

AN ILLUSTRATION OF A RITE

FOR

THE CELEBRATION OF COMMITMENT

TO A LIFE TOGETHER,

SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATION

REGARDING SUCH A RITE,

AND

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

ON THE NEED FOR SUCH A RITE

June 1, 1995

The following is presented at this time as (1) an act of theological imagination, (2) a concrete illustration of the kind of liturgical text and pastoral education which might be considered for use in a given setting, (3) a way for the church to continue its dialogue on the gift of human sexuality and (4) a work in progress toward a rite bishops might authorize for use in their dioceses and the Standing Liturgical Commission and the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops might weigh in their study, called for by the 71st General Convention in Resolution C-042s, of the theological foundations and pastoral considerations underlying the development of such rites.

INTRODUCTION

It is with gratitude for all who care deeply for this church that this contribution to the present conversation regarding the church's celebration of people's commitments to life together is offered. The rite, the accompanying suggestions for education, and the theological reflections which follow grew out of a national consultation of Episcopalians held July 10-12, 1993, and are the subsequent work of Charles E. Bennison, Jr., E. Otis Charles, L. William Countryman, Anne Fowler, Jane Garrett, Bruce Garner, John Hooker, J.M.C. Oliver, Jennifer Phillips, William W. Rich, Gene Robinson, Richard Schimpfky, Timothy F. Sedgwick, David Siegenthaler, Douglas Theuner, Owen Thomas, Fredrica Harris Thompsett, and R. Stewart Wood, all of whom participated in the consultation.

We were not of one mind when we came together, and, though much clearer about the issues, we were not of one mind when we parted. We did come to a general agreement that the desire to celebrate the commitment to a life together arises from within the baptismal community as it seeks to support all its members, including those who are lesbian women and gay men, as they endeavor to form and deepen their Christian identity by making mature commitments, sharing their gifts with the community, and receiving the support of the community. And having followed carefully the discussion of the past few decades about homosexuality and the church, and with consciences formed by Scripture, tradition, reason, and the experience of and belief in the equality of people, we came to believe that there is no justification for the exclusion of gay/lesbian people from full participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the community. In addition, we did write what eventually became Resolution C-028, which was sponsored by the dioceses of Massachusetts, Michigan, and Newark, calling on the Standing Liturgical Commission to present to the 72nd General Convention in Philadelphia in 1997, proposed supplemental liturgical rites for such celebrations.

Resolved, the House of _____ concurring, That the 71st General Convention direct the Standing Liturgical Commission to prepare and present to the 72nd General Convention proposed supplementary rites and ceremonies for celebrating the commitment of gay and lesbian couples who are members of this church to life together. to be used under the direction of the diocesan bishop, and be it further

Resolved, That the House of Bishops' Committee on Theology be directed to assist the Standing Liturgical Commission in this endeavor.

And over the course of the next year, working in four sub-committees (on theological, pastoral/canonical, ethical, and liturgical concerns), we produced the following document. While none of us would agree with every sentence in what follows, all feel that our collaborative work is worthy of publication as part of the on-going discussion within the church.

We considered mailing the document out to all bishops, deputies, and alternates attending the 1994 General Convention in Indianapolis, in support of Resolution C-028. But after portions of

the fourth draft of the House of Bishops' study guide were published in *The United Voice*, we felt that doing so would put us in a "paper war" in which we had no interest, would further exacerbate an already tense situation at General Convention, and would not be constructive. Instead, at Indianapolis, copies of the document were handed out to people who expressed an interest in it. Some of these were the leadership of the Association of Diocesan Liturgy and Music Chairpersons, who invited us to mail the document to their membership and receive their critique of it on November 10, 1994, at their organization's annual conference in Chicago. In March of this year copies of the document were mailed to all members of the North American Academy of Liturgy at the request of some of them.

The 71st General Convention adopted two resolutions to which the document is pertinent. First, in Resolution C-013, it resolved "That the prayers in the marriage service of the Book of Common Prayer offer guidance to all Christians who seek to understand the nature of their relationships and who strive to be signs of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world; and ... That this Church continue its dialogue on the gift of human sexuality." Secondly, in Resolution C-042a, it resolved "That the 71st General Convention direct the Standing Liturgical Commission and the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops to prepare and present to the 72nd General Convention, as part of the Church's ongoing dialogue on human sexuality, a report addressing the theological foundations and pastoral considerations involved in the development of rites honoring love and commitment between persons of the same sex"; "That no rites for the honoring of love and commitment between persons of the same sex be developed unless and until the preparation of such rites has been authorized by the General Convention"; and "That the sum of \$8,600 be appropriated to support this work, subject to funding considerations."

In regard to the last resolve clause prohibiting the development of such rites, we believe that part of the genius of our church is our principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. What follows was written before the passage of General Convention Resolution C-042a, asking that such rites not be written while the pastoral considerations and theological foundations underlying such rites are being studied by the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops or in the Standing Liturgical Commission. We believe that, because people are of very different points of view on the issue of the church and homosexuality, we need to carry out this study not only in the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops or in the Standing Liturgical Commission, but at the grassroots where people can candidly and compassionately explore and reflect with one another their own thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears. We also believe that, to be real, a study of the pastoral considerations and theological foundations underlying such rites of necessity requires the writing of such rites.

While not incontrovertible, the argument can be made, moreover, that the prohibition of the development of such rites presumably applies only to the National Church, for the Book of Common Prayer authorizes diocesan bishops to set forth such forms as are fitting to the occasions "when no service or prayer has been provided in the Book" (BCP 13). When such events become more than occasional, dioceses customarily acknowledge a pastoral need and seek to regularize their worship by providing appropriate supplemental rites. The rite which follows is presented because services celebrating the commitment to life together on the part of baptized homosexual

members of our church are numerous enough to warrant making such a form widely available.

Once written, will such rites be used? Possibly. But that has not been our intention, and not many of us who would be willing to use the rite presented as it now stands or, in the case of most of us, in any form. Can clergy canonically preside at the celebration of such commitments? Although the General Convention in 1979 passed a resolution against the ordination of homosexual persons, the church has not written into its canon law or rubrics any prohibition of such ordinations. Resolution A-104sa, passed by the 1991 General Convention, moreover, was offered as a compromise because the Convention was unable to reach an agreed-upon policy regarding such ordinations. The resolution, even though arising out of the Ministry Committee of the House of Bishops, seems to acknowledge, first, that the prior issue to be resolved is not the ordination, but the church's sanction of the faithful commitments of homosexual persons, and, secondly, that there is a discontinuity between the church's traditional teaching regarding marriage and many of its members' experiences.

Both the 1979 and the 1991 resolutions, of course, express majority views, but resolutions have never been either accorded the weight of canon law or actively supported across the church by all bishops and clergy. The covenant embraced at their meeting at Kanuga in March, 1995, by nearly all of the church's bishops to consult with one another on a provincial level when considering "the ordination of a non-celibate homosexual" or the filing of a presentment against a bishop who performs such an ordination signals an acknowledgement of the existence of and widespread acceptance of such persons in many quarters of the church. Finally, at the mid-March, 1995, meeting, the Anglican primates conveyed their support of the Rt. Rev. David Hope of London, who disclosed that week that he had been the target of a gay activist campaign to expose him as a homosexual and referred to his sexuality as a "gray area," not strictly defined by either homosexuality or heterosexuality, and said he had chosen to live a "single, celibate life." At the same meeting Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning, arguing that the church has to face the question of same-sex unions before that of ordaining non-celibate gay and lesbian persons, said: "I have a feeling that if that issue could be addressed and we could look at that sincerely in terms of two people who have committed themselves to a life-term commitment, that would say something about how we saw that lifestyle and about the holiness of that lifestyle."

Where the local congregation finds evidence that a couple desires to share together a life of nonviolence, equality, and mutual love; of care, respect, forgiveness, comfort, joy, hospitality, and faithfulness; where no previous commitment is being violated; and where at least one member is a baptized communicant of the church, it is suitable that a public liturgical celebration of a committed relationship take place. These qualities already manifest in the lives of many gay and lesbian couples bear witness to the church that God's grace and love are summoning us to eucharistic inclusion in ways that have not been anticipated in the past.

For Anglicanism, theological authority rests in Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Tradition includes the deposit of the church's evolving understanding of the gospel as recorded in the creeds, ecumenical councils, confessions of faith, and liturgies, especially those included in the Book of Common Prayer. In every age, Scripture and tradition have been interpreted by

reason. In our time reason, in the form of historical-critical study and the modern natural and human sciences and philosophy, is informed by and at the same time is used to interpret the experience of our lives.

Living in committed relationships, especially when these have been celebrated by the church, homosexual Christians have experienced life-giving power through the faithfulness, mutuality, generosity, love, respect, and forgiveness they have known. Commitments on the part of lesbians and gay men have been celebrated in Episcopal churches in every diocese of the church. Some, such as in the Diocese of Rochester for twenty years, have been approved by the diocese, some have been celebrated with the tacit approval of the diocesan bishop, many with the bishop enunciating a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, and others done surreptitiously without episcopal knowledge. In 1988, the Diocese of California approved a resolution to "support liturgies for the open blessings of committed, loving couples of the same sex." The same resolution stated that "the open blessings of same sex couples affirm their validity and acceptance in the broader community and promote the acceptance of God's gift of diversity."

The Good News of God's grace calls the Christian community into being and shapes it both through the proclamation of the gospel and through love of God and the mutual love of one another which flow from the gospel. This Gospel compels us to break with existing conventional forms, in order to include people previously excluded by them. Thus, for example, according to Luke, Peter was led to recognize God's love for the gentile family of Cornelius, and to offer them the rite of baptism, previously restricted to Jews (Acts 10-11), and Philip came to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). The underlying premise is that God loves and affirms all people equally. To some, God gives the particular blessing, within the community, of a partnership of love with another person. When the Christian community discerns such gifts, it gives thanks for them, supports and encourages the partners as they give their relationship form through public vows, and welcomes the gifts which God will give to the community as a whole through their union.

At the same time that the institution of heterosexual marriage is in crisis and the rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage in the Book of Common Prayer is viewed by small but increasing numbers of Episcopalians as inadequate to the pastoral needs of heterosexual people endeavoring to make and sustain individual marriages, the issue of the celebration of the commitment of gay men and lesbian women to lives together is raised in the Episcopal Church. Proposed here for purposes of discussion is a single rite, such as could be adopted in addition to that now in the Book of Common Prayer, for the church's celebration and blessing of *all* couples, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

This and similar rites are based on ancient forms and historical precedent and are occasioned by particular pastoral needs. Still, when honored in a particular congregation, they have the potential for causing conflict, not least when they are opposed by persons inside and outside the congregation, and especially when their use is frowned upon, disapproved of, or banned by the bishop of the diocese. At the same time, those ordained are obliged by their ordination vows to obey their bishop for the sake of the unity and integrity of the church. Thus, a fundamental

conflict of obligations may arise out of different individuals' deepest convictions. Such conflict should be addressed and not avoided, and addressed now rather than later.

At the same time, in the effort to meet the pastoral needs of both same-sex and opposite-sex persons, we remind ourselves that theological integrity and pastoral concern, and not sociology, are at issue in our discussion., and that the shrill voice of controversy – on either side – must not obscure this reality.

What follows is an illustration of one kind of liturgy which might be considered, first, by bishops who, facing "special occasions for which no service or prayer has been provided in the Book," desire to "set forth such forms as are fitting to the occasion" (BCP 13); secondly, by the Standing Liturgical Commission, if and when, as we hope, it undertakes to draft proposed, supplemental liturgical texts for the celebration to commitment to a life together by both heterosexual and homosexual persons; and, finally, by all inside and outside the church who are interested in rites to meet what are obviously emerging pastoral and ecclesial needs throughout the world.

A RITE FOR THE CELEBRATION OF COMMITMENT TO A LIFE TOGETHER

Introduction

The rite is intended for use as a public form in the celebration of the commitment between a man and a woman, or two women, or two men, at least one of whom is a baptized Christian, who desire to make a declaration of their commitment to a life together and to celebrate God's blessing in the context of the Christian community.

The rite which follows is in two parts, which may be celebrated either on two separate occasions, or together on one occasion, or the second of which may be celebrated alone without the first having been celebrated: Part I: The Engagement, and Part II: The Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together.

In Part I, the couple declares to their families, friends, and congregation(s), their intention to explore their commitment to a life together, enter a period during which, supported by the ongoing prayer and discernment of their congregation(s), and accompanied by sponsors, they undertake a period of preparation to make their formal commitment to a life together. Ideally, the sponsors and a small group from within a congregation help the couple discern the nature of their relationship and come to clarity in the articulation of what expectations and fears they have, and what commitments they seek to make.

In Part II, the couple celebrates their commitment to each other and responds to the proclamation of God's Word by exchanging vows. The one who presides then voices the Christian assembly's thanks to God for God's love and faithfulness, evidenced in the couple's commitment, and pronounces God's blessing on the couple.

PART I: THE ENGAGEMENT

Part I is a rite of Engagement, initiating a period of preparation leading to Part II: The Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together. Part I may take place at the principal celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday in the congregation in which either or both people are members.

The readings are those appointed in the lectionary for the given Sunday.

Before the Liturgy

The congregation may be invited to read the following before the liturgy begins, or it may be read aloud to the congregation by the celebrant at the beginning of the liturgy:

Engagement is a time between the making of a binding promise to celebrate a commitment to a life together and the actual celebration of that commitment. Although it makes no mention of a ceremony of engagement, the New Testament does mention engaged persons, such as Mary, the mother of Jesus. Engagement may be performed in conjunction with a celebration of commitment

A RITE FOR THE CELEBRATION OF COMMITMENT TO A LIFE TOGETHER

Introduction

The rite is intended for use as a public form in the celebration of the commitment between a man and a woman, or two women, or two men, at least one of whom is a baptized Christian, who desire to make a declaration of their commitment to a life together and to celebrate God's blessing in the context of the Christian community.

The rite which follows is in two parts, which may be celebrated either on two separate occasions, or together on one occasion, or the second of which may be celebrated alone without the first having been celebrated: Part I: The Engagement, and Part II: The Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together.

In Part I, the couple declares to their families, friends, and congregation(s), their intention to explore their commitment to a life together, enter a period during which, supported by the ongoing prayer and discernment of their congregation(s), and accompanied by sponsors, they undertake a period of preparation to make their formal commitment to a life together. Ideally, the sponsors and a small group from within a congregation help the couple discern the nature of their relationship and come to clarity in the articulation of what expectations and fears they have, and what commitments they seek to make.

In Part II, the couple celebrates their commitment to each other and responds to the proclamation of God's Word by exchanging vows. The one who presides then voices the Christian assembly's thanks to God for God's love and faithfulness, evidenced in the couple's commitment, and pronounces God's blessing on the couple.

PART I: THE ENGAGEMENT

Part I is a rite of Engagement, initiating a period of preparation leading to Part II: The Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together. Part I may take place at the principal celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday in the congregation in which either or both people are members.

The readings are those appointed in the lectionary for the given Sunday.

Before the Liturgy

The congregation may be invited to read the following before the liturgy begins, or it may be read aloud to the congregation by the celebrant at the beginning of the liturgy:

Engagement is a time between the making of a binding promise to celebrate a commitment to a life together and the actual celebration of that commitment. Although it makes no mention of a ceremony of engagement, the New Testament does mention engaged persons, such as Mary, the mother of Jesus. Engagement may be performed in conjunction with a celebration of commitment

or at the beginning of an extended period of counseling and preparation. Today N. and N. come before us to pledge to each other their decision to join their lives together and to request the assistance of this congregation in their preparation.

Pastoral Introduction

Following the Prayers of the People, the one presiding invites the couple to come forward and stand in full view of the congregation.

The one presiding introduces the couple, who may then address the people, explaining their decision to begin preparations for their public Declaration of Commitment to a Life Together, announcing the date of their celebration, if it has been decided upon, and asking for their congregation(s)'s support and prayers.

Declaration of Consent

The one presiding asks each person:

Presider: N., will you accept N. as your partner in life, and promise to be united to him/her in love and support for each other?

Response: I will. Blessed be God who visits me in N's love.

The one presiding asks the congregation:

Presider: As N. & N.'s family in Christ, will you rejoice in their love?

People: We will.

Presider: Will you assist them as they prepare to make their commitment to a life together?

People: We will. Blessed be God who appears to us in their love.

If there is to be a presentation of either or both of those becoming engaged, it takes place at this time. (See the rubrics at the conclusion of this section.)

The Giving of Rings

The couple may exchange rings or other tokens and gifts as pledges of their intention, saying,

N., I give you this ring [and/or gifts or tokens] as a sign of my pledge to share my life with you.

Prayer over the Couple

The one presiding (and the sponsors) may lay hands on the couple. The one presiding then says,

Blessed are you, O God,

Lover of the human race.
 You make the heavens and
 bind them to the earth by your word.

Blessed are you, eternal Word.
 You pledge yourself to us in love.
 Be present now and stand with *N* and *N*
 as they pledge themselves to each other
 by the giving of rings [and/or gifts or tokens].
 May each have for the other unending love
 on which their union will stand and be strong.

Blessed are you, Holy Spirit of love.
 You renew the face of the earth.
 Bind *N* and *N* together in love
 and unite them in the bond of peace,
 as you promised through Jesus Christ,
 who said, "My peace I give you, my own peace I give to you."
 For you indeed are our Peace,
 and we render you praise and honor,
 Source of all life,
 Word of Wisdom,
 and Holy Spirit, one God,
 now and forever.

People: AMEN. Blessed be God who makes two people one.

The Peace

Presider: The peace of Christ be always with you.

People: And also with you.

The couple greet each other, after which the Peace may be exchanged throughout the congregation. During the exchange of the Peace, the following anthem (Psalm 85:10,11) may be sung:

Mercy and truth have come together.
 Justice and Peace have embraced.
 Truth has sprung up from the earth
 and Justice looks down from heaven.

The service proceeds with the Offertory, at which the couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.

Additional Directions

When pastoral care necessitates, the Engagement may be celebrated at any time or in any place, or if need be, it may be used within the Celebration of Commitment to a Life Together.

If by reason of pastoral necessity this rite is celebrated outside the Sunday Eucharist, one or more of the readings (including a Gospel passage, if the Eucharist is to follow) from the Celebration of a Commitment to a Life Together may be used.

After the Declaration of Consent, if there is to be a presentation of the two people by their sponsors, family members, and/or friends, the one presiding asks:

As N. and N. begin their new life together, will you, their (parents, grandparents, children, friends, sponsors) give them your blessing?"

They respond together, each one saying:

I give you my blessing. May God bless you both.

As an alternative, the one presiding may ask:

Who gives these persons to each other?

To this question, the appropriate answer is, "I do." If more than one person responds, they each together say, "I do."

The rings or gifts or tokens may be blessed before being exchanged. The exchange of rings and/or gifts may be omitted.

Special forms of the Prayers of the People at the Eucharist may be written for the occasion.

With the permission of the Ordinary, the couple may assist in the administration of Holy Communion

PART II: THE CELEBRATION OF COMMITMENT TO A LIFE TOGETHER

Part II may take place at the principal celebration of the Eucharist on a Sunday in the congregation in which the one or both of the people are members or at another time.

Before the Liturgy

The congregation may be invited to read the following before the liturgy begins:

The celebration of commitment to a life together is a time for good wishes, feasting and joy. Jesus shared such an occasion in Cana of Galilee where, in his first miracle, he gave a sign of new beginnings by turning water into wine. The bond between two people shows us the mystery of the union between God and God's people, and between Christ and the church, and the Holy Scriptures point to the centrality of love as the principal sign of God's presence. Through the blessing of their love for each other and their children or family or friends, in good times and bad, the couple share together in the spirit of Jesus Christ. and extend hospitality to others. Today N. and N. come before each other and their friends and family and this community to make their promises and join the church in blessing God for their relationship. As members of the community, you witness their commitment and express your support by your presence and prayers.

The Eucharist begins as usual.

Part I: The Rite of Engagement, if not performed on an earlier occasion, takes place after the Gloria or other Hymn of Praise and before the Collect. Otherwise, Part II follows with the Collect for the Sunday, unless the Rite of Engagement is used. If the Liturgy does not take place on Sunday, the following Collect may be used:

Presider: The Risen Christ be with you.

People: And also with you.

Presider: Let us pray.

O God our Maker and Lover of the heavens and earth, you have commanded us to love each other as Christ loved us, to bear each other's weaknesses, and share each other's strengths. Look with favor on N. and N., whom you have brought together in love. Grant them unashamed faithfulness, sincere love, and constant strength. Protect them from all trouble and danger and bring them with us to the heavenly feast of your eternal reign, through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. **AMEN.**

The readings are those appointed in the lectionary for the given Sunday, other appropriate readings, or any of the following readings:

From the Hebrew Bible:

Song of Solomon 2:10-13, 8:6-7 (Many waters cannot quench love)
 I Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a (Jonathan made a covenant with David ...)
 Ruth 1:16-17 (Where you go I will go...)
 Ecclesiastes 4::9-12 (Two are better than one)

From the Psalms:

67
 111
 127
 133:1-3
 149

From the New Testament:

Romans 12:9-21 (Let love be genuine)
 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (If I speak with the tongues of mortals...)
 Colossians 3:12b-16a (Be clothed in sincere compassion)
 1 John 4:7-12 (Beloved let us love one another...)

From the Gospels:

Luke 6:20-23 (The beatitudes)
 John 2:1-12a (The marriage at Cana)
 John 15:9-17 (This is my commandment: that you love one another)
 John 17:1, 18-26 (...that they may be one as we are one)

The Vows

Following the Creed, the one presiding invites the couple to come forward and stand in full view of the congregation. The couple faces each other. Taking the other's hand, each says to the other, in turn:

I, N., take you, N., to have and to hold from this day forward, to love and to cherish, in good fortune and in ill, in health and sickness, as my companion, lover, and friend. Amen.

The Giving of Rings [and/or gifts or tokens]

The one presiding may say,

Blessed are you, our God,
for you have bound yourself to us
in love and faithfulness.

Blessed are you for these signs
of *N.* and *N.*'s commitment to each other.

Keep them in the bond of love
through Christ our Savior. *AMEN*

Each person places the ring on the ring-finger of the other's hand, or presents the gift(s) or token(s), saying:

N., I give you this ring (or gift or token)
as a sign of our union and my love and faithfulness.

The Prayers of the People

The Deacon or an appointed lay person bids the people to pray in these or similar words:

Seeing how greatly God has loved us, let us remember before God this couple, this community of faith and the whole world, saying, "Hear our prayer."

I ask your prayers for *N.* and *N.*, that they may be filled with God's blessing and grow in love for each other with unashamed faithfulness throughout their life together. Pray for *N.* and *N.*

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers for *N.* and *N.* May they have the courage to recognize and forgive each other's faults, bearing each other's burdens and exemplifying for us forgiveness and reconciliation. May their life together be a sign of God's faithful love for the world. Pray for *N.* and *N.*

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers for the earth and all of God's creation: for the rivers and oceans, for the forests and fields, for the mountains and meadows, and all creatures who live in them. Pray for our planet.

[The people pray aloud]

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers for our country and for our leaders and all in authority. Pray for justice in our own land.

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers for the welfare of the world, for peace and respect among nations, for all the leaders of the world and all men and women and children everywhere. Pray for our world.

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers for the concerns of our community, for the people of this [neighborhood, town, city] and for the yearnings of our hearts which we now present before God. Pray for our community.

Deacon: O God, Source of all life

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers for those who suffer and for all in any need or trouble. Pray for the sick and the poor, the destitute, the unemployed, the lonely, the bereaved, those suffering from addictions, and all victims of hatred and intolerance. Pray for those who bear the pain of the world.

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers for the Christian community throughout the world. For our bishop(s), *N.N.*, for all baptized Christians everywhere in their life and ministry, that we may be the living presence of Christ in the world. Pray for the Church.

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

I ask your prayers of gratitude for all those who have gone before us in the faith and those whose faith is known to God alone. We remember especially *N.N. & N.N.* Pray for all who have died.

Deacon: O God, Source of all life,

People: *Hear our prayer.*

The one presiding adds this or another concluding collect:

O God, Ruler of all, you made us in your image and likeness and bestowed upon us everlasting life. You commanded your apostles to be united by the law of love. Hear the prayers of your people and grant to *N.* and *N.* grace to love each other in joy all the days of their lives. For you are a compassionate God and a lover of human beings, and we glorify you, the Source of all, the Word of Wisdom, and the Holy Spirit, one God in glory everlasting.
AMEN

The Blessing

The one presiding and sponsors may lay hands on the couple, who stand or kneel. If desired, the couple may stand with right hands joined upon the Gospel Book or Bible.

Presider: Blessed are you, God of our ancestors,
 Source of all life and Lover of the world.
 Earth and sky, rivers and seas
 and all who dwell in them bless you.

Blessed are you, for you have joined *N.* and *N.*
 Hold them together by that same love
 by which we cling fast to Christ,
 who holds us in close embrace.
 Reveal your love in the life they share.
 Let their love be without shame,
 a sign of the new world of justice and peace.

Blessed are you, for you have come near and visited us
 in the love of *N.* and *N.* for each other,
 bringing together what was apart and
 uniting them by the law of love.
 Give your Holy Spirit to *N.* and *N.*
 Make their life together a sign of trust,
 and a blessing upon the whole world.
 Grant all this through your Beloved One, Jesus Christ,
 who lives and reigns with you in the Holy Spirit,
 one God, forever and ever. **AMEN.**

The living God bless you.
 May you flourish together
 and rejoice in your friends.
 [May you be blessed with children.
 or May God bless your children.]

May God grant you the good that endures
and bring you to everlasting joy.
And the blessing of the Living God,
The Source, the Word and the Spirit, One God,
be with you now and forever. **AMEN.**

The Liturgy continues immediately with the Peace, at which the couple may kiss. The couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.

Additional Directions

The exchange of rings, gifts or tokens in the second part of the rite may be omitted if it took place in the first part, or additional signs of commitment may be exchanged.

It is appropriate to exchange signs of union typical of the culture(s) represented.

Whenever Part II takes place at the regular Sunday service, the readings appointed in the lectionary for that Sunday take precedence over other possible readings.

After the Declaration of Consent in Part I, if there is to be a presentation of the partners by family members or friends, the one presiding asks:

Who presents these persons to make a commitment of life together?

If either partner, or both partners, has/have young or grown children, suitable adaptations may be made in the rite to recognize their presence and include their participation.

Among those named in the remembrance of the saints during the Prayers of the People may be Zechariah and Elizabeth, Jonathan and David, Ruth and Naomi, the martyrs Serge and Bacchus, and appropriate others from the tradition.

The vows may be expanded by the couple in consultation with the one presiding.

As deemed appropriate by the one presiding, the following or portions thereof may be included in the statement which the people are invited to read or hear read at the beginning of Part I:

With the exchange of vows persons bind themselves in a life together. This life is celebrated and blessed as it seeks to express and deepen a life formed by Christian faith and lived in Christ. The life together to which the parties commit themselves should be marked by non-violence, equality, mutual respect, love, care, joy, and forgiveness. There are times when these larger purposes

which give life to a union may be frustrated, but the commitment is to abide with each other that they may be realized. However, physical or emotional spousal abuse or infidelity may so break the bonds of union that the purposes of the vows cannot be realized and the integrity of the relationship may be diminished or destroyed. In such a case, the dissolution of the vows and union may be necessary. Before it is undertaken, however, the couple is responsible to themselves, to their children, if there be any, to their families and friends, to their sponsors and to the church, to seek forgiveness and reconciliation and the counsel and advice of a wise and understanding counsellor

In place of the final blessing, the following may be said or sung:

Antiphon:

*You have set upon their heads crowns of precious stones, O God;
they have asked you for life and you have given it to them.*

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Abraham and Sarah.

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Isaac and Rebecca.

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Jacob and the patriarchs.

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Ruth and Naomi.

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Moses and Zipporah.

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed David and Jonathan.

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Joachim and Anna.

Bless them, O Lord, our God, as you blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved Noah in the ark.

Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved Jonah in the belly of the whale.

Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved the holy children from the fire.

Preserve them, O Lord, as you preserved Jesus in the tomb.

Repeat Antiphon.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATION REGARDING SUCH RITES

The proposed rites are intended to focus the community's attention on the nature, purpose, and integrity of committed relationships and the meaning of our human sexuality. In order for them to be performed at their best, preparatory education of the worshipping community on different levels is advisable:

1. The Congregation

Preparation for the performance of the rites provides an opportunity for discussions within a congregation on topics such as:

- + the integrity of committed relationships in the Christian community
- + the purpose of human sexuality for the life of the worshipping community
- + the effect on the Christian community of the dissolution of commitments

A program for adults and teens, exploring the moral dimension of commitment in relationships in a Christian context, could promote the understanding that the positive qualities hoped for through such commitments are equally applicable to relationships between any two persons, regardless of their sex. The program might also raise for consideration the unique qualities of commitment between persons of the same sex, especially its egalitarian nature, which might prove helpful at present to commitments between persons of the opposite sex. The opportunity exists, as well, for discussion of the merits of non-sexual marital and non-marital sexual relationships, and of the ways in which the church might celebrate diversity in terms of sexual orientation as well as in terms of race, class, gender and other divisive factors.

A congregation's celebration of commitment to a life together for same-sex couples can cause questions and fears which, in turn, can set the educational agenda for the congregation. Children might wonder about the nature of sexual behavior and whether or not children will be part of the family established by such unions. Parents may fear the prospect of having to provide answers to those questions. Young people, in the midst of serious explorations of their sexual identities, may have their own questions. Parents of teens might express concern about the church's approval of a commitment to life together between persons of the same sex. Even adults who are better prepared than others to provide room in the congregation for same-sex commitments, may be nervous about the implications of an assumption-shattering event in the life of their community.

Opportunities to deal specifically with the questions of children and youth and to listen and respond to adults and parents regarding their concerns and to provide them with resources may be scheduled.

As the development of educational resources begins, congregations are advised to avail

themselves of the experience, learnings, and wisdom of the "More Light Churches" of the Presbyterian Church, the "Open and Affirming Churches" of the United Church of Christ, the "Reconciled-in-Christ Congregations" of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the "Reconciling Congregation Program" of the United Methodist Church, the "Welcoming Congregation Program" of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the congregations of the Metropolitan Community Church, the Oasis Congregations -- trained by the Oasis, a ministry of the Diocese of Newark, which has developed a multi-session curriculum for use in congregations studying the issue -- one of the approximately sixty chapters of Integrity in dioceses across the Episcopal Church, and other congregations and organizations with a history of celebrating the commitments of same-sex, as well as opposite-sex, couples.

2. The Couple

The primary educational process for the couple whose commitment is to be celebrated could take place in the context of a period of pre-commitment counselling and/or small-group discernment regarding:

- + the status of previous commitments
- + children (already present or hoped for)
- + property, wills, power of attorney, and other legal issues
- + the development of rules and practices for dissolution
- + the need to deal with fears, as well as expectations
- + the political implications and possible sensationalism or controversy attending their performance of the rites if they are a same-gender couple (media coverage, for example)
- + and other topics such as sex, finances, family dynamics, religious values and practices, and conflict styles and strategies.

3. Friends, Family, and Witnesses

The commitment affects not just the couple, but also other people, who deserve an opportunity to deal with the issues they face and the feelings they have. The congregation can assist this process by providing opportunities for conversation and guidance for:

- + family of origin and family of choice
- + children
- + friends
- + witnesses and others involved in the liturgical service

If the couple is a same-sex couple, the issue of "coming-out" is often difficult. Some congregations may be able to provide guidance and support, helping the couple make announcements to family and friends in the most creative and helpful manner. Such openness is needed if the community is, as it should, to support the couple, and if the liturgical rite is to be public, and not private or closeted.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE NEED FOR THE RITE

Prior to the Reformation, the primary purposes for marriage were the procreation of children and the prevention of fornication. The English reformers, however, effected a shift in the understanding of committed relationships by claiming that marriage was primarily for the provision of "help and comfort" for one another "in prosperity and adversity." In a like manner, today we are seeking to expand our understanding of the purposes of such commitments to meet pastoral needs and can list at least seven purposes, not just for opposite-sex, but also for same-sex, unions.

1. The Provision of Comfort

The goals and desires of all couples for their lives together are broad. Among these is companionship. Many seek and find a strengthening of one another for their work and an imaging of Christ in one another for the deepening of their faith. The full, free, equal, loving, and nonviolent expression of intimacy is also a central aspect of the vocation to committed relationship, and one which bears fruit in the increase of love and friendship in the wider community.

2. The Procreation and/or Nurture of Children

Some couples desire or are, in some instances, already finding their relationship to be the basis for the nurture of children. This is as true for same-sex as for opposite-sex couples. Gay men and lesbian women by the thousands today are raising children to maturity, wholesomeness, and sound moral values.

3. The Prevention of Sin and Death

Christian faith holds human nature to be sinful, yet holy in its potential for good. The prevention of sin has been a stated purpose of marriage since the English Reformation. In the proposed English Prayer Book of 1928, which was defeated in Parliament by the deciding vote of a Marxist member of the House of Commons, "the instincts and affections implanted by God" were said "to be directed and hallowed aright" in marriage. The natural inclination of human desire, our "instincts and affections," are twisted in self-interest and need to be "directed and hallowed aright". To deny homosexual persons a supporting community in which to make and live covenants of primary Christian relationship is to promote as an option among them that has led to an often overstated promiscuity and that sex of desperation which can lead not only to spiritual despair, but also to physical sickness and death. Often for both the celibate and those in committed relationships, when trouble comes, the failure is failure of community, as well as of the individual. Needed is a community to voice its consent to the commitment being undertaken: "Will all of you who [will] witness this couple's vows do all in your power to support these persons in their marriage?" "We will," says the whole community (BCP 425). In

a Christian community we can know and be known and, therefore, helped to "be good" by being supported and held in care and responsible living.

4. The Covenant of Baptism

Baptism both signifies radical inclusion of all those baptized, regardless of sex or sexual orientation, and forms the basis for the covenantal relationship between committed couples. Since the *Apostolic Constitution* of the 3rd century, the one constant rubrical requirement for those being united sacramentally is that at least one of the parties be a baptized Christian (BCP, page 422). We all have a role in supporting couples in their relationships. When we do not provide such support, we ought not be surprised when such relationships fail. Couples yearn for the prayers and assistance of their community of faith to weather the joys, challenges and stresses of life together. It is the responsibility of the local congregation to discern the godliness of such relationships and their suitability for solemnization in the church. The counsel and consent of the priest, the role of witnesses, and the congregation's pledge to do all in its power to uphold the couple in their marriage, are liturgical expressions of this discernment. The bishop exercises oversight of the priest's work of counsel and preparation in the case of remarriage following divorce, or clergy marriage. Similar functions for the congregation, witnesses, priest, and bishop are appropriate in the discernment of gay and lesbian relationships to be liturgically celebrated.

5. The Benefits to Heterosexual Marriage

Heterosexual people may find in the experience of homosexual couples some useful models as they seek ways to understand their own spiritual and sexual identities. Bringing same-sex unions openly into the life of the church may benefit all Christians in five ways. First, inasmuch as telling their stories is an essential part of coming to terms with God and themselves in an often hostile world, homosexual people often display an articulateness about their faith and spirituality worthy of emulation. Second, inasmuch as they do assume, not inequality between the two person and the dominance of men over women, but equality, experience with same-sex commitments may help in the search for new models of heterosexual married life. Third, the acceptance of same-sex unions, at least in the first generation that experiences them, is serving to overcome our unconscious but destructive identification of goodness with respectability, and thus to liberate us to serve God and the Good News, instead of being subservient to predominant cultural paradigms. Fourth, the celebration of same-sex unions is another step in the effort to reverse the longstanding Christian suspicion towards sex and the human body generally, which, while not strictly biblical, arose in the context of the world-weary asceticism of Late Antiquity; thus, such celebrations stand in continuity with the Reformation's recovery of the dignity of marriage as a matter of more than procreation. Fifth, by their struggle to love and care for one another in a world which is often hostile to them and in the face of HIV/AIDS, gay and lesbian persons bear a strong witness to the world on how to persevere in love under stress.

6. The Precedence of History

John Boswell, the late Yale historian, in *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York:

Villard Books, 1994). points out that there exist over 100 manuscripts possibly containing an ancient same-sex union rite. Some references are as old as the 5th century, and there are references in legal documents dating from the 4th century. Interestingly, in the 8th and 9th centuries, the church had a liturgy for blessing same-sex relationships, but none for those of the opposite-sex variety, though obviously they were to come later. Use of same-sex ceremonies receded after about 1200, but remained in use in Italy and Eastern Europe up until the 19th century.

7. The Question of Moral Justice

Ralph Smith and Patricia Beattie Jung, -- a Lutheran and a Roman Catholic scholar who teach at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa -- in *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) argue that the church is a "heterocentric" institution which upholds the "heterosexism" of a society which unjustly privileges in status, employment, personal freedoms, and social acceptability those who practice heterosexual, in contrast to homosexual, relationships. Without necessarily being homophobic, individuals living in such a society can still be heterosexist -- unless they work intentionally to change the heterosexist structures into ones which are just. Included in such work are efforts to assure the church's sanctions of the commitments to life together on the part of gay men and lesbian women. Equally for the sake of moral justice, however, caution must be taken to guard against the possibility that this initiative could intensify the church's focus on couples, thereby further problematizing the position of single persons in the church.

CONCLUSION

The church's adoption and use of proposed supplemental rites, such as are illustrated above, will be to transform, for all of us, the sense of living in a heterosexist world and a heterocentric church. This transformation may be greeted with a sense of liberation on the part of some, and anxiety on the part of others. The "liberated" could well go on to inquire how this liberation enhances their relationship with God, and the "anxious" could well go on to inquire whether the anxiety is of God or is in fact occasioned by problematic convictions. The celebration of commitment to a life together for all persons, including gay men and lesbian women, is necessary before the church can claim to be genuinely accepting of lesbians and gay men and to be providing the hospitality and justice God asks of it. Until this is done, the church will be perceived as saying, at best, "You are real members of Christ, but not quite." This move, once carried out, however, could put a more solid ecclesiastical foundation under the spirituality of gay men and lesbians, even those who may not enter into such unions. At the same time, heterosexual unions, now in crisis in every quarter of our society, may also be renewed. It is our Anglican tradition to approach such questions by working together on the creation, not of confessional or doctrinal statements, but of liturgical rites. We urge the Standing Liturgical Commission to pursue a process for the study and creation of proposed supplemental rites for the celebration of commitment to life together.