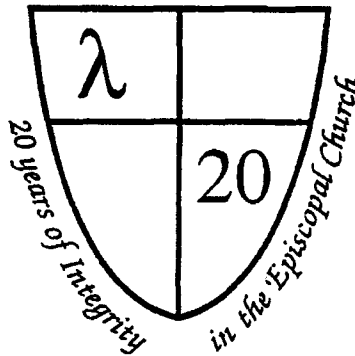


λ | INTEGRITY

AN ANGLICAN GUIDE TO PROPER RITES FOR CELEBRATING COMMITMENTS

*A LIGHTHEARTED VIEW
OF A SERIOUS SUBJECT*

The Rev. L. Paul Woodrum



COPY: Material located in the
Archives of the Episcopal Church

**AN ANGLICAN GUIDE TO PROPER
RITES FOR CELEBRATING
COMMITMENTS
A LIGHTHEARTED VIEW OF A SERIOUS SUBJECT**

by The Rev. L. Paul Woodrum

You are a lesbian or gay Christian couple. You want to solemnly and publicly declare and celebrate your commitment to one another; to have your relationship blessed. To whom do you turn? Where and when do you celebrate? What rite do you use?

Depending on the answer to the first question, the process may be easy or difficult. You will probably need tremendous persistence and considerable intrepidity but it can be done.

First, who do you ask? If you are member of a parish, consider starting with the rector. The rector may giggle, say yes or no, suggest someone else or have a heart attack. Whichever, except the last, it gives you the opportunity to do some consciousness raising. If you are members of an Integrity chapter, check with its leadership. They should be able to suggest priests friendly to the cause. For members at large, the national leadership may be able to suggest someone in your area.

Marshall your arguments. People marry each other by holding hands and exchanging vows and rings. The function of the priest is to officiate, witness and bless, but he or she does not marry people.

Assume what is not specifically forbidden is permitted. Gay/lesbian committed relationships are not yet recognized in canon or civil law though in some places civil, domestic partnership laws are now on the books. Some states still have "sodomy" laws, but separation of church and state is written into the Bill of Rights and neither civil nor canon law prohibits the blessing of companionship. If the clergy can, with a clear conscience, bless

most everything from hounds to battleships, they ought not (but will) balk at blessing a loving, human relationship.

Promise to show restraint in selecting your garments for the service. Two men in morning suits (or white tie for evening), or two women in formal gowns, is probably as far as you should go. Elaborate wedding dresses with seed pearls, bugle beads and twenty-foot trains, on either men or women, tend to suggest less than serious intent or, worse, call your innate good taste into question.

Above all, pledge that you will not invite the media nor send your picture to the local paper's society editor. Sure, it's buying into the heterosexist oppression of silence and invisibility but, from the Presiding Bishop down, the one thing clergy fear most about gay events in the church is publicity. Discretion in this area will go a long way toward lowering the clerical fear quotient. However, if there is no objection and you're dying to appear on Phil, Oprah, or Sally's show, go for it.

Respect local guidelines, but don't let anyone lay heavier requirements on you than they would on a straight couple. Weddings are one of the few areas of power left to the clergy and they tend toward the dictatorial.

Second, where? As this is a Christian rite, a church building is certainly appropriate. According to Yale professor John Boswell, such rites took place in churches long before most straight weddings did. However, as the church is the gathered community of the faithful -- not a building -- a home, garden, social hall or restaurant need not be ruled out.

Third, when? We continue to treat marriage privately as we once did baptism, i.e., to celebrate it outside the context of the congregation's regular worship. To affirm our baptismal incorporation into Christ's church and to enable members of the church to rejoice with us, the most appropriate time to bless a relationship -- gay or straight -- is the regular eucharistic gathering of the

couple's faith community to which additional friends and family can be invited.

This might mean the Sunday eucharist of the parish church or at an Integrity eucharist. This is an area in which lesbian and gay church folks have an opportunity to set an example for their straight brothers and sisters, just as they do by establishing relationships free of the old gender roles.

If this isn't possible, most any time people can gather is acceptable. The English custom of a morning wedding followed by a wedding breakfast (really a luncheon) particularly commends itself. It helps keep the focus on the service rather than on the reception, the bane of most straight weddings.

Fourth, what rite? The civil rights movement taught us that separate is inherently unequal. As the church crawls toward authorizing rites for the blessing of same sex unions every effort will be made to distinguish them from "marriage" and to assure their second class status.

Gay and lesbian Episcopal couples can help deflect this by appropriately adapting the marriage rite of the Book of Common Prayer. While you probably don't want to mimic the gender role stereotypes of straight marriage, remember that Episcopalians embody their faith in a Prayer Book common to all. Using what is already authorized and claiming what is already yours may be the only way to assure the dignity, integrity and equality of your lesbian or gay covenant.

The 1976 Book of Common Prayer restructured occasional rites and sacraments on the order of the eucharist's liturgy of "The Word of God," with the particular rite following the Gospel and sermon and followed by the Prayers of the People. This makes perfect sense for the blessing of a gay or lesbian holy union.

It makes it possible to pass over the questionable *apologia* which prefaces the marriage rite. Did God really establish marriage in

creation or just sex, leaving its regulation up to fallen mortals? Did Jesus really go to the wedding at Cana of Galilee or, loving a good party, just to the week-long reception for which, at Mother's behest he made all those firkins of good wine? No other rite has such a preface. Many denominations have dropped it. Its inclusion in the Prayer Book smells of Anglo Saxon ambivalence toward human sexuality.

It also by-passes "The Declaration of Consent," which is derived from the ancient, Roman, civil engagement contract made between the families of the couple involved. It avoids the sexist "giving" of anyone, inherited from a day when women were the chattel property of men. The '75 Prayer Book framers questioned this for even straight couples by demoting it to the rubrics. Neither of these apply to gay and lesbian couples.

Baptism, confirmation, ordination and other rites of commissioning and dedication include a presentation, affirmation by the congregation;, and the taking of vows or giving of promises.

**THE CELEBRATION
AND BLESSING OF A
LESBIAN OR GAY
COMMITTED RELATIONSHIP**

ENTRANCE HYMN, psalm anthem or instrumental music.

The couple, their supporters and/or presenters may be part of the entrance procession along with the clergy and acolytes, and be seated at the front of the nave.

[A WELCOME by the celebrant, a friend, or family member.]

SALUTATION: (appropriate to the season, and/or:)

Celebrant: Beloved, let us love one another. Alleluia.

People: For love is of God. Alleluia.

[GLORY BE TO GOD or other appropriate canticle.]

COLLECT: (that appointed for the day or:)

Gracious and ever living God, you have created us in your image: Look mercifully upon these two (men/women) who come to you seeking your blessing, and assist them with your grace, that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may ever behold your image in one another and honor the promises and vows they make; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever, Amen.

READING FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES: (that appointed for the day or Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Ecclesiasticus 6:14--17; or Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

Friends or family members may be invited to read the first and second lesson.

[PSALM or canticle.]

READING FROM THE EPISTLES: (that appointed for the day or I Corinthians 13:1-13; Ephesians 3:14-19; Colossians 3:12-17; or I John 4:7-16)

ALLELUIA VERSE: (appropriate to the day, or:)

May God be gracious to us and bless us,
May the light of God's face shine upon us.
May God bless us;
And all the ends of the earth stand in awe of God.

READING FROM THE HOLY GOSPEL: (that appropriate to the day or Matthew 5:1-10, Matthew 5:13-16; Matthew 7:21, 24-29; or John 15:9-12)

HOMILY

RITE OF COMMITMENT

The couple stand before the celebrant and are presented by two or more friends, family members or parishioners.

PRESENTATION: Reverend (Mother/ Father/Pastor), we present N.N. and N.N. who, seeking to honor one another in heart, body and mind, come before you, their families and friends, to commit themselves to each other and to seek God's blessing.

Celebrant: N. and N., are you prepared to honor and support one another in joy and in sorrow, in prosperity and in adversity?

Response: We are.

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

Response. We will.

Facing each other, each in turn takes the other's right hand and repeats the vow.

In the Name of God, I, N., take you, N., to be my spouse, to honor from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish. This is my solemn vow.

BLESSING AND EXCHANGE OF RINGS

Celebrant: Bless, O God, these rings to be signs of the vows by which these two (men/women) have bound themselves to each other, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Each in turn presents a ring to the other, saying:

N., I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (or, In the Name of God.)

Joining the couple's right hands and binding them with the stole, the celebrant says:

Now that N. and N. have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I pronounce their holy covenant with each other, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (or, In the Name of God.)

All stand or kneel for:

THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

THE LORD'S PRAYER (after the Great Thanksgiving, if the eucharist follows.)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE (any of the prayers of the people incorporating all or part of the following or the following alone.)

Celebrant: Let us pray for N. and N., their common life together, and their witness among us.

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation; and giver of all grace: Look with favor upon the world you have made and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon N. and N. who seek to witness to your love through their holy covenant with each other. Amen.

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. Amen.

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life. Amen.

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours. Amen.

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt and joy conquer despair. Amen.

(If the couple has, or plans to have, children, here their nurture and care may be prayed for.)

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

Grant that all covenanted couples who have witnessed these vows may find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed. Amen.

Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your sons and daughters are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace, that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where, O Creator, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign in perfect unity, now and for ever. Amen.

The couple kneel to receive.

THE BLESSING

Most gracious God, we give 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 your blessing on N. and N. Defend them from every evil that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace. Bless them in their work and in their companionship, in their waking and in their sleeping, in their life and in their death, through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

+ God the Father, + God the Son, + God the Holy Spirit, (or The + one, + holy, and + triune God,) bless, preserve and keep you; God mercifully with favor look upon you and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that you may faithfully live together in this life, and in the age to come have life everlasting. Amen.

The couple may greet each other with, and the congregation exchange:

THE PEACE

Celebrant: The peace of God be always with you.

Response: And also with you.

If the rite ends heres it may be concluded with a benediction and/or dismissal. If there is to be a celebration of the eucharist, it follows, beginning with the offertory. The proper preface of the day, or one of the following may be used:

Through Jesus Christ our peace, in whom two are made one and commanded to love one another even as he has loved us.

or:

Through the blood of Jesus Christ we are destined in love to be God's sons and daughters and appointed to live for the praise of his glory, loving one another even as Christ has loved us.

The following post communion prayer may be used:

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

As the postlude thunders forth, the official party may exit with the regular procession or down the center aisle as clergy and acolytes retire to the sacristy. Form a reception line, hug, kiss

and graciously receive the congratulations of your guests. Keep the line moving. You can chat at the reception.

The Book of Common Prayer provides for numerous variations. An evening liturgy, for example, might begin with the ceremonial lighting of candles and follow the order for Evening Prayer. The choice and placement of music and variations need only follow the Prayer Book rubrics to assure a dignified and solemn ceremony. Save social customs and silliness for the reception.

Certificates for gay or lesbian commitments are not readily available. You might ask a friend gifted in calligraphy to prepare one being sure to include provisions for it to be signed by at least two witnesses and the celebrant or ask the officiant to give you a letter certifying the blessing and to enter it in the parish register. This is more than a nice touch. As legislatures and courts recognize gay and lesbian domestic partnerships, such a document may be useful legal proof of your relationship.

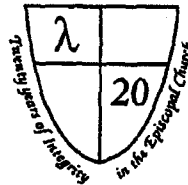
Preparing an authorized rite is on the Standing Liturgical Commission's back burner. Help move it forward by sending a copy of your rite to: Standing Liturgical Commission, 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

Now, call the rector. Schedule your gay organist. Start selecting appetizers with your lesbian caterer. Arrange with your local lesbian or gay florist for the latest in flower chic. Make an appointment with your gay hairdresser. Just like the straight folks do.

The Rev. L. Paul Woodrum received his STB from the General Theological Seminary in 1965 and was ordained a priest in the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania. He served parishes in that diocese and in the Diocese of Newark. In 1979, he became administrator of the Fund for Human Dignity of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. He was National Treasurer of Integrity from 1984 to 1990. He and his life partner, Victor Challenor, are partners in Challwood Studios in Brooklyn.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

I want to share in Integrity's work for justice for lesbians and gay men. Please enter my membership as checked below and begin my subscription to *The Voice of Integrity*.



- Individual annual membership \$25
 Couple's annual membership \$40
 Low income/student/sr. citizen \$10

Please send all materials:

- In a plain envelope (\$10 extra)
 Via First Class Mail (\$7 extra)

Mr./Ms./Miss _____

Mrs./Rev./Dr. _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Phone _____

Zip _____

Please mail with your check or money order to: Integrity, Inc.
P.O. Box 19561, Washington, DC 20036-0561

INTEGRITY: THE EPISCOPAL LESBAY MINISTRY

In rural Georgia in 1974, Dr. Louie Crew started a newsletter for lesbian and gay Episcopalians, *The Integrity Forum*. In it, he called on his adopted church to show "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." Joined by hundreds of lesbian and gay Episcopalians and friends, a year later chapters were formed around the country and a national convention held. In 1976, Integrity was represented at General Convention, where two major resolutions passed: one "...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;" the other "...that homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens, and [General Convention] calls upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality." Integrity has been represented at every General Convention thereafter and has attempted to see that the 1976 resolutions are fully implemented.

Although some perceive Integrity as a "lobbying organization," few Integrity members would identify with that label. In over 70 chapters in the United States (plus unaffiliated chapters in Australia and Canada) the primary focuses are worship in a supportive environment, emotional support and counseling, spiritual nourishment and Christian education, and service to the Church and the lesbian community. Through Integrity's evangelism, thousands of lesbians and gay men, estranged from the Episcopal and other churches, have returned to worship and fellowship.

Non-gay/lesbian people are vitally important to our mission and we invite all to join.

Members of Integrity receive the quarterly publication, *The Voice of Integrity*.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE FROM INTEGRITY, INC.'S BYLAWS

We are a ministry for the encouragement and nurture of gay and lesbian persons in Christian life and community; and, equally, a ministry of gay and lesbian persons, offered to the Church and to the world seeking unity and peace in the body of Christ, justice and dignity for all people, regardless of their likeness to or difference from ourselves, the end to human oppression, especially the oppression of people who are gay or lesbian; and, the building of a world and a society as safer places in which to love. We proclaim the good news that the world and all people in it have been liberated and redeemed by Jesus Christ.

Help yourself grow in faith. Help the church grow in understanding.

JOIN INTEGRITY.