

# Guidelines for the Solemnization of Holy Union



GUIDELINES AND LITURGY  
FOR CLERGY AND CONGREGATIONS  
WISHING TO PERFORM BLESSINGS OF SAME SEX UNIONS  
IN THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF CHICAGO  
Effective June 1, 2011

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# The Blessing of Same Sex Unions

## In the Diocese of Chicago

In this packet you will find pastoral guidelines and a liturgical form for the blessing of committed, life-long, faithful unions of gay and lesbian Christians in this diocese. I am grateful to members of the task group who worked prayerfully to develop these resources – it has been a blessing to collaborate with leaders in our diocese (and ecumenically) whose commitment to Christ is so clear. I want to offer here a brief theological reflection that represents my own perspective on the provision of these guidelines.

In his essay, “Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?” Archbishop Rowan Williams answers the question of his title by saying, “Yes. Several.” He writes that Christians too often conduct the conversation around this topic at the level of asking simply whether a given behavior or way of life is permissible or not. After a careful and honest consideration of the complexities of the biblical and historical evolution of attitudes on the matter he concludes that there is a more faithful and fruitful way to consider the question. For sacramental Christians the question is not simply if this or that is permissible; the question is what we are prepared for given behaviors or patterns of living to *mean*. “Our main question ... should be neither ‘Am I keeping the rules?’ nor ‘Am I being sincere and non-hurtful?’ but ‘How much am I prepared for this to signify?’”\*

The conviction behind these pastoral guidelines is that the faithful, loving, and lifelong union of two persons of the same sex is capable of signifying the never failing love of God in Christ for the church and the world. Such unions can be sources and signs of grace, both for the couple and for the wider community. It is appropriate therefore that they be surrounded by the prayer of the Christian community. A further conviction is that just as Holy Matrimony is a vocation leading a man and a woman to practice disciplines of holiness, so should the gift of a similar, publicly committed discipline be available to gay and lesbian members of the church. Both marriage and faithful unions can be schools of holiness, ways of ordering our lives so that we might learn to be more faithful servants of Christ.

Clearly the blessing of same sex unions represents a change from centuries of what the church has judged to be acceptable. But so do several practices in our church which have come to be seen as faithful responses to a deepening understanding of the nature of what it is to be human and how God is revealed in human community. There was a time when slavery was defended as sanctioned by the Bible. It is not very long ago that Jesus' prohibition of divorce and remarriage meant that divorced and remarried persons could not receive Holy Communion in the Episcopal Church. Just as our perspectives on these matters have changed dramatically, so now our evolving understanding of human sexuality is causing a reevaluation of the kind of pastoral care and liturgical support we offer all members of our church.

The last General Convention of the Episcopal Church passed a resolution (C056) authorizing diocesan bishops -- particularly in states with legal provision for same sex unions or marriage -- to provide a "generous pastoral response" to members of our church who seek the prayer and support of the church in celebration of their lifelong committed relationships. The same resolution also acknowledges the range of diverse views on these matters and calls on the Standing Liturgical Committee to collect and develop resources to be presented to General Convention in 2012.

These guidelines for the Diocese of Chicago have been prepared under the provision of this resolution of the General Convention. They make formal what has been the informal practice in this diocese for several years. These guidelines are offered as a generous pastoral response to the needs, hopes and concerns of baptized members of the Body of Christ in this diocese. They also reflect the current state of the work of the Episcopal Church's Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music in collecting and developing resources for the church's response to the needs of all our members.

These guidelines also recognize the range of convictions on this matter -- no priest, no congregation is required to offer these blessings and remaining bound together in Christ we will continue to respect the diversity of theological stances in this diocese.

In the sixth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul tells us that we are baptized into the death of Christ so that we might walk with him in a whole new way of life. We live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died for us and was raised. For most of us the household is a primary context for learning the implications of that way of life. Our lifelong commitments, our mundane daily struggles, our most intimate relationships, our triumphs and tragedies, all of it has the potential to reveal the love of God. Gay or straight, single or called to marriage or union, our family life has the capacity to be the “domestic church.” I pray that all of us in this diocese will continue to grow together into the image of the dying and rising Jesus. May we and our faithful relationships be signs of his self-giving love.

Jeffrey D. Lee

XII Bishop of Chicago

\* In *A Ray of Darkness*, Cowley Publications, 1995, p. 143.

**Guidelines for  
The Solemnization of Holy Matrimony and Holy Union  
in the  
Episcopal Diocese of Chicago**

The Episcopal Church has permitted dioceses to respond pastorally to requests for the blessing of same sex unions through the passing 2009 General Convention Resolution C056. By the passing of SB1716, the Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act, the State of Illinois has instituted civil unions and afforded them the same legal rights, benefits and obligations as are applicable to marriages. These significant pieces of legislation have made it necessary for the Diocese of Chicago to clarify its pastoral guidelines concerning the Solemnization of Holy Union. This further allows us to look more closely at the wisdom to be found within the Marriage Canons of the Episcopal Church.

Our desire in these diocesan guidelines is, as much as possible, to establish parity between the pastoral practices surrounding Holy Matrimony and the pastoral practices surrounding Holy Union.

1. Every Member of the Clergy of the Diocese of Chicago shall conform to the laws of the State governing the creation of civil unions and the creation of the civil status of marriage. The clergy shall also adhere to the laws of the Church and Diocese governing the solemnization of Holy Matrimony and the solemnization of Holy Union.

*This guideline exists in recognition that the Member of the Clergy most often functions for both the State and the Church when Officiating at Holy Matrimony or Holy Union. Just as we require a civil marriage license, we require a civil union license. We must do so in both cases to comply with Illinois law.*

*Historically, our canons have recognized a distinction between the civil status of marriage and Holy Matrimony. The vows the couple make, within the community of faith, create holy Matrimony. Similarly, a civil union, effected within the community of faith, we will name a "Holy Union." The use of the word, "holy," in both cases reflects a vision of committed relationships within the Church as a practice in holiness (about which more will be said below).*

2. The Clergy of the Diocese of Chicago shall not Officiate at the solemnization of Holy Matrimony or Holy Union when there are close kinship ties between the parties, when either or both parties are currently married or civilly united to another, or when either or both parties do not intend to create a Marriage or Union of mutual and exclusive fidelity.

*We recognize that the State and the Church have some related concerns regarding the creation of committed relationships. For example, the State is interested in preventing consanguinity, polyandry and polygamy. These patterns of life also fall outside the moral vision of the Church. It is also outside the moral vision of the Church to bless "open" relationships or relationships with more than two partners. Again, the Illinois law on civil unions contains the same prohibitions in this area as the Illinois law on marriage.*

3. Before solemnizing a marriage or union, the Member of the Clergy shall have ascertained:
  - a. That both parties have the right to contract a civil marriage or civil union according to the laws of the State of Illinois.
  - b. That both parties understand that by entering into Holy Matrimony or Holy Union within the community of faith, they proclaim by their actions and commitments that their relationship is a physical and spiritual union of two people (a man and a woman for Holy Matrimony and for Holy Union a man and a man or a woman and a woman) by mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, and with the intent that it be lifelong.
  - c. That both parties freely and knowingly consent to such marriage/union, without fraud, coercion, mistake as to identity of a partner, or mental reservation.
  - d. That at least one of the parties has received Holy Baptism.
  - e. That both parties have been instructed as to the Church's understanding of the nature, meaning and purpose of the commitments they will be making. This instruction may be provided by the Member of the Clergy or by persons known by the Member of the Clergy to be competent and responsible.

*We understand Holy Matrimony to be an estate the Church offers to heterosexual couples. We understand Holy Union to be an estate that some parts of the Church offer to homosexual couples. This means that Members of the Clergy in the Diocese of Chicago shall neither offer the solemnization of Holy Union to heterosexual couples nor the solemnization of Holy Matrimony to homosexual couples.*

*In the Diocese of Chicago, we promote the understanding that entering into Holy Matrimony or Holy Union is a Christian holiness practice. By mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, two people create mutual fidelity with one another, within the community of faith and with lifelong intent. This is a practice which promotes holiness of life for the parties and, thereby, generates goods for the broader community. Such an undertaking should be engaged with mental and emotional clarity, reflection, and conscious intent. In this holiness practice, one willingly and publicly becomes accountable, not only to the person one loves, but to the community of faith and God.*

4. No member of the Clergy of this Diocese shall solemnize any marriage or union until having complied with the following procedures.
  - a. The intention of the parties to contract marriage or union shall have been signified to the Member of the Clergy at least thirty days before the service of solemnization; *Provided*, that for weighty cause, this requirement may be dispensed if one of the parties is a member of the Congregation of the Member of the Clergy, or can furnish satisfactory evidence of responsibility. In case the thirty days' notice is waived, the Member of the Clergy shall report such action in writing to the Bishop.
  - b. There shall be present at least two witnesses to the solemnization of Holy Matrimony or the solemnization of Holy Union.

- c. The member of the clergy shall record in the proper register the date and place of the marriage/union, the names of the parties and their parents, the age of the parties, their residences, and their Church status; the witnesses and the Member of the Clergy shall sign the record.
- d. The Member of the Clergy shall have required that the parties to Holy Matrimony sign the following declaration:

“We, A.B. and C.D., desiring to receive the blessing of Holy Matrimony in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold marriage to be a lifelong union of husband and wife as it is set forth in the Book of Common Prayer.

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

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

- e. The Member of the Clergy shall have required that the parties to Holy Union sign the following declaration:

“We, A.B. and C.D., desiring to receive the blessing of Holy Union in the Church, do solemnly declare that we intend, with the support of Almighty God, to enter a lifelong union for our mutual joy, for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity, for the gift of children, if it be God's will, and for those goods which we, by being so united, may bring to our family, friends, community of faith and the world. We engage this manner of life prayerfully, deliberately, and with all due humility.”

- 5. It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Diocese to decline to solemnize any Marriage or Civil Union. Congregational guidelines regarding the solemnization of marriages and civil unions should be developed by the Member of the Clergy and congregational leaders. These guidelines should be clearly communicated with the congregation.

*Ideally and pastorally, it is best if the congregation has an agreed upon policy on offering Holy Matrimony to non-members, the relatives of members, and the like. Such policy should include a statement as to whether or not the congregation and clergy are willing to offer Holy Union. If the congregation is willing to offer Holy Union then additional policies need to be articulated regarding offering Holy Union to non-members, the relatives of members, and the like.*

- 6. When Holy Matrimony or Holy Union is imperiled by dissension, it shall be the duty, if possible, of either or both parties, before taking legal action, to lay the matter before a



Member of the Clergy; it shall be the duty of such Member of the Clergy to act first to protect and promote the physical and emotional safety of those involved and only then, if it be possible, to labor that the parties may be reconciled.

*It is important to take seriously the reality of domestic violence. Domestic violence occurs in marriages and unions, and is perpetrated by both men and women.*

7. Any member of this Diocese whose Marriage or Civil Union has been annulled or dissolved by a civil court may apply to the Bishop of Chicago for a judgment as to relational status in the eyes of the Church.
  - a. Such judgment may be a recognition of the nullity or of the termination of a marriage or civil union.
  - b. No such judgment shall be construed as affecting in any way the legitimacy of children or the civil validity of the former relationship.
  - c. Former relationships of emotional or spiritual significance that were not legally or ecclesiastically recognized may, and sometimes definitely should, be included in the application.

*The Application for Judgment as to Marital Status was a form designed to encourage reflection on one's relationship history and the spiritual and emotional dynamics of previous marriages. Having the conversation with a Member of the Clergy, completing the form and seeking a judgment as to marital status is a way of sharing these reflections with one's Bishop. By this sharing we recognize that our life and choices are more than personal when we live as part of a community of faith.*

*We must recognize, however, that many persons come to us with a history of significant relationships in which they were not, or could not be, married. These relationships are nevertheless a part of the emotional and spiritual history of the people who are seeking Holy Matrimony or Holy Union. Therefore, as the Member of the Clergy is counseling a person prior to Holy Matrimony or Holy Union, s/he is encouraged to include such relationships on the new Application for Judgment as to Relational Status form. The sole criterion for inclusion is the applicant's sense, together with the Member of the Clergy, that the former non-marital relationship was significant in that person's life.*

8. No Member of the Clergy shall solemnize the marriage or civil union of any person who has been the husband, wife, or civil union partner of any other person then living, nor shall any member of this Church enter into a marriage or civil union when either of the contracting parties has been the husband, wife, or civil union partner of any other person then living, except as hereinafter provided:
  - a. The Member of the clergy shall be satisfied by appropriate evidence that the prior marriage or civil union has been annulled or dissolved by a final decree of a civil court of competent jurisdiction.

- b. The Member of the Clergy shall have instructed the parties that continuing concern must be shown for the well-being of the former spouse or partner, and of any children of the prior marriage or union.
- c. The Member of the Clergy, licensed or canonically resident in this Diocese, shall consult with and obtain the consent of the Bishop of Chicago, and shall report to the Bishop of Chicago the solemnization of any marriage or civil union under this guideline.
- d. If the proposed marriage or civil union is to be solemnized in a jurisdiction other than the Diocese of Chicago, it shall be the duty of the Member of the Clergy to abide by the civil rules of that jurisdiction regarding the creation of civil marriages and civil unions.
- e. If the proposed marriage or civil union is to be solemnized in a jurisdiction other than the Diocese of Chicago, it shall be the duty of the Member of the Clergy to seek the permission to preside at the solemnization of a marriage or civil union from the Bishop of that jurisdiction.
- f. All provisions of guidelines 1 through 7 apply.

#### Pastoral Note Regarding Clergy in Unions Established Prior to June 1, 2011

*Several Members of the Clergy in the Diocese of Chicago currently live in committed, monogamous relationships with persons of the same sex. The option of a civil union did not exist for these persons and neither did the option for solemnizing a Holy Union when they formed their relationship.*

*In the ideal, these persons would now choose to solemnize their relationship by entering a Holy Union. However, given the historical and ongoing prejudices against Gay and Lesbian people, some may not be practically or emotionally ready for this public legal and ecclesiastical act. For example, it is a reality that some Clergy partners may not wish to engage in a public liturgical act because of previous negative experiences in the Church. It is also a reality that some congregations are willing to accept a Gay or Lesbian Member of the Clergy provided that the person is not "too public" about her or his relationship. Therefore, the Bishop of Chicago has the expectation of Holy Unions for Members of the Clergy in same-sex relationships which were formed on or after June 1, 2011.*

**Some Questions and Answers:  
The Sacramental Blessing of a Holy Union  
Prepared by the Blessing of Same Sex Unions Task Force of  
The Episcopal Diocese of Chicago  
June 2011**

**An Introduction**

The Bishop of Chicago is authorizing the use of a rite for the “Witness and Blessing of a Holy Union.” This rite may be used to celebrate the union of two persons of the same sex.

At the present time the state of Illinois has voted to grant civil unions to both same-sex and opposite-sex couples. This document is presented, not as a comprehensive theological treatise, nor as an official position paper of the Episcopal Church. It is written to provide some distinctions between marriage as a legal contract and the sacramental blessing of sacred unions. It is also written in order to provide a broad biblical, historical, and theological basis for this sacramental blessing, especially as applied to a same-sex union, but also to explain their introduction in this diocese.

The document is presented in a question-answer format in which there is an attempt to use some everyday language that may be able to help with the everyday questions that people who are sitting in the pews may be asking (or may have been asked of them by friends from other faith traditions). Understandably, this document may raise a host of questions with regard to the more encompassing issue of our position on “homosexuality” and how this phenomenon is understood within the biblical and historic tradition of our Church. While some of the questions and answers offered here may indirectly address issues of homosexuality, the purview here is limited to questions about the Blessing of a Holy Union, particularly as it pertains to same sex couples.

The thinking throughout the document proceeds from a fundamental reliance upon our core baptismal covenant: we are people committed to bringing about a just society and to respecting the dignity of every human being.

**Question 1**

What is meant by “Holy Union”?

*Answer*

For purposes of this discussion and for their blessing, a Holy Union is defined as a lifelong committed relationship characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God.

**Question 2**

What is the difference between “marriage” as recognized by the state and Holy Matrimony or a Blessing of a Holy Union?

*Answer*

Actually, there is a lot of cloudiness about the relationship between Church and state when it comes to marriage. If these matters are confusing to you, you are certainly not alone.

In this country, marriage is a civil or legal contract. In most states, in order to get married a couple must first obtain an official marriage license from the state. This document testifies that they are legally able to contract a marriage under the laws of the state, and it gives them permission to legally enter into marriage. All couples, regardless of what kind of marriage ceremony they will have, must first obtain this marriage license.

The ceremony for officially legalizing the marriage can then be conducted by any number of persons with any number of wedding ceremonies. It can be conducted by a judge or other person recognized by the state in a garden, a home, a judge's chambers. After some sort of public exchange of marriage vows, the officially designated officer of the state signs the license and testifies that the two are now legally married. With the signing of the license, the couple is legally married in the eyes of the state of Illinois.

Now, here is where the Church gets into it. In our country (which is not the case in many other countries), church weddings can also be one of the ways in which a marriage can be legalized. Thus at the end of the church ceremony, the clergy person (who is, in essence, an agent of the state for this purpose) signs the license stating that vows were exchanged and with the signing of the license the couple is legally married in the eyes of the state of Illinois.

Beyond legalizing the civil contract of marriage, the Church creates Holy Matrimony. By making their vows in the context of the baptismal community, the couple proclaims their intention to understand their relationship to each other to be part of their spiritual discipline. They undertake their relationship of loving commitment and mutual fidelity as a practice in holiness. They sign a declaration of lifelong intent (something not required in a civil marriage), surround their vows with the prayers and blessings of the baptismal community, and by these rites enact the truth that in Holy Matrimony, they make themselves accountable for their relationship to each other, God, and the baptismal community. They invite the Holy Spirit into their relationship.

In a similar way, the State of Illinois now allows for the contracting of civil union between two persons of the same sex. Most of the same legal requirements and protections which exist for the civil contracting of marriage apply for the contracting of a civil union. When same sex couples make their vows in the context of the baptismal community, we consider this to be the creation of a Holy Union. The use of the word "Holy," indicates that the couple will treat this relationship as a practice in holiness. They will sign a declaration of lifelong intent, surround their vows with the prayers and blessings of the baptismal community, and enter into the spiritual discipline of a relationship characterized by loving commitment and mutual fidelity. They will invite the Holy Spirit into their relationship.

Some people in our diocese will see no real difference between Holy Matrimony and Holy Union. Others will see, in the difference between heterosexual and homosexual relationships, a significant difference between Holy Matrimony and Holy Union. In a very real sense, both positions are true.

### **Question 3**

Can we speak about the “Blessing of a Holy Union” as sacramental?

*Answer*

Yes. We live in a sacramental world: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). In the sacraments and in sacramental rites the reality of God and God’s presence is focused and consciously encountered. In them we experience something of God which is ultimately unspeakable and not completely knowable to the human mind; and we experience this through aspects of the created order, e.g. the self-giving life of Christ in the bread broken and wine out-poured at Holy Communion. The sacramental provides a doorway for helping us enter into the experience of God’s holy presence. It provides us with a place where the divine and the human can intersect, an entry into an encounter with the living God.

In the case of the blessing of a Holy Union, the Church is recognizing something of God’s covenantal love already present in the life and love of the couple. The couple’s public vows express their intention to continue in this way of life, living together in a lifelong covenantal relationship. The Church blesses this decision, and gives thanks to God as something of God’s own steadfast love for us and for all creation as revealed in the couple’s own covenant. As the People of God witness the exchange of vows, they are invited to glimpse into the love of the couple being joined, and hence into the circle of God’s own love. In this way, the blessing of such a covenant can be said to be sacramental.

### **Question 4**

Traditionally, only a man and a woman could receive the Church’s blessing for their union. Why is it possible for persons of the same sex to receive this blessing?

*Answer*

Baptism is the primary sacrament from which all other sacraments and all the rites of the Church flow. The standards for admission to the sacrament of Baptism should likewise apply to all other rites of the Church. With this in mind, no person should be disqualified from receiving any of the Church’s ministrations on the basis of who they are or how they are created. At baptism one is made a full member of the Body of Christ, the Church. If persons are not disqualified from baptism because of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, and so on, neither should they be denied the other rites of the Church.

Having said this, we also recognize that some sacraments and rites, like ordination, might not be made available to some persons under particular circumstances. For example, after a period of discernment, a bishop with the advice and consent of the Commission on Ministry and Standing Committee may refuse to ordain a person seeking the Sacrament of Holy Orders. When it comes to Matrimony or the Blessing of a Holy Union, a priest may also refuse to offer the Church’s blessing to a couple because it is believed that the couple is incapable of entering into a relationship of lasting commitment as understood by our Church. However, these rites are never withheld because something basic to the very nature of the person has disqualified them, e.g., being a man, a woman, a gay person, a white person, a black person.

With regard to the question of same-sex couples being able to receive the sacramental blessing of the Church focuses back upon our earlier definition about the nature of sacraments and the sacramental. As noted earlier, the Blessing of a Holy Union involves the exchange of vows

between two people who make a public declaration of unconditional, covenantal love. This God-type love draws us all into the experience of God.

Our common life and experience shows that two men or two women are just as capable of making such a covenantal commitment of lifelong, Godly love as are a man and a woman. Therefore, persons of the same sex should be able to receive the Church's ministration by having the relationship blessed in the context of the whole people of God.

### **Question 5**

Isn't the promise to have children necessary before a union may be sacramentally blessed by the Church?

#### *Answer*

On page 423 of the Book of Common Prayer are carefully articulated the purposes of Christian marriage. The idea that "bearing children" is a pre-requisite to the Church's blessing does not figure among them. The prayer book suggests that a holy union has three purposes: first, the mutual joy that a couple can provide for one another; secondly, in order that the couple might help and comfort one another in prosperity and adversity; and finally, for "the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord *when it is God's will*". (italics added).

The Church has traditionally offered the sacrament of Holy Matrimony to couples for whom the procreation of children was not even an option: for example, couples past child-bearing age, or couples in which one of the partners has a physical disability that precludes conceiving or bearing children. Moreover, couples may choose not to have children for a multitude of reasons.

### **Question 6**

How can "procreation" be understood for same-sex couples?

#### *Answer*

If one looks at the tradition of the Church over time, a widely accepted definition of "procreation" is cooperation with God in the creation of a new human person whose destiny is to share God's life forever. This definition of procreation is far broader than the actual physical conception and bearing of a child.

For example, a man and woman who adopt a child are certainly bringing the child into a new life in this world. As this man and woman raise this child in the knowledge and love of the Lord (as the Book of Common Prayer directs) they nurture the child to share God's life forever. Although the child is not a physical product of their bodies, they are certainly procreators in every way in which procreation is understood.

The exact same reasoning can be applied to same-sex couples. Two men or two women might likewise adopt a child, nurture and guide the child in "the knowledge and love of the Lord" and nurture the child to share in "God's life forever."

### Question 7

If we offer the sacramental blessing for persons of the same sex, will we be abandoning our heritage and changing our biblical tradition?

#### *Answer*

We have to remember that, through the years, almost everything we understand about marriage has changed and evolved. In fact, if we were to base our current understanding and practice of marriage upon certain Old Testament principles and practice, every man in the Church might have a whole house full of wives to help carry on the family line. The practice of marriage between one man and one woman evolved gradually and became normative for Christians. However, even in the context of monogamous marriage, the understanding of the purpose of marriage in ages past was certainly different from our current understanding.

Throughout antiquity, including Christian antiquity, marriage was primarily viewed as a social vehicle, uniting families for various political and social gains, including increasing the size of a farm or business or even a nation. Women were commodities in this contract, who along with their dowry, were “sold” into a marital union. Such marital unions enabled the passing on of lineage and inheritance, but also protected the woman from harm lest she be left to fend for herself in a society that demanded and expected the protection of a man. Furthermore, our ancestors placed great stock in the necessity of physically consummating a marriage. A couple was not “wed” until the marriage was physically consummated. Thus, the conception and bearing of children enjoyed primary significance and was an absolute necessity for Christian marriage in the past, again, to shore-up the lineage and insure the continuation of the family.

The idea of marrying for love or the notion that marriage was a way for couples to express mutual joy was essentially a foreign concept in antiquity and not a prominent part of our Christian heritage. For the Book of Common Prayer to suggest that the primary purposes of marriage are “mutual joy” and “the help and comfort given to one another in prosperity and adversity” represents a significant evolution from the ancient heritage and from the biblical tradition. Its prominence is a relatively modern idea.

More recently, our views on divorce have changed dramatically. As little as fifty years ago, divorce was reckoned to be a greater sin than, for example, staying in a violent marriage that exposed a spouse and children to a great risk of harm at the hands of the other spouse. Most Christians no longer believe that. Divorced persons are permitted to remarry in most churches.

As humanity and divinity have danced together over the ages, we have evolved in our experience of God and have come to newer understanding as how best to be faithful and committed followers of Jesus. The Biblical tradition from the Old Testament through the Christian era to our very own time is marked by evolution and emergence. Throughout our evolution, we do not change for the sake of change, but rather we change in order to live out the demands of the Gospel more faithfully. Jesus said, “I still have many things to say to you...When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth.” *John 16:12-13*

When we are caught up in the Spirit of God, we will always be moving in the direction of love. As such, our evolutions over time may be judged according to whether or not they have led us to greater and greater love – to the love of God and the love of one's neighbor as one's self.

Certainly, the notion of blessing the covenant of persons of the same sex is a change from our historic heritage, and change is never easy. However, this is not an abandonment of our tradition, but rather an evolution and emergence from it.

### **Question 8**

But even if we should and can bless the covenant of persons of the same sex, shouldn't we wait for someone in the "official Church" to develop such a service?

#### *Answer*

The 76th General Convention passed Resolution C056, which directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to "collect and develop theological and liturgical resources" as they relate to the blessing of same sex relationships. That task is in progress and the results are to be reported to the 77th General Convention in 2012. In the interim, Resolution C056 stated that, "bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same gender marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church." Upon the Illinois legislature's adoption of the bill recognizing civil unions, The Bishop of Chicago, Bishop Jeffrey Lee, put together a task force to determine diocesan guidelines for the blessing of same sex unions. The goal of the task force was to produce a provisional rite for The Blessing of Holy Unions for use in the Diocese of Chicago, as well as pastoral guidelines and theological principles to be disseminated to clergy before the bill takes effect on June 1, 2011.

### **Question 9**

Will there be a liturgy and guidelines provided for the blessing of Holy Unions?

#### *Answer*

Yes. As with couples seeking marriage, same sex couples seeking the blessing of their union must meet the following criteria:

- a) Each must be free to enter into such a covenant. That is, they must not be in an existing covenantal relationship, including marriage.
- b) Both understand that a Holy Union is a physical and spiritual union of two persons, entered into within the community of faith, by mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, and with intent that it be lifelong.
- c) Both receive instruction as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of a Holy Union by the Member of the Clergy, or that they have both received such instruction from persons known by the Member of the Clergy to be competent and responsible.
- d) At least one of the parties has received Holy Baptism.
- e) The Member of the Clergy shall be satisfied by appropriate evidence that any prior marriage or civil union has been annulled or dissolved by a final judgment or decree of a civil court of competent jurisdiction.



f) If either person was party to a prior marriage or union, the Member of the Clergy shall consult with and obtain the consent of the Bishop in which the Member of the Clergy is canonically resident.

g) The Member of the Clergy shall have instructed the parties that continuing concern must be shown for the well-being of the former spouse, and of any children of the prior marriage or union.

Moreover, it is expected that the use of liturgies of Blessing of Holy Unions occur in the context of the Christian community and with the community's understanding of its role in fostering godly relationships. Every effort should be made, therefore, to fulfill the hopes that the on-going relationship of the couple would be supported by the community both before and after the service, and in turn enrich the life of the community. It is particularly appropriate that the blessing take place in the context of a Eucharist in which the members of the community participate.

Finally, as it is currently with the celebration and blessing of a marriage, no clergyperson will be required to officiate at any rite of union in contravention of their beliefs and conscience.

### **Conclusion**

In the beginning of this document, we mentioned that we had no intention of answering every possible question that may arise regarding the subject of the blessing of unions, especially as applied to the union of persons of the same sex. In fact, even our "answers" to these questions are not so much definitive answers as they are guidelines to help formulate ideas leading to further dialogue. Perhaps, though, the best way for individuals to move forward in their understanding about whether they can embrace same-sex blessings within the Christian tradition and in our own Episcopal Church is one which is far more "incarnational" and not simply intellectual.

So here is a final thought: if you want to discover whether or not the love of God can be experienced and expressed in a lifelong God-centered committed relationship between couples of the same-sex, have some conversations with people of the same sex who have been in lifelong committed relationships with each other. Interact with them. Look at the fruit of their life together. Many of our church communities are graced and gifted with the presence and ministry of such couples. Spend some time together. Share your stories with one another: go have dinner, get a cup of coffee or have a glass of wine together.

When we are able to see and interact with real loving people who share the same joys and the same struggles and are on the same journey of faith, we come to the heart of primary theological thinking – the challenge to speak about God from our lived experience. When we encounter the living God and meet the risen Christ in fellow human beings, we are immersed in the mystery of our all belonging to God. That is the nature of amazing grace.

*This document was originally prepared by a writing group of the Diocese of Los Angeles. It has been considerably adapted for the Diocese of San Joaquin and further adapted for the Diocese of Chicago with gratitude to all who previously contributed to this document.*

*The Witnessing and Blessing  
of a Holy Union*



**The Episcopal Diocese of Chicago**  
Provided for Provisional Use on June 1, 2011

*Except in the places where proper texts are provided, this rite presumes the use of the texts and the observance of the rubrics of*

*The Book of Common Prayer and other authorized liturgical documents.*

## THE WORD OF GOD

### Gathering

*The Celebrant may say the following, the people standing:*

*Celebrant* Blessed be the One, Holy and Living God;

*People* Glory to God forever and ever.

*Then may be said:*

*Celebrant* Beloved, let us love one another,

*People* For love is of God

*Celebrant* Whoever does not love does not know God;

*People* For God is love.

*Celebrant* Since God loved us so much;

*People* We ought also to love one another.

*The Celebrant may address the congregation, acknowledging briefly the purpose of their gathering and bidding their prayers for the couple. Examples of such an address are provided in the appendix.*

*The Gloria or another Hymn of Praise may be said or sung.*

### Collect

*Celebrant* The Lord be with you.

*People* And also with you.

*Celebrant* Let us pray.

*The Celebrant says the following collect or one of the collects provided in the appendix.*

Most holy and eternal God,  
You are pleased to dwell with us,  
filling our lives with your presence:  
We thank you for N. and N.  
whom you have called into a covenant of fidelity and love.  
Watch over them in their life and work,  
and lead them with us and all creation  
into your reign.  
We ask this through our Savior Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.

People            Amen.

## The Lessons

*The people sit.*

*Then one or more of the following passages of Scripture is read.*

Hosea 2:20-24	Romans 12:9-18
1 Samuel 18:1b,3,20:16-17, 42a; or 1 Samuel 18:1-4	1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13
Ruth 1:16-17	II Corinthians 5:17-20
Song of Solomon 2:10-13,8:6-7	Galatians 5:13-14,22-26
Micah 4:1-4	Philippians 2:1-4
	Ephesians 3:14-21
	Ephesians 4:25-32
	Colossians 3:12-17
	1 John 4:7-16,21
	1 John 3:18-24

Reader            A Reading from \_\_\_\_\_.

*After the Reading, the Reader may say*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

*or*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.

*or*

The Word of the Lord.

People            Thanks be to God.

*Between the Readings, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung. Appropriate selections from the Psalms are:*

8	95:1-7	127
65	98	133
67	100	148
85:7-13	126	149:1-5

*Except on those occasions when Communion is not to be celebrated, a passage from the Gospels always concludes the Readings.*

Matthew 5:1-16	John 2:1-11
Mark 12:28-34	John 15:9-17
Luke 6:32-38	John 17:1,18-26

*All standing, the Deacon or Priest reads the Gospel, first saying*

The Holy Gospel of our Savior (Lord) Jesus Christ  
according to \_\_\_\_\_.  
*People* Glory to you, Lord Christ

*After the Gospel, the Reader says*

The Gospel of the Lord.  
*People* Praise to you, Lord Christ

The Sermon

## **THE WITNESSING OF THE VOWS AND THE BLESSING OF THE COVENANT**

The Presentation

*The couple, with those who will present and assist them, comes before the congregation and the Celebrant, who then says*

*Celebrant* What do you seek?  
*Couple* We ask a blessing from God and this community  
on our covenant.

*Celebrant* Who presents N. and N. as they seek  
the blessing of their covenant by God and the Church?

*Those who are presenting the couple stand and say*

We present N. and N. to receive the blessing of God and the Church.

The Affirmation of the Congregation

*The congregation stands. The celebrant addresses them, saying*

*Celebrant* Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons  
in their covenant of holy union?

*People* We will.

*or*

*Celebrant* Will you, brothers and sisters in Christ, honor and uphold N. and N., recognizing them as a  
family and respecting the bonds of their covenant, supporting and praying for them in times  
of trouble, celebrating with them in times of joy? And will you seek to discern the  
continuing presence of Christ within their common life?

*People* We will.

## The Prayers

*Celebrant* Let us pray for N. and N., that the blessing they seek today will bear fruit in their lives and in the life of God's Church, and make the redeeming love of Christ know in the world.

*A leader bids prayers for the Church, for the nations and all in authority, the welfare of the whole world, the concerns of the local community, those who suffer and those in trouble, and for the departed. Prayers are especially offered for the couple.*

*The prayers may follow any of the patterns exemplified in the Book of Common Prayer beginning on page 406, or the following. The deacon, or in the absence of a deacon another leader says:*

*Leader* Let us make our prayer saying, "God, source of life, *hear our prayer.*"

*Leader* For the Christian community everywhere: for the life and ministry of the baptized, and for pastors, leaders, and servants of the gospel: God, source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For our nation, and all the nations; for all those who govern and for all in authority, and for justice and peace throughout the world. God, source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For God's creation; for the wisdom and will to honor and protect all that God has made. God, source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For those we easily love, and those we struggle to love, for those familiar to us and those who are not, for the grace and the will to make Christ's reconciling love known. God, source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For those who suffer: for those who are lonely, or sick, or dying, and for those who are bereaved; for those who are poor or hungry, homeless or unemployed; for the victims of violence, hatred, and intolerance. For the vision and strength to be servants of God's coming reign of justice and peace. God, source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For N. and N., servants of God, as they are joined to each other in bonds of mutual love and fidelity. God, source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For their growth in holiness and love for you, in commitment to your Church and its

mission, in unity and faithfulness to one another, in mutual support and enduring patience.  
God, source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

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

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For their children, N. and N., that they may be blessed by the covenant that we witness today, and that they may be a blessing to it. God, source of life;

*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For all those who have died, known to us and unknown; especially for those among our families and friends who have gone before, [especially\_\_\_\_\_:] God source of life:

*People* Hear our prayer.

*The Celebrant concludes the Prayers with the following or another appropriate collect.:*

*Celebrant* Creator of all, you make us in your image and likeness and fill us with the hope of everlasting life. Hear the prayers of your people and grant to N. and N. the grace to live in unity and joy all the days of their lives. We ask this through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to whom, with you, be glory and praise now and for ever.

*People* Amen.

Commitment

*The couple joins hands. First one and then the other says*

I, N. give myself to you, N.

By the grace of God,

I promise to support and care for you.

In the love of Christ, I promise to love and cherish you.

With the Spirit's help, I promise to be faithful to you,  
as long as we both shall live. This is my solemn vow.

*or*

In the name of God, I, N, join my life with yours, N, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

## The Giving of Symbols

*If rings are to be exchanged, they are brought before the Celebrant, who prays*

Ever-living God, bless these rings as enduring signs of the covenant N. and N. have made and keep them in the bond of love, through Christ our Lord.

*People* Amen.

*The two people place the rings on the fingers of one another, first the one, then the other, saying*

N., I give you this ring as a sign of my vows, and as a witness of the faithfulness and love I pledge to you for the rest of our lives.

## Blessing of the Couple

*The celebrant invokes God's blessing upon the couple saying the following prayer or any of those provided in the appendix.*

Praise and thanks to you, O God, Creator and Sustainer of the world. You spoke and the heavens came into being, the earth and everything therein. You saw all that you had made and found it good. The world was charged with your glory and mercy.

Praise and thanks to you, O Lord our God, Liberator and Healer of the world. You have broken down the walls of division, calling together by the law of love those who were apart. For this, Christ died, giving birth to a new creation.

Praise and thanks to you, O Lord our God, who renews the face of the earth. Pour your Holy Spirit upon N. and N. Let them love each other openly without fear, in justice love and peace, a joyful sign of your new creation.

Most gracious God, you have put into the hearts of your people a yearning for community. You call us into covenant and endow us with the will to keep faith with you and one another. Pour out your blessing upon N. and N. Deepen their joy, guide them and console them in difficult times; sustain them in the knowledge of your loving care; and bring them in the end to know you face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*People* Amen.

## The Peace

*Celebrant* The peace of Christ (the Lord) be always with you.

*People* And also with you.

*The newly united couple may greet each other, after which greetings may be exchanged throughout the congregation. The liturgy continues with The Holy Communion. If Holy Communion is not to be celebrated, the Celebrant may bless the people. The Deacon, of the Celebrant, dismisses them. At Holy Communion, the following Proper Preface may be used.*

It is right to give you thanks, most gracious God, and to praise you for the unfailing love and care, for the great joy and comfort, you have bestowed upon us in the gift of human love. Therefore...





## APPENDIX

### Opening Address

*The celebrant may address the congregation, acknowledging briefly the purpose of their gathering and bidding their prayers for the couple.*

*Celebrant* Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the union of N and N in a lifelong commitment of love. The calling to live in the bond of a holy union is a gift from God, in whose image we are created and by whom we are called, in Christ's Body the Church, to live in God and with one another. N. and N. are here to bear witness to their love for each other and their intention to embody Christ's love in their life together as a family. The union of two people in heart, body and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and that their love may be a source of grace and blessing to all whom they encounter. This solemn covenant is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and with the commitment to seek God's will for their lives.

*or*

*Celebrant* Dear people of God: We have come together in the presence of God to acknowledge and bless the union of N.N. and N.N., who seek to make public profession of their offering of themselves to each other in heart, body and mind, for their mutual joy and comfort, and for their growth together in Christ as a family. The life-long covenant of two persons in holy union is to be honored as a means of sanctification, a witness to God's love, and a shared commitment to service in God's Name. Therefore it should be entered into deliberately, freely, and with full knowledge of the solemn obligations it entails.

*If the couple is to be presented later in the service (after the sermon), the Declaration of Consent is omitted and the service continues with the hymn or the collect.*

### The Declaration of Consent

*The Declaration of Consent may follow the Opening Address. If the couple is to be presented later in the service (after the sermon), the Declaration of Consent is omitted and the service continues with the hymn or the collect.*

*The celebrant addresses each member of the couple in turn.*

*Celebrant* N, will you join your life with N,  
to live together in the covenant of holy union?  
Will you love him/her, comfort her/him,  
honor and keep him/her in sickness and in health,  
and, forsaking all others,  
be faithful to her/him as long as you both shall live?

*Response* I will.

*If sponsors have been chosen, the celebrant addresses the sponsors.*

*Celebrant* N and N, you have been chosen to accompany N. and N.  
as they journey towards the fulfillment of their commitment,  
growing in love and faithfulness.  
Will you support them in their life together?

*Sponsors* We will.

*The Celebrant addresses the people.*

*Celebrant* Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons  
in their covenant of holy union?

*People* We will.

The Collect

*Celebrant* O gracious and everliving God,  
you have taught us to love one another as Christ loved us:  
look with favor on N. and N.  
who come to you seeking your blessing.  
Assist them with your grace,  
that with true fidelity and steadfast love  
they may honor and keep the promises and vows they make.

Protect them from all trouble and danger,  
and bring them, with us,  
to the heavenly feast of your eternal kingdom,  
through Jesus Christ our Savior,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, in glory everlasting.

*People* Amen.

*or*

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

*People* one God, in glory everlasting.  
Amen.

*or*

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

*People* Amen.

Blessing

*Celebrant* O God,  
you have so blessed the covenant of holy union  
that in it is represented the spiritual unity  
between Christ and his Church:  
Send therefore your blessing upon these your servants,  
that they may so love, honor, and cherish one another  
in faithfulness and patience,  
in wisdom and true godliness,  
that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Savior,  
who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

*People* Amen.

*or*

*Celebrant* Most gracious God,  
we give you thanks for your tender love  
in sending Jesus Christ to come among us,  
to be born of a human mother,  
and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life.  
By the power of your Holy Spirit,  
pour out the abundance of your blessings  
upon these two people.  
Defend them from every enemy.

Lead them into all peace.  
Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts,  
a mantle about their shoulders,  
and a crown upon their foreheads.  
Bless them in their work and in their companionship;  
in their sleeping and in their waking;  
in their joys and in their sorrows;  
in their life and in their death.  
Finally, in your mercy,  
bring them to that table  
where your saints feast for ever in your heavenly home;  
through Jesus Christ our Savior,  
who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns,  
one God, for ever and ever.

*People* Amen.

*Celebrant* God the Father,  
God the Son,  
God the Holy Spirit,  
bless, preserve and keep you;  
the Lord look upon you with mercy and favor,  
and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace;  
that you may faithfully live together in this life,  
and in the age to come have life everlasting.

*People* Amen.

*or*

*Celebrant* Most gracious God,  
you have put into the hearts of your people  
a yearning for union with you and one another.  
You call us into covenant and endow us with heart and will  
that we may honor and keep our commitments.  
Pour out your blessing upon N. and N.,  
that they may honor one another in all times and in all places.  
Bless them in their loving faithfulness;  
touch others through them,  
that many may know more fully the grace of your love.  
Deepen their joy, sanctify their celebration;  
guide and console them in difficult times;  
ever sustain in them an awareness of your loving care;  
and finally bring them to know you face to face;  
through Jesus Christ our Savior.

*People* Amen.

*or*

*Celebrant* May the God of peace bless, preserve, and keep you;  
may God be gracious to you,  
guide you in truth and peace,  
and make you strong in love and faith;  
so that you may grow together in this life,  
and the love that you share be taken up beyond death itself,  
to dwell in God's eternal glory.

*People* Amen.