolve, God willing, as did the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Summary of Commission conclusions

If we say that our love for one another is God-given and that sexual expression is one form of this love, then that will lead us to certain conclusions, especially that such expression of love be available to all who freely and mutually enter into enduring, committed loving relationships.

Sexuality itself, as part of our humanity from God, is moral. The moral concern is in how it is expressed. When mutual love expresses itself sexually, and where mutual fidelity is not being compromised, sexual expression is not sinful. We affirm that the precise nature of a committed couple's sexual expression should be between the persons in the relationship and God.

Union is a sexual expression, an interweaving of our lives. It involves symbol and ceremony, which serves as an announcement and celebration within the larger community. Union also implies fidelity and exclusivity to the relationship, in both loving commitment and sexual expression. The bearing of witness

⁸⁷ Spong, p.198.

⁸⁸ Spong, p.203.

⁸⁹ Williams, p.137.

to a relationship is important as a basis for deepening the love within the relationship, the commitment to exclusivity, and of its relation to Christ and the Church.

We affirm that sexual orientation itself is neither good nor evil, nor a matter of sin or righteousness. We also have been impressed with the growing scientific evidence and testimony of homosexual persons that sexual orientation is, in most instances, determined by birth, rather than a chosen lifestyle. To ask one group of people to suffer for the sake of their human condition is unthinkable. Today, we know that this is both wrong and unjust, and we cannot condone any double standard applied on the basis of sexual orientation. We believe that social pressures which have coerced homosexual persons to attempt to lead a heterosexual lifestyle or to hide their orientation are both hypocritical and unethical, are not part of God's loving intention for humanity. Therefore we believe that it is both morally just and theologically appropriate for the concept of holy union to be based on the intentionality, mutuality and exclusivity of love underlying a relationship regardless of the gender those involved.

We recognize that evolution of our understanding of God's will for humanity is still taking place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, our human understanding including our church tradition is historically conditioned, and open to transformation. Certain life events belong in the realm of the Church as this is the place where genuine spiritual transformation can occur. The value of such blessings is that they strengthen the spiritual nature of the relationship, that of the parish community and that of the Church. We believe that the Episcopal Church should solemnize same-gender relationships in the same spirit that it does opposite-gender relationships in the rite of Holy Matrimony. We also suggest a name other than Holy Matrimony. Even if the Church overall is not yet ready to designate this service as a formal sacramental rite, it is nonetheless most appropriate to begin by blessing these relationships, much as did the early Church for marital unions. Solemnization as a sacrament may evolve, God willing, as did the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Since any such covenant made before God and a community of faith is sacramental in nature, we support the blessing of such unions regardless of sexual orientation.

Recommendations for Action

"Anglican ethics at its best respects scientific evidence," writes Lammers.⁹⁰ Some have argued that the Holy Spirit is at work within the Church, and is leading it to new insights on the basis of sexual orientation.⁹¹ We see the need for the Episcopal Church to say that it recognizes and affirms the legitimacy of homosexual lifestyle in itself. The Church also must pay attention to consistency. For instance, is sexual intimacy when an expression of a committed loving relationship ever affirmable outside of traditional marriage? We are convinced that this must be the case for same-gender couples who are ineligible for Holy Matrimony.

We as a Commission have reached a consensus that theological and morally the blessing of relationships should occur within the Church:

We believe that loving commitment to share a life together in Christian community is a holy state, and we recommend that it be given the Church's blessing. As a result, we fully support a position of blessing

⁹⁰ Lammers, p.158. She is an assistant professor of theology and ethics at CDSP.

⁹¹ See Radner and Sumner, p.911.

life-long committed unions regardless of sexual orientation. The blessing of same-gender unions is right, just and should be part of our Church rites. We believe this position to be justified scripturally, theologically and ethically. We are convinced that God's concern is over faithfulness, of intimacy being rooted in enduring love and respect for one another. For this reason, we advocate the blessing of only true, committed relationships.

The open blessing of unions would facilitate public respect for gay and lesbian people and the integrity of their lifestyle. In this way they can be the persons they have been called to be, and fully affirmed, participating members of our Christian community. For these parishioners, and for St. Barnabas itself, such a stand publicly affirms the civil and ecclesiastical rights of all of God's children. It is a stand for justice.

Currently, until the Church Constitution and Canons are changed, same-gender marriage within the church is not an option, due to Title I, Canon 18, Sec. 2(a), forbidding clergy to solemnize any marriage unless the parties can legally contract a marriage according to state statutes. Daniel Stevick argues, however, that this violates the principle of church-state separation where the priest serves as an officer of the state as well as the church.⁹² Traditionally, Williams argues, the church has recognized marriages that the state didn't allow such as during periods of American slavery or where inter-racial marriages weren't legally recognized.⁹³

The sociological realities of the Church, however, are situated in the context of civil and legal mores surrounding the official sanction of unions. For instance, same-gender partnerships are legally recognized in Denmark. Some American cities including New York and San Francisco have "domestic partnership" rights for city employees.⁹⁴ Although U.S. society overall is slowly moving in the direction of acknowledging the rights of same-gender couples, the recent passage of Amendment 2 points to the backlash in our own backyard. Because of its passages and the challenges that follow, we are concerned about possible ramifications due to the public hysteria over sexual orientation. Such hysteria unfortunately exists in our Episcopal Church as well as in our community.

We are aware of the hostility that our clergy may face as authorized representatives of the Church leadership, in both the civic community and within the Diocese. The clergy have committed themselves to witnessing prophetically for what they believe to represent both social justice and God's intention for humanity.

We as a commission feel called to a prophetic stand on this issue. However, we also are concerned that by acting fully upon what we believe to be right, St. Barnabas could turn into a focal point for public hysteria that could endanger this very community which traditionally has been a safe place for all people of faith, without qualification. Thus, such action could harm the very people it was intended to support. In acknowledging the importance of the welfare of our community in view of the widespread ignorance and emotional hysteria, and injustice that such hysteria fosters, it is with this hesitation that the commission advocates a moderate position, one based on "timing."

⁹² Stevick, *Canon Law: A Handbook* (Seabury, 1965), p.150, cited by Williams, p.146.

⁹³ Williams, pp.146-147.

⁹⁴ Williams, p.147.

Political expediency is the only ground upon which we as a Commission justify taking anything less than a full advocacy stand for the blessing of same-gender Holy Unions. We are concerned for the welfare of our gay and lesbian parishioners and for our parish as a whole. We realize that many have grown weary of delaying action to which they feel called.

For the present time, we suggest refraining from full-scale Holy Union liturgies in the parish. At the time that we can safely perform these, and with what we hope will be Diocesan and National Church sanction, we suggest that same-gender ceremonies be called something other than marriage, such as Holy Union which is increasingly used in churches which do hold such ceremonies.

Admittedly, a moderate position with a commitment to fullness at this time can initially affirm the rights and values of committed, loving relationships, regardless of the couple's sexual orientation, without attracting undue ire by "crossing the line" beyond what has been done elsewhere in the Episcopal Church. Because of the conservative tradition of the Colorado Diocese on matters related to gender and sexuality, we expect that the actions we recommend taking immediately will be beyond the normative practice of most other parishes and that our more conservative members of the Diocese may criticize us according to their own standards of what they think is correct or appropriate. For this reason, we are recommending actions that technically be within the bounds of the existing liturgical flexibility of the Book of Common Prayer, although we support every step possible to move toward the Diocesan sanction of liturgy for Holy Union ceremonies.

Short-term recommendations

1. We affirm the continuing commitment of this parish to include all members in its pastoral care, and the importance for this parish of being a safe haven for all.
2. Diocese of California Bishop William Swing has authorized a liturgy for use in his diocese called "The Affirmation of a Relationship," which can be used between The Prayers of the People and The Peace at the Sunday Holy Eucharist service.⁹⁵ It is intended to not resemble a marriage liturgy.⁹⁶ *We recommend that a copy of this liturgy be made available for study as to how well it might suit St. Barnabas' needs, and if recommended to refer it along with this report to Bishop Winterrowd for authorization of its use in this diocese.*
3. *Through The Prayers of the People we recommend that St. Barnabas pray publicly for the coming of the day when injustices being committed against homosexual persons are overturned, and they can enjoy the freedom and fullness of Sacramental life within the Church and equality of treatment in the civic community.*
4. Based on the flexible adaptation of assorted prayers, collects or liturgy to the particular occasion

⁹⁵ Williams, p.136.

⁹⁶ Swing rejects liturgies resembling marriage ceremonies in that they represent "second class" marriages, a stance he holds possibly to the Church's lack of full affirmation of the legitimacy of committed same-gender relationships. See "The Bishop's Newsletter," The Episcopal Church in the Diocese of California, VI:15, November 21, 1986, cited in Williams, p.136

or circumstance encouraged in the *Book of Occasional Services* and in the *Book of Common Prayer*, there currently exists the opportunity to bless couples celebrating anniversaries, rings, etc., in the context of worship. We are asking God's blessing on their growth in mutual love and fidelity, traits which are fundamental to our Christian faith. In this manner, sexual orientation is irrelevant to a couple's capacity to exercise these traits. *We recommend that such blessings occur free of the hypocrisy of a double standard on sexual orientation, and the exclusionary injustice that it creates. Wherever blessings might occur, during Sunday Holy Eucharist daily Holy Eucharist, morning or evening prayer, or during a house blessing, we encourage the Vestry to authorize our clergy to encourage such "blessing" occasions and to do so irrespective of sexual orientation.*

5. Under the rector's guidance, we recommend that any other means of recognizing and blessing unions, regardless of sexual orientation, currently available or not in explicit violation of the national Church or Diocesan Constitution and Canons be available for use within the parish.

6. Parish education needs to be undertaken on human sexuality, in accord with the program being developed by the Diocesan Commission on Human Sexuality, and the 1991 General Convention request. *We recommend that such educational programming be continued beyond the end of the diocesan program so that we as a parish may begin to discuss many of the concepts that our commission has studied and reflected upon over the past year.* A secondary intention of such education is to "equip the saints for ministry," in helping our parishioners be able to discuss such topics with their families, friends, neighbors, colleagues and others with whom they may come into contact.

7. Those persons with whom the Commission talked who either had been through a holy union ceremony or, as clergy had or would be willing to perform one, spoke of the centrality of pre-union counseling. Fr. Halverstadt has said that he views about 10 hours of premarital counseling as necessary prior to the marriage. If he were to bless a union, he believes that the same amount of counseling would be essential. In such counseling, he looks for the presence of the couple's love and commitment to each other, and wants them to affirm this commitment, covenant and accountability to each other. Finally, he looks for evidence of mutual love, willingness to grow together both personally and spiritually, and for *permanence* of commitment. These are characteristics he would want to see regardless of the gender orientation of the relationship. *We recommend that all who would like to have their relationship recognized as a union in the context of liturgy in the parish go through such a counseling process in ways that help them discern the soundness of their relationship based on loving commitment, and once discerned, to seek ways to encourage its growth. The decision to recognize the union as such should lie with the rector.*

8. We recognize that even following through with a moderate position may incur anger and hostility elsewhere in the Church and in the civic community. *We urge both the clergy and the same-gender couples involved in any public blessing to be prepared for possible ramifications, and be willing to undertake them in a prophetic spirit for the good of the entire community.*

9. *We urge both the clergy and laity of St. Barnabas to work publicly, in what ever ways they can within the Church and the civic community toward developing a concrete timetable by which St. Barnabas will be able to move to blessing through Holy Union liturgies without fear of retribution to the parish.*

10. *We urge the Vestry to adopt our recommendations, and to share our report with the parish, the Diocese, and with the National Church.*

Ultimately we recognize that these short-term recommendations will serve as educational tools for those parishioners who may be comfortable with holy union expressed as traditional marriage but need to learn and experience the depth of meaning that commitment to other types of relationship can bring.

What we may temporarily refrain from in act, may we say loudly and clearly as our theological ideal, affirming those in our midst who suffer without the opportunity to celebrate their Holy Union at the altar--just yet. We affirm that their suffering and the injustices that cause it--within the Church and in the civic community--may have prophetic power.

Long-term recommendation

Since the moderate position we recommend is intended for the short-term only, we encourage the rector and worship committee to collect and study liturgies of Holy Union that have been done elsewhere in the Episcopal Church.

Where either of the couple has children or, as a couple, they foresee the possibility of adopting children, a commitment to rearing and caring for children should be part of the liturgy, as should a commitment to add to the common life together as the Body of Christ and the Church.

Ramifications

One of the central issues for any change or transformation within the church has to do with the basis of authority and whether it is in accord with the will of God. The Episcopal Church has relied on a balance of scripture, tradition and reason and to reflect on controversial issues. Human experience is a part of our capacity to reason. Within scripture, for Christians the New Testament supersedes the Levitical law upon which the Hebrew Scriptures are based. Furthermore, as Episcopalians, we understand ourselves as Church to be the Body of the Resurrected Christ. For instance, when the ordination of woman was being debated, the basis of authority was held to be that of the Resurrected Christ; in Christ there is neither male nor female (cf. Gal.3:28). However, warns theologian Carter Heyward, even the Bible "does not, and cannot, stand alone: not for [A]nglicans."⁹⁷

We are concerned about those persons who have unjustly projected various concerns onto a homosexual orientation, and a culture which has done so. Biblical content has been taken out of context and applied both abstractly and universally in a way that is unjust and oppressive to others. Although they may claim adherence to Biblical literalism, they have shown relativism in selecting Biblical verses which support their point while ignoring others that may contradict their intention or actions.

We are aware that our position of holy union understood as a mutually loving and enduring, committed relationship, with sexual orientation being no more relevant than whether the couple intends--or can--procreate, is a change in the tradition of the Church. We are convinced that this understanding is in accord with the intention behind Scripture, especially the Two Great Commandments, which for Christians sum all the Law and the Prophets (Matt.22:37-39). We also are convinced by human reason and the experiences, both heterosexual and homosexual, that have been witnessed to us in our discussions,

⁹⁷ Heyward, p.78. Heyward, Carter. *Touching our Strength*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.

that our position is in accord both with God's loving intention for humanity and with the need for social stability in supporting enduring and loving relationships.

However, we also are aware that some persons hold different views and concerns. In attempting to consider the interests and needs of as many people as possible, we have summarized the interests of concerns of some of those persons or groups who may be materially affected by our recommendation, and what we believe may be a helpful pastoral response to them.

Stakeholders

Vestry

Historically the St. Barnabas Vestry has been very sensitive to the needs of gay and lesbian parishioners. Yet we recognize that the task of this Commission has the potential for creating conflict within the Church. We applaud the Vestry's serious consideration of this issue and the potential ramifications that may occur should it choose to endorse the Commission recommendation. The Vestry's realistic concern with "bottom-line" issues such as finances, membership and parish stability have been weighed in the Commission's consideration, and we have sought and encouraged members of diverse backgrounds and interests to participate on the commission or share their experiences and insights with us. We would be willing to meet with the Vestry and further explain our process of deliberation, the methodology utilized, and conclusions, if the Vestry might so wish.

Al Halverstadt, rector

He has expressed strong interest in the possibility of being able to bless the union of same-gender couples within the parish setting. If the vestry approves, his doing so could provoke attention and concern from the diocese, media coverage, and possible harassment in the wake of the passage of Amendment 2. It is hoped that the deliberation of the commission, the support of the vestry and this written document will support his commitment.

Other St. Barnabas clergy and those in the ordination process

Paula Nesbitt was asked how she would feel about the issue, as the response could put her, Pat Griffin, and those in the ordination process at risk with the diocese. She responded by affirming her commitment to prophecy, and that the root of the word *obey* was "to listen closely," not simply to follow orders.

Bishop of Colorado

Bishop Winterrowd represents the authority of the Episcopal Church in Colorado. We recognize that whatever we as a parish undertake, it will be associated and ultimately reflected on him. It is partly for this reason that we recommend a moderate position at this time, while the issue continues to be deliberated at Diocesan and national levels. We also acknowledge that what the Bishop has said he wants to occur in the Diocese is so occurring in this parish through the study, reflection and recommendation of this Commission. This report, then, is offered in support of our Bishop and his goals of having parishes seriously discuss issues surrounding sexuality. We also prophetically stand behind him in his concern for the spiritual well-being of all our Church members, regardless of sexual orientation, when in opposing Amendment 2 affirmed that through our Baptismal Covenant and his "understanding of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ" that "all people are children of God."⁹⁸ We invite him into conversation with this report, in helping us search for additional ways in which we can move toward full affirmation of the dignity of loving relationship of all persons regardless of sexual orientation.

Gay and lesbian persons in the parish

As a constituency of both singles and couples, this group is diverse in its interests and opinions on this issue. The Commission hopes that its recommendation may serve to affirm those who do want to enter into the process of having their relationship blessed and, when the church can sanction it, perhaps a Holy Union ceremony. We hope that by instituting a blessing at this time, all our gay and lesbian members may feel supported not only by being given the choice, but by the public affirmation and support for loving, committed relationships regardless of their sexual orientation. We also hope that our affirmation of gay and lesbian members of the parish, and our commitment to act on that affirmation may serve to reinforce St. Barnabas as a welcoming place for those feeling marginalized elsewhere.

Married people in the parish

We affirm that our recommendation in no way detracts from the theological, spiritual, sacramental and social importance of marriage, in both church and society. For heterosexual couples, ie. those who can enter into a marriage covenant, marriage as Holy Union will continue to be emphasized as the traditional and usual mode of loving union before God. As such, marriage is the model of how Christ and the Church bless a relationship, and the standard for mutually loving commitment within any union. Furthermore, we believe that by also affirming as good those loving, committed relationships of same-gender couples, we will be taking a prophetic step toward mitigating those social pressures that may coerce homosexual persons to enter into heterosexual marriage with disastrous results for all.

Children and youth in the parish

We recognize that our youth could be subject to chides and peer pressure from friends outside the parish who hold narrower perspectives on God and God's loving intention for people. For this reason, and as a means of teaching Christian moral values to our children, we hope that if our recommendation is adopted the blessing of relationships be openly discussed in Sunday School and youth groups, emphasizing why the blessing of committed, loving relationships is an important part of our Christian lifestyle and our parish family. To do so will allow children to ask questions, which can begin substantive discussions on topics such as love, sexuality and sexual orientation in a Christian context, human relationships, Church Sacraments and blessings. The encouragement of discussion of such content should be especially affirming to children of gay or lesbian parents, or to children who have recognized themselves to be gay or lesbian. We hope that, in the extreme, our doing so could even save some lives, emotionally and perhaps physically. Ideally, we hope that a member of the Commission might be invited to be involved with some of the discussions.

Parents

We recognize that if the Vestry approves our recommendation, children may be asking their parents about the blessing of same-gender couples. We hope that parents would understand why the recommendation is being supported, as it is being made in our best judgment guided by what we fully believe is the Holy Spirit. We have chosen to emphasize the values of caring and love amidst our diversity. If the parents are conservative in discussing such matters with children, they might feel that what they had thought was

⁹⁸ Winterrowd, William J. "Winterrowd opposes Amendment #2, cites Baptismal Covenant," *The Colorado Episcopalian*, October-November, 1992, p.1.

a safe environment has become one in which their values are contradicted. We are aware that a few could even leave the parish. We also remind parents that they may not always know the future sexual orientation of their children. Parents of a gay or lesbian child might see our recommendation as an affirmation that their children someday may upheld and supported in their loving relationships as has been done for them.

Divorced people in the Church

The Church's response to the divorced has been intended as a pastoral response, although we recognize that the Church needs to reflect seriously on its theological and social treatment of single persons so as to not devalue, explicitly or implicitly, their Christian lifestyle.

Divorced gay and lesbian people and their ex-spouses

We recognize that our recommendation could trigger anger among ex-spouses, although we suggest that it may be bringing to the surface anger that has already existed. We also recognize that our recommendation may serve as a preventative measure to future mismarriages. Our recommendation, however, is not a judgment on existing or previous relationships nor does it seek to undermine relationships.

Feminists

We are aware that many feminists--gay and straight--don't go to church because of patriarchal hurt. We hope that feminists in the parish, female and male, would support our recommendation as an affirmation of equality and an invalidation of those patriarchal structures that traditionally have oppressed and marginalized people. As a Commission, we recognize that we haven't yet had explicit input from lesbians, although we are aware lesbians have a greater tendency to couple and remain monogamous. Therefore, we hope that our recommendation would affirm their freedom and their relationships. Although our recommendation at this time is less than we desire for the parish, we are committed to the full equality that feminists support.

Members of this Commission

Because of the time and effort invested in a process of education, reflection and spiritual discernment on this issue, members of the commission hope that this report will be utilized by the Vestry, not only for its own deliberation on the issue, but as a vehicle to communicate to other parishes, the Bishop of Colorado, the Diocesan Commission on Human Sexuality and the National Church. We also hope for feedback from the Vestry, and hopefully from the Bishop, on our process.

We are aware of the possibility that some parishioners may not understand the basis of our recommendation, and others simply may choose to leave rather than to try to listen and learn, and possibly to grow. However, we believe that as in the past, when confronted with diverse and challenging perspectives, our parishioners will remain and struggle in an attempt to understand and learn. We also are aware that our stand for justice may attract new members.

Nonetheless, we believe that our advocacy of this position represents an issue of justice. We as a commission cannot condone any action that denies any people of God access to God and the rites of Christ's Church when they are sought with religious integrity and Christian commitment. We are committed to justice among all of God's people, and abhor any practice that categorically grants privilege to one group while denying it to another group. We cannot conceivably approve of excluding any group of people from the opportunity to affirm before God and the Christian community their commitment to

a life-long, loving union that includes the full sexual expression of human love.

We do not seek to alienate ourselves from the Church, which is why we have stayed within what we currently can do. We are choosing to work with in the framework of the diocese to seek a resolution that is just for all God's children.

In the classical interpretation of the word "obedience," we look to its etymological source: ob + audire, meaning to hear near, or to listen closely. The intention is that by listening closely, we may discern greater wisdom in helping us perceive what we ought to do. We have tried to do this over the past year, in listening to one another and our diverse perspectives, and in listening to those in the community who have been involved in Holy Union ceremonies and those who will not be. It is in the root spirit of this obedience form which we take our prophetic commitment: *Obedience*, to listen for the sounds of justice, God's call to all faithful people.

Conclusion

Bishop Wolfrum, writing in *The Colorado Episcopalian* (March 1992), pointed out that the New Covenant makes clear the intention of the Old Covenant laws and pronouncements: to teach people how to love each other and how to live together amid their diversity. He cites Peter and Paul as an example, who made peace despite grievous differences of view on Christian practice, namely whether Jewish Christians should eat with uncircumcised Gentile Christians, and that the chief criterion in their accord was that in Christ we are bound to share community with those whose practices don't necessarily agree with we believe to be important. The point for us today is that as a Church we are called to tolerance and to respect the integrity of other members in the midst of our differences. Jesus was clear on this when he said,

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? (Mt.7:1-3)

As a Church, and as part of an ecumenical Christian community, we too often have strayed from our mandate to love our neighbor as ourself, when that neighbor's views and practices don't agree with our own. Faithful Christians have been persecuted, ostracized, beaten and humiliated because of intolerance. Those Christians who have suffered most, related to the issue this Commission was asked to address, have been the gay and lesbian communities. It is with great regret that we have had to recommend any position short of complete and immediate blessing of Holy Unions, in the context of the joyful witness, worship and celebration that our great liturgical tradition offers, regardless of the sexual orientation of the faithful, committed couple.

The commission is deeply pained by intolerance in the Church, and in the civic community, witnessed by the support of such measures as Colorado's Amendment 2 which has allowed not only the discrimination, harassment and persecution of homosexual persons but similarly has targeted heterosexual brothers and sisters who publicly support their right to nondiscrimination and equal opportunity. It is only through our greater commitment to St. Barnabas as a safe and welcome haven for all faithful Christians, and our concern for jeopardizing that status, that we have recommended an intermediate position for the short-term. As both our desire and our goal, we urge continual prayer and active faith witness toward

being able to become the Church that represents and symbolizes Christ to the world.

In this spirit, we affirm the words of our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Edmond Browning, when he spoke to the 1991 Integrity convention,

Is it possible to know the pain of what you have known and still find it within yourself to remain in the body where so much of that pain has occurred?...Hang in there.... You are contributing to the health and well-being of the whole church."⁹⁹

St. Barnabas as a parish, and the Church as the Body of Christ, needs all its members. In the words of St. Paul,

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1Cor.12:12-13,26)

The Church needs to be blessing its members' capacity for mutual love, fidelity and trust, that these may be enriched for their ministry to all creation. Let us strive toward the moment when we as a parish--and as a Church--can rejoice in heart and liturgy with those among us who have suffered for so long.

⁹⁹ The first sentence was from his sermon at the opening Eucharist, while the others were from his address the following day. *The Living Church*, p.6.

St. Barnabas Parish Commission on the Solemnization of Relationships

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ST. BARNABAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

1280 Vine Street
Denver, Colorado 80206
(303) 388-6469

The Parish Church of Capitol Hill

St. Barnabas Parish Commission on
the Solemnization of Relationships

Summary recommendation

We consensually agree that the Christian blessing of the holy union of faithful couples committed to life-long, loving monogamous relationships not be limited on the basis of sexual orientation. Because marriage has legal as well as ecclesial status, we recommend that this term be used only for those (heterosexual) couples that qualify for its dual status. Furthermore, because of our great concern for our homosexual parishioners in this current hostile political climate, and for our Bishop's support in an ambivalent diocesan climate, we recommend for the short-term those types of blessings such as can currently be done within the context of our authorized liturgies.

Short-term recommendations

1. This parish continue as a safe haven for all, in worship and pastoral care.
2. St. Barnabas study other liturgies, such as that authorized by Bishop Swing (Cal), and recommend one or more to Bishop Winterrowd for authorization.
3. Through Prayers of the People, St. Barnabas pray for the day when homosexual persons can enjoy fullness of Sacramental life within the Church.
4. All wanting their relationship recognized as a union in a parish liturgy go through pre-union counseling. The decision to recognize the union lies with the rector.
5. Vestry authorize clergy to encourage authorized "blessing" occasions, such couples celebrating anniversaries, rings, etc., irrespective of sexual orientation, during Holy Eucharist and other services.
6. Under the rector's guidance, any other means of recognizing and blessing unions currently not in explicit violation of the national Church or Diocesan Constitution and Canons be available for use within the parish.
7. Parish education on human sexuality undertaken in accord with the Diocesan Commission on Human Sexuality be continued and the material studied by the Commission be discussed reflected upon.
8. Both clergy and same-gender couples involved in any public blessing should be willing to undertake possible ramifications in a prophetic spirit.
9. Both clergy and laity develop a concrete timetable and work publicly toward being able to hold Holy Union liturgies without fear of Church or community retribution.
10. Vestry adopt these recommendations, and share the report with the parish, Diocese, and National Church.

Long-term recommendation

Since the moderate position we recommend is intended for the short-term only, we encourage the rector and worship committee to collect and study liturgies of Holy Union that have been done elsewhere in the Episcopal Church so that we may be able to pro-actively lead the diocese and serve in a consulting role to other churches and their leaders on this very important topic.

Where either of the couple has children or, as a couple, they foresee the possibility of adopting children, a commitment to rearing and caring for children should be part of all Holy Union liturgies, as should a commitment to add to the common life together as the Body of Christ and the Church.

A Response to the Report on the Solemnization of Relationships Prepared by St. Barnabas Church, Denver

Because a summary of the report prepared by St. Barnabas Church, Denver, on the Solemnization of Relationships has been circulated among the clergy, I would like to share some observations. My first concern is that this issue, "the blessing of same-sex unions," raised by St. Barnabas, could result in serious division within the diocese. We can avoid polarization if clergy and lay people who have strong points of view about the blessing of gay union, value their membership in the body of the church more than their strong beliefs. In the past our practice at all levels of the church has been to hold debates, write resolutions, count votes and declare winners and losers. I am convinced that process will not work. As Christians who take seriously our membership in the body of which Jesus Christ is the head, we value our membership by praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which means intentional dialogue to inform our beliefs, regardless of what they may be.

The St. Barnabas report is important because it may be a catalyst for dialogue. After reading the report, I can say that the quality of the process followed in the congregation and the depth of the study reflects good work. However, there is ambiguity in the life of the church and this same ambiguity is reflected in the St. Barnabas report. For example, resolution A104sa of the 70th General Convention in 1991 came about after a lengthy debate in which strongly held beliefs could not be resolved.

Resolved, that the 70th General Convention of the Episcopal Church affirms that the teaching of the Episcopal Church is that physical sexual expression is appropriate only within the lifelong monogamous "union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind" "intended by God for their mutual joy, for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity and, where it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord" as set forth in the *Book of Common Prayer*; and be it further Resolved, That this Church continue to work to reconcile the discontinuity between this teaching and the experience of many members of this body; and be it further Resolved, That this General Convention confesses our failure to lead and to resolve this discontinuity through legislative efforts based upon resolutions directed at singular and various aspects of this issue.

The St. Barnabas Report reflects the same ambiguity. It says, for example, "A priest blessing same gender unions is doing so as an official of the church and this is done because the church wants to celebrate and bless the life of that couple in the life of the church."

If by this, church is defined as institution, then this statement is incorrect because the institution has declared by resolution of General Convention that the only appropriate sexual expression is within the lifelong monogamous union of husband and wife. A clergy person then cannot do what the church has not authorized her or him to do.

If, on the other hand, by church we mean the Body of Christ, of which Jesus is the head, then the faithful gathered are the church and the faithful then in many ways set their own standards for what they will do.

HEREIN LIES THE DILEMMA AND WHERE THE HEALTHY DIALOGUE CAN TAKE PLACE.

January 24, 1993

To: St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

From: Rev. Dr. Paula D. Nesbitt

Subject: Commission on the Blessing of Relationships--Annual Report

The St. Barnabas Vestry, early in 1992, asked a parish commission to form for the purpose of studying and recommending to it a position for the parish on the blessing of same-gender unions. Currently, the Episcopal Church's only such ceremony is marriage, which is a legal status as well as a Church sacrament, and therefore open only to heterosexual couples. The commission's task also supports the 1991 General Convention's request that parishes and dioceses study and discuss issues of sexuality.

The process of our commission involved reading, studying, discussing, listening and praying together which modeled the House of Bishops' March 1992 commitment to seek to build unity amid diversity. Prior to discussing any positions on our task, through study and reflection we sought to learn more about the underlying theological and spiritual themes. We explored both intention and content of Biblical scripture, theology, and other writings. Our concern was to discern which aspects hold enduring authority as God's intention for humanity through the Church, and which are the result of particular historical and cultural understandings.

From April to June, twice monthly we read, reflected and discussed various Biblical, Anglican tradition and contemporary readings. The topics included *love* (what is God's intention for us regarding love?), *sexuality* (is sexual orientation chosen or not, and what are the various understandings of scripture and tradition on sexuality?), *union and relationship* (what is the essence of marriage, and of committed same-gender relationships?), *sacrament and blessing* (what are Church sacraments and blessings?), and possible *ramifications* of whatever the Commission might decide. Over the summer we met twice monthly to listen to the views and experiences of those affected, including a same-gender couple who had a Holy Union ceremony in another denomination, and various clergy who had conducted such ceremonies, who might consider doing so, or did not foresee that as an option for their church. Both traditional and progressive perspectives were represented. During the fall we met monthly to reflect and consider various groups of people in our parish who could be affected one way or another by our recommendation, so that we might keep in mind their interests and concerns. An article summarizing the Commission's process appeared in the October *Steeple Bell*. In November the Commission reached a consensus on the position it would recommend to the vestry. A comprehensive report has been drafted and currently is being reviewed by Commission members. It is expected to be given to the vestry in early February.

I would like to thank the Commission members for all of their studying and hard work: Pam Bliss, Lucille Bollinger, Garry Horle, Steve Kick, Terry Lewis, Conrad Riley, Jim Scheffe, Jim Steed and Judy Ward. I also would like to add that it is nothing short of the miracle of God's grace that with our diversity of viewpoints and experiences we would freely and enthusiastically reach a consensual recommendation.

Sample
materials

INITIAL STAKEHOLDERS LIST

Parish
Diocese
House of Bishops
1994 General Convention
Members of the Commission
Parish Clergy
Albert Halverstadt
Gay/Lesbian People
Homophobic People
Bi-sexual People
Non-Gay or Lesbian People
Homoambiguous People (not homophobic but unsure)
Traditional, moderate, liberal, of no opinion parish
members
Those who question the Church (in the Church)
Those who question the Parish (in the Parish)
Those committed to the Church/Parish
Feminists
Those estranged from the Church
People of Color
Denver's Gay/Lesbian Community
Children/Youth
Media
C.F.V. (?by recorder)
Trans-sexuals - pre and post operative, straight or
Gay/Lesbian
Gay/Lesbian parents
Persons with AIDS (P.W.A.), persons with HIV
Friends of Gays/Lesbians (P.F.L.A.G.)
Boy Scouts
Colorado Aids Project
Metropolitan Community Church
Colorado Family Value Coalition
Gay/Lesbian couples in the parish thinking about Holy Union
Legal ramifications; ie. witnesses to the Union

St. Barnabas Commission on Blessing of Unions

Meeting 1
April 1, 1992

Agenda

Opening Prayer

1. Introduce task

Introduce selves, interest in issue, why want to be on commission

Discuss recent House of Bishops meeting; mandate model for our process

1. consider the role of our community in the life and ministry of the Episcopal Church
2. take time for theological reflection and discussion in a context of prayer and common worship
3. strengthen the bonds that unite us in our common life and shared ministry
4. read statement

2. Discuss overview of process, time framework

3. Need mediator, secretary.

4. List themes (opportunity to add next week, as well)

5. Identify stakeholders (opportunity to add next week, as well)

Closing Prayer

St. Barnabas Commission on Blessing of Unions

Themes to Explore

April 29, 1992 Love

what is love? what is God's intention for us regarding love?
loving God, loving one another
the expression of love
the relationship between love and sexual activity

May 13, 1992 Sexuality

what do we mean by "gender"? how does it affect Biblical understanding?
sexual activity: same sex, heterosexual
what does scripture say?
is sexuality chosen or not?
homosexuality and sin, hatred
position of the Church (has it changed historically? If so, why?)
single (gay or straight)
divorce
what does scripture say?
one body, many members (widows, widowers)
what is the role of the widow(er) in the Church?
promiscuity

May 27, 1992 Union and relationship

bearing witness to the relationship of Christ and the Church
what is the meaning of union? what is the essence of relationships?
marriage as relationship
what does scripture say?
how the Church views the purpose of marriage
sacramental purpose of marriage
what is the relationship between this parish family and
traditional marriage?
same-sex relationships
gay, lesbian
position of the Church (has it changed historically? If so, why?)
what is the relationship between this parish family and same-gender
unions?
ramifications of church recognizing same-sex relationships

June 10, 1992 Sacrament and Blessing

definition of "sacrament" as defined by the Church
what does blessing mean?
definition of "blessing" as defined by the Church
ex. blessing of the animals, altar, fishing vessels
blessing people as compared to blessing relationships
blessing people in relationships
what does the Book of Common Prayer say on the blessing of unions,
relationships; what could be used to bless a same-gender
relationship?

June 24, 1992 Ramifications

Use and abuse of scripture
Ramifications of what we do: in the commission, parish, Church

St. Barnabas Commission on Blessing of Unions

Meeting 1
April 1, 1992

Record

The meeting opened at 7:00 p.m., with prayer.

Present were Paula Nesbitt, Chair, Garry Horle, Vice Chair, and Members Diane Barrett, Pam Bliss, Donna Campbell, Mel Drapeau, Steve Kick, Terry Lewis, Conrad Riley, Jim Scheffe, Jim Steed. Absent were Chuck Brooks and Judy Ward.

Commission members introduced themselves and talked briefly about their interest in being on the commission and the issue it has been asked to deliberate.

Paula Nesbitt read the Statement of the House of Bishops, March 7, 1992, from a meeting called in the aftermath of the strife (generated by issues related to sexual orientation) within the House at the 1991 General Convention. She urged that the Bishops' statement be a mandate, as well as model, for the commission's own process (in their Statement, the Bishops offered three key points: 1. consider the role of our community in the life and ministry of the Episcopal Church; 2. take time for theological reflection and discussion in a context of prayer and common worship; 3. strengthen the bonds that unite us in our common life and shared ministry).

An overview of the commission process and time framework was discussed. It was agreed that attention would be given to method, so that the report presented to the parish would be objective and well-documented. It was hoped that consensus would be reached. If that weren't possible, a minority report would be included alongside a majority report. Rather than have a formal mediator, members agreed to perform that role themselves within the group as best they could. An informal discussion process for the group was agreed upon, with the provision that the group could reassess at some point how well this process was working. The overall approach would be to name, study and discuss key themes that the group believed to be of central importance underlying the issue before the commission, and to name and discuss those affected (stakeholders) both directly and indirectly by the issue and any position that the parish might take. Following the Fisher and Ury model (in Getting to Yes), discussions would seek to focus on interests prior to positions. The time framework was set in the context of a nine-month goal: April-June, to discuss underlying themes related to the issue at-hand; July-August, through pot-luck picnics, to discuss more informally the thematic material in relation to those affected stakeholders, and to share personal experience; September-October, to work toward consensus of common interest on topic; November, to develop consensual position based on consensus of common interest; December, report due. To do this, the commission would meet at two-week intervals, on Wednesday

evenings, 7-9 p.m., at St. Barnabas. Several members felt that getting to know one another was sufficiently important at the outset that the first few meetings should be restricted to commission members. This will be reassessed at the May 13 meeting. It was suggested that the summer meetings might be a good time for people in the larger community, representing one or another of the affected stakeholder interests, be invited to share their personal experience with the commission.

It was requested that at each meeting someone would (volunteer to) be a recorder, so that a written record of what was discussed could serve to document the commission's work.

Members then listed and discussed themes they believed were important to explore in relation to the issue at-hand--developing a parish position on the blessing of relationships [this list has been written up in a separate document and distributed to members].

Since the commission did not have time to prioritize the list of themes for subsequent meetings, nor to name stakeholders, a meeting was called for Wednesday, April 8, 1992, 7 p.m., St. Barnabas, to complete these tasks.

The meeting ended with prayer, at 9 p.m.

Recorded by Paula Nesbitt

Is love something that happens forever?
Why do we get so neurotic around love?

Members broke into triads for 30 minutes of discussion. The group then reconvened. The following summarizes the overall group discussion:

Love is not blind. God's love sees us with our warts. *People* can love blindly, though, as in "fatal attractions."

Love is all-embracing.

Love is a gift of God, given for our joy; it is a foretaste of heaven.

Sexual love is from God, and is part of God's gift to us. Sexual love is part of God's will. It is a unique, God-given form of intimacy that may exist as a part of love but not apart from love.

Chris Glaser's (sp) observation was cited of a dance between the spiritual and the sexual. If sexuality is part of God's gift to us and spirituality is getting in touch with God's gift to us, the inter-relationship between sexuality and spirituality makes sense. It touches on sensual experience. In charismatic expression, for example, all our senses are alive.

If we say our love for each other is God-given and sexual expression is one from of love, this will lead us to certain conclusions.

If love at first sight lasted forever in a marriage, it would be devastating. Marriage is more than love; it is a commitment. If one can't keep the promise, it is time to get out of the marriage.

Over a long marriage, love ebbs and flows. The romance may decrease and the intimacy increase. There is a sense of safety, *caritas*. In relationships where there isn't love, there may be expectations put on one's spouse, such as expecting her/him to read one's mind, or that one owns her/him.

Sexual expression between parent and child (ie. incest) is wrong because of the disproportionate power relationship. Gen. 19:30-38 was discussed as an example of incest where the power relationship was different.

One member observed that the group didn't talk about intention and love: "what is the intention of 'I love you?'"

Gender differences in men's and women's experiences with love were discussed briefly.

The meeting ended with prayer at 9 p.m.

Recorded by Judy Ward and Paula Nesbitt.