

BLESSING OF-SAME-SEX UNIONS: REPORT

Diocesan Liturgy and Music Commission

This report was undertaken at the directive of the 221st Convention of the Diocese of Connecticut. The Diocesan Commission of Liturgy and Music was directed as follows:

1. Gather and survey materials that have been created and/or used in the Episcopal Church or other denominations for the purpose of blessing same-sex unions.
2. Study and discuss those materials.
3. Report to the 222nd Convention of the Diocese in October, 2006, to provide information from various church communities, as a resource to convention, in light of the State of Connecticut's Statute on Civil Unions.

We met as a committee throughout the year, researched the offerings and discussed our findings. Some of us attended the New England Provincial Convocation in November 2005, "Sacramental Relationships of Fidelity, Holiness, and Commitment: The Church Reflects on Marriage, Unions and Blessings". The convocation was extremely helpful, bringing us into first hand contact with what was happening in the other Episcopal dioceses of New England. A task force was formed, and in August, we took a full day apart to finalize our thinking. We wrote, and met, again. A final report emerged.

We found our studies leading us to an understanding of the meaning of Blessing and Covenant within the Community, the Body of Christ. We see the blessing of same-sex unions as a thanksgiving to God and an invocation of God's holy name upon that which is being blessed. Quoting from the report: "A blessing lifts up and celebrates objects and people who are signs of God's presence in today's world." The couple covenants to lifelong love, faithfulness, and mutual support, and to make their life together a sign of God's love in the world. We find the Baptismal Covenant the model for all covenants made in the Church. Because of the communal nature of life in the Body of Christ, any covenants between Christians are properly the concern and the work of the people (*leiturgia*). The covenant and blessing are public acts of committal and mutual responsibility.

“A blessing is a statement of the church’s care for people at discreet moments in their lives, a sign of God’s strengthening of those who attempt to live in faithful witness to the law of love given by Christ.”

Special thanks go to the Rev. William Hardwick, the Rev. Dana Campbell and Canon Robert Brooks who combined research and their talents in the writing of this report; Ms. Jill Strawn compiled the Resources for Clergy, and Ms. Wilma Whitley, Resources on Blessing of Same-Sex Unions. We thank the Rt. Rev. James Curry, who pastored us in our studies.

Please note – this report as well as the attachments will appear on the Diocesan website www.ctdiocese.org shortly after the Diocesan Convention. Use of this site will enable readers to access the URL for each entry directly from the site.

We, as a commission, feel privileged to have made this study and present this report to convention. We are enthusiastic and willing to continue to be of service to the Church, as we open and explore the future ahead, together.

The Rev. Judith Semple Greene, Chair

The Nature of Blessing

Blessing is a prayer of remembrance and thanksgiving that celebrates the goodness of God in creation and salvation. A blessing lifts up and celebrates objects and people who are signs of God's presence in today's world. Thus, in Baptism, water is blessed as a remembrance of God's saving acts in which water played an important role. The Baptismal candidate is then blessed with the water as a sign of the new life that is offered to him/her. In the Eucharist, we thank God for the Incarnation and the Resurrection, and bless bread and wine as Jesus did. We gather the members of the gathered community around this action, inviting them to partake in God's continuing nurture. A blessing is also a statement of the Church's care for people at discreet moments in their lives, a sign of God's strengthening of those who attempt to live in faithful witness to the law of love given by Christ. Baptismal blessings ask for God's continued strengthening of baptized persons as they assume their role in the mission and ministry of the Church. In the Eucharist, communicants are strengthened by receiving the bread and wine, which empowers them for the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Communal Aspect of Blessing

Blessing is a communal act which makes public what had been private, unveiling what previously was known only to God and the persons involved. Blessings make manifest that which is already present in people and relationships that are signs of God's love. Thus, in Matrimony the love of a man and a woman for one another is held up, blessed, and celebrated as a sign of God's love for the Church. The blessing asks for God's continued favor on the couple as they attempt to live out their love for all the world to see. The communal aspect of blessing creates not only a sign to the community, but also is a sign of the community's involvement. After recognizing God's love in those who are being blessed, the community responds to that love by making a statement of affirmation and support. In ordination rites, the congregation is asked if it will consent to the conferring of orders on the ordinands. In the rites for baptism and marriage, members of the Church family are asked to support the candidates in their new status as baptized Christians or married persons. The priest performs a distinct role on behalf of the community in the act of blessing. Ordination confers authority from God and from the Church for priests to "pronounce God's blessing," (BCP, p.531), that is, to proclaim that God's blessing is manifest in particular objects, individuals, and relationships. The priest who pronounces a blessing does so in the name of the Church.

Blessing and Covenant

Covenant is an ancient and Biblical form of promise that binds people in a mutual and enduring relationship. It is the form of relationship God continues to seek with human beings. It is the form of public commitment that binds all Christians to Christ.

Since the inauguration of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, our Church has come to see the Baptismal Covenant as the foundation and context of its life and ministry. Over the past 25 years, there has been a convergence of thinking and practice aimed at promoting the baptismal covenant as the model for all covenanted relationships. The baptismal rite celebrates that covenant by which individual Christians are joined to one another and to Jesus. It is through Baptism that the Church becomes the Body of Christ.

All of the Church's rites celebrate this mutuality. Thus, the Book of Common Prayer recognizes the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage as "a public covenant" (BCP 422), which is witnessed and supported by the entire community (BCP 425).

There are some strong theological reasons for understanding the Baptismal Covenant as the paradigm for the blessing of same-sex unions. Baptism is rooted in the incarnational connection of holiness with physicality.

It is a public rite in which community support is assumed, and it inaugurates a ministry that is to be directed outward. Finally, it presents a vision of a just and loving God who orders all creation in the divine image and invites individuals to the work of co-creation.

Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships

A blessing does not make something holy, but rather acknowledges the presence of holiness. Blessing relationships does not change their intrinsic value, but rather releases the power inherent in them. By celebrating the power that relationships have to enhance people's ability to be agents of God's purpose, the blessing of same-sex relationships "recognizes their pre-existent reality; confers the community's authority upon the recipients to conduct themselves as formal and public participants in such a relationship; establishes a communal context of responsibility, accountability and privilege; and petitions God to endow the partners with all such grace and strength necessary to fulfill the vows and commitments being made." (Diocese of New Westminster, Canada). The blessing of same-sex unions would enable the Church to provide opportunities for strengthening the faith of individuals, promoting the stability of relationships and confirming "the traditional values of fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, open communication and steadfast love." (Guidelines for The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship, Diocese of Washington.) Such blessings would be a statement that the community recognizes God's presence in a particular relationship and that the community is willing to support both the individuals and their relationship as part of the ongoing mission and ministry of the Church.

In blessing same-sex unions, the Church would thus be affirming several things. First, it would uphold commitments spelled out in the Baptismal rite, namely, the commitments made to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, to trust in his grace and love, to renounce evil, to seek Christ in all persons, and to strive for justice and peace while respecting the dignity of all persons. Second, it would uphold two people in lives that exemplify these commitments, and whose relationship strengthens each of them in the living out of their baptismal vows. Finally, such blessings would tie the common life of same-sex couples to the life and ministry of the Christian community as it seeks to make God's love manifest to the world.

Liturgies for the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions

The Commission believes it is important that a unified rite for the blessing of same-sex relationships be established. To resort to ad hoc liturgies would not be consonant with our identity as Anglicans, i.e., people of "common prayer." After having reviewed many liturgies, we commend those listed in the appended Resources on Blessing of Same-Sex Unions.

The liturgies for same-sex union, which we have examined, fall into two groups, those that simply amend the language of the prayer book marriage rite and those, which seek to create an entirely new rite. The vows and promises being made by the partners are similar in each category. Expressed in a variety of ways, the partners agree to live together in lifelong love, faithfulness, and mutual support, and to make their life together a sign of God's love in the world. Some liturgies for the blessing of same-sex unions create roles for sponsors (similar to those used in the Baptismal rite), or include additional signs of community support for those making their vows (C.F.: "Celebration of a Covenant," Diocese of New Westminster, Vancouver, Canada; "The Celebration and Blessing of the Covenant of Louise Emerson Brooks and Susan Lynn Russell," All Saints Church, Pasadena, CA, Diocese of Los Angeles; "The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship," Diocese of Washington; "A Rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union 1," Diocese of Vermont.)

Conclusion: Concerns about Same-Sex Blessings

Because there might be misunderstanding within the faith community concerning the nature and significance of the blessing of same-sex unions, education would be of the utmost priority.

Another concern would be the discernment of which relationships to bless and which not to bless. Not all relationships are capable of sustaining the love and commitment required of a life-long union. As much care would need to be taken by the clergy in assessing the character of relationships and in counseling same sex couples as is taken with opposite gender couples.

Same-sex couples continue to experience adversity in our time, even within the Church. The support of the faith community for their unions is particularly critical. The best means for providing such support is not yet clear. Continuing dialog about the implications of blessing same-sex unions would have to be a part of the ongoing formation process of the faith communities where such liturgies would take place. Materials for congregational study can be found in the resource list appended to this summary.

COMMISSION OF LITURGY AND MUSIC **RESOURCES FOR CLERGY** **RE. SAME-SEX BLESSINGS AND CIVIL UNIONS**

I. Diocesan Policies regarding same-sex blessings from: New Hampshire 1996, Nevada 2003, North Carolina 2004, Washington 2004, VT 2004, New Westminster 2004, Arkansas 2006 (see each diocesan website).

II. Understanding and Counseling same-sex couples

Background material on homosexuality and same-sex blessings

1. Downloadable

Available on Diocese of VT website: www.dioceseofvermont.org
 -*A Report to the Bishop and People of the Diocese of Vermont June 8, 2004*
 -*Claiming the Blessing*. Rev. Michael W. Hopkins
 -*Let the Reader Understand: Principles of Scriptural Interpretation*
 Diocese of New York Hermeneutics Study Group 2002 (pdf)

2. Print Material

-Alexander, J. Neil, *This Far By Grace: A Bishop's Journey Through Questions about Homosexuality*. Crowley Publications, 2003.
 -Ecumenical Working Group on Faith and Genetics sponsored by Diocese of Massachusetts, *The Science of Sexual Behavior in Humans and Other Animals: A Resource for Churches*. 2005.
 -Hefling, Charles, Ed., *Ourselves, Our Souls and Bodies*. Crowley Publications, 1996.
 -Linzey, Andrew & Kirker, Richard, *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*. 2005.
 -*Liturgy Canada*. Lent 2003. (entire issue devoted to these issues)
 -Marshall, Paul V., *Same Sex Unions: An Inquiry*.

3. Websites

www.beyondinclusion.org
www.samesexblessing.info/cnurse/DotNetNuke/Default.aspx?tabid=67
www.integrityusa.org/samesexblessings/WashingtonRite.pdf
www.liturgy.ca/#Liturgy_Canada_Archive
www.dioceseofvermont.org

III. **Sample Services**

A. *A Report to the Bishop and People of the Diocese of Vermont June 8, 2004*
 B. Diocese of Washington: *The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship*.

RESOURCES ON BLESSING OF SAME-SEX UNIONS

REFERENCES:

[1] All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California. *God, Sex and Justice Task Force Report*. November 4, 1991. www.beyondinclusion.org/ssunions.htm

[2] All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California. *The Celebration and Blessing of the Covenant of Amy Elizabeth G. and Suzanne S. S.*, September 27, 1997. One of the Liturgies listed at www.beyondinclusion.org/ssunions.htm

[3] All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California. *The Celebration and Blessing of the Covenant of Carole L. and Deborah S.*. One of the Liturgies listed at www.beyondinclusion.org/ssunions.htm

[4] All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California. *The Celebration and Blessing of the Covenant of D--- and T---*, June, 19--. One of the Liturgies listed at www.beyondinclusion.org/ssunions.htm

[5] Boswell, John. *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. Random House, 1995.

[6] Church of Our Saviour, Cincinnati, Ohio. *Preparing for and Celebrating Life in Community within the Body of Christ*. www.beyondinclusion.org/pdf/OurSaviour.PDF

[7] Diocese of Arkansas. *Same-Sex Blessings in the Diocese of Arkansas (Guidelines)*. July 19, 2006.

[8] Diocese of New Hampshire. *Statement from the Bishop on the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions (Guidelines)*. November 25, 1996. www.beyondinclusion.org/theunerguide.htm

[9] Diocese of New York Hermeneutics Study Group. *Let the Reader Understand: Principles of Scriptural Interpretation*. 2002. www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonblessings/Let%20the%20Reader%20Understand.pdf

[10] Diocese of New Westminster, Anglican Church of Canada. *The Rite of Blessing (Guidelines)*. 2004. www.samesexblessing.info/cnurse/DotNetNuke/Default.aspx?tabid=67

[11] Diocese of New Westminster, Anglican Church of Canada. *A Rite for the Celebration of Gay and Lesbian Covenants (Order of Service)*. 2004. www.samesexblessing.info/cnurse/DotNetNuke/Portals/3/SSB%20Rite-the%20Ceremony.pdf

[12] Diocese of Vermont. *Downloadable Resources*. www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonblessResources.html

[13a] Diocese of Vermont. *Report of the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships (Executive Summary)*. www.dioceseofvermont.org/Orgs/TFonblessings.html

[13b] Diocese of Vermont. *Report of the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships* (Complete Report).

www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonblessings/VT%20Blessings%20Report.pdf

[13c] Diocese of Vermont. *Report of the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships* (Complete Report, pp. 19 - 25): *A Rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union 1*. July 1, 2004.

www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonblessings/VT%20Blessings%20Report.pdf

[13d] Diocese of Vermont. *Report of the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships* (Complete Report, pp. 25 – 31): *A Rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Holy Union 2*. July 1, 2004.

www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonblessings/VT%20Blessings%20Report.pdf

[14] Diocese of Vermont. *Report of the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships* (Part VI only: Orders of Service).

www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonblessings/BlessingLiturgies.doc

[15] Diocese of Washington. *The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship* (Guidelines). www.integrityusa.org/samesexblessings/WashingtonPolicy.pdf

[16] Diocese of Washington. *The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship* (Order of Service). www.integrityusa.org/samesexblessings/WashingtonRite.pdf

[17] Hull, Kathleen E. *Same-Sex Marriage: The Cultural Politics of Love and Law*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[18] Jordan, Mark D. *Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

[19] Knight, The Very Reverend Hollinshead T., Interim Rector, St. John Episcopal Church, Jackson, Wyoming. <http://members.aol.com/DrSwiney/knight.html>

[20] *Liturgy Canada*. Volume IX, Number 3/Lent 2003 addresses same-sex blessings. One can browse the archives freely at www.liturgy.ca/#Liturgy_Canada_Archive (spaces in this URL are underscores).

[21] Maze, The Right Reverend Larry. See Diocese of Arkansas, above.

[22] St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Washington, DC. *Report on Marriage and the Covenanting of Same-Sex Unions*. 1998. One of the links listed under same sex unions at www.beyondinclusion.org/

[23] Witte, John and Eliza Ellison, ed. *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*. Eerdmans, 2005.