

I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing

Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships

This portion of the report of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music is intended for the consideration of the 77th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, and for study in preparation for that Convention. It is intended to be read in connection with the Commission's report contained in the Blue Book. None of the material in this document is authorized for use in The Episcopal Church.

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Introduction

As members of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music of the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, we give thanks for the many and various ways that the grace of God in Christ is made manifest in our Church and throughout the world. Whenever the Church pronounces God's blessing, it does so with such gratitude always in mind.

For more than thirty years, The Episcopal Church has been responding to the call to seek and serve Christ in its members who are gay and lesbian. In 1976, General Convention Resolution A069 affirmed 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." Since then, we have been in a Churchwide discernment process about how we live out that resolution. Some congregations and their clergy have welcomed same-gender couples and offered liturgical blessings of their relationships, and some dioceses have developed guidelines for such blessings. Resolution 2003-C051 of the 74th General Convention recognized "that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions." Six years later, General Convention called for the collection and development of resources for those blessings. The materials presented here respond to that call.

Resolution 2009-C056 of the 76th General Convention directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to "collect and develop theological and liturgical resources" for the blessing of same-gender relationships. This resolution instructed the Commission to work in consultation with the House of Bishops and to "devise an open process for the conduct of its work, inviting participation from provinces, dioceses, congregations, and individuals who are engaged in such theological work, and inviting theological reflection from throughout the Anglican Communion." We have understood the process for our work to be as important as the resources themselves.

The Scope of Our Work

Because Resolution 2009-C056 directed us to "collect and develop" resources, we have not debated whether the Church should bless same-gender relationships. Nonetheless, we recognize that Episcopalians and Christians throughout the Anglican Communion have disagreed about whether such blessings are a legitimate development within Christian tradition or an unacceptable departure from biblical teaching. Resolution 2009-C056 acknowledged this dispute in the resolve "that this Convention honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality," and previous General Convention resolutions have also recognized this disagreement. In the theological essay "Faith, Hope, and Love" we acknowledge these differences, and offer an approach to blessing same-gender relationships that reflects the centrality of Scripture in Anglican tradition, interpreted in concert with the historical traditions of the Church and in the light of reason. The discussion guide included in these resources is intended to enable all congregations and dioceses to explore the materials, whether or not they believe the Church should bless same-gender relationships.

As we developed the resources, many people asked whether we were actually preparing a rite for same-gender marriage. In accord with Resolution 2009-C056, the Commission has understood our charge to be the development of a liturgy of blessing, not marriage. Nonetheless, there are a number of parallels to different-gender marriage, as General Convention Resolution 2000-D039 suggested when it acknowledged that "there are currently couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in marriage and couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships." That 2000 resolution then set forth the expectation that "such relationships will be 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," and denounced "promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members." These expectations have defined the Commission's understanding of the same-gender relationships for which we have developed resources. While the liturgy we have developed is not called "marriage," we recognize significant parallels: two people publicly make a lifelong, monogamous

commitment to one another with the exchange of solemn vows in a ritual that pronounces God's blessing on their life together.

The question of marriage is complicated by ongoing changes in American civil law. As of August 2011, six states and the District of Columbia issue marriage licenses to same-gender couples, five states allow civil unions, and seven recognize some form of domestic partnership; on the other hand, thirty states have adopted constitutional language defining marriage as between one man and one woman and thirty-nine states have statutes defining marriage in this way.¹ Civil law in other countries where The Episcopal Church is located adds further complexity. Both the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Canons of the Episcopal Church require clergy to conform to the laws of the state regarding marriage and describe marriage as being between a man and a woman. To address this complexity, these resources include an essay on canon law that discusses scenarios likely to arise as same-gender couples request an authorized liturgy for blessing of their relationship and/or civil marriage (or union) in the Church.

In addition to questions about the term "marriage," we received many comments about the terms "gender" and "sex." Following the wording of Resolution 2009-C056, we have used the term "same-gender" rather than "same-sex" to describe these relationships. Previous General Convention resolutions, along with the diocesan resources we have collected, are not consistent in their choice of terminology. This is more than a linguistic question. As the Commission has worked on these resources, we acknowledged but did not address the complexity of contemporary social and academic conversations about the categories of "sex" and "gender." The pastoral resources for preparation of couples prior to a liturgy of blessing offer ways to work with individuals who identify themselves as bisexual or transgender. The resources expect that a bisexual or transgender couple who seeks the Church's blessing of their relationship will commit to monogamy and lifelong faithfulness, the same commitment asked of every other same-gender and different-gender couple.

Collecting Resources

The Commission has gathered a vast amount of materials, including official studies, service leaflets from liturgies of blessing, and diocesan and provincial guidelines for these blessings. The Archives of the Episcopal Church established a digital archive for the project, <http://www.episcopalarchives.org/SCLM/>, where anyone may review the materials we have gathered.

Resolution 2009-C056 allows bishops to "provide generous pastoral response" to meet the needs of the Church's members, so in December 2009, the chair of the Commission asked all diocesan bishops to report what provisions they were making and what resources they were commending to their dioceses. Twenty-seven bishops responded to this request, and a number of these bishops included theological, pastoral, teaching, and/or liturgical resources. Seven other dioceses subsequently submitted materials. All diocesan materials that we received are available for review in the digital archive for Resolution 2009-C056.

We gathered liturgical resources from many places. Clayton Morris, who served as Liturgical Officer for the Episcopal Church until 2009, had accumulated numerous materials over the course of nearly two decades. The Commission received resources from lay and ordained Episcopalians throughout the Church, including some of our own members. Commission members reviewed all of these as we began the process of developing liturgies. A representative sampling of the resources is posted on the digital archive, and all of the resources will be permanently housed at the Archives of the Episcopal Church.

Developing Resources

At our March 2010 meeting, the Commission began our work in response to this resolution with a day of theological reflection. That conversation resulted in a brief outline of the resources to be developed:

- one or more essays setting forth scriptural and theological foundations for blessing same-gender relationships;

¹ This information is from the website of the National Conference of State Legislatures: <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16430>.

- one or more rites for blessing same-gender relationships;
- pastoral and teaching resources to assist clergy and congregations as they consider these blessings; and
- resources designed to help communities understand and address canonical and legal matters.

This proposed outline became the basis for four task groups formed to develop materials. These groups were advisory to the Commission, which made the final decision about the resources to be reported to the 77th General Convention in 2012.

In forming the task groups, the Commission sought the wisdom and experience of lay people and clergy from both academic and congregational contexts. Members of the task groups reflected the diversity of The Episcopal Church in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity, geography, and sexual orientation. The task groups met four times in 2010 and 2011, and the chairs of the task groups met monthly by telephone or video conference. The Commission discussed the work at each of its five meetings during the triennium.

An Open Process ... Inviting Participation

Consultation with the House of Bishops

In September 2010, the chair of the Commission and four of the task-group chairs presented to the House of Bishops a draft of theological and liturgical principles that would guide this work. Responses from the bishops helped refine those principles. At the March and September 2011 House of Bishops meetings, bishops serving on the Commission and/or the task groups updated their colleagues. At the September 2011 meeting, bishops had an informal opportunity to discuss the final draft of the theological essay and the liturgy with the bishops who are members of the Commission.

Province I Hearing

In October 2010, the Commission meeting in New Hampshire included a hearing with bishops, other clergy, and same-gender couples from each of the seven dioceses in Province I, which comprises the six New England states. The evolving legal status of civil unions and marriage equality in those states has meant that many of the dioceses have been addressing questions of blessing same-gender relationships for many years. Province I is the only province of The Episcopal Church to develop a resource for clergy ministering to same-gender couples, and a majority of the dioceses in this province have guidelines for blessing these relationships. Thus, our meeting in one of the dioceses of Province I offered a good opportunity to consult with those engaged in this work, as directed in Resolution 2009-C056.

At the hearing, thirty-three people, lay and ordained, testified about their experiences. Many told the Commission that congregations were transformed when they joined in the celebration of a blessing. For some congregations and couples, the blessing of a civil union as part of the regular Sunday liturgy was an especially powerful expression of the Church's acceptance and care for the couple. Clergy and couples alike were surprised at how jubilant congregations were. We also heard about the cost of secrecy in places where relationships had to be hidden and blessings could not be openly celebrated. Couples and clergy spoke of the joy that came when relationships could be openly acknowledged. A few couples told powerful stories of reconciliation that happened within their families when their relationship was celebrated and blessed in a Church liturgy.

Churchwide Survey Regarding Pastoral and Teaching Materials

In October 2010, the Task Group on Pastoral and Teaching Resources created a Web-based survey asking what resources congregations were using to prepare same-gender couples who came to the Church seeking a blessing, and what teaching materials and resources were used or would be needed to help congregations in a discernment process about welcoming the blessing of same-gender relationships. The Commission used both official and unofficial channels to invite responses to the survey: a press release sent to diocesan communicators, a letter to all members of the 2009 House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, invitations on the unofficial list-serve for bishops and deputies, and networking by members of the Commission and the task groups.

Between October 2010 and January 6, 2011, we received 1,131 responses to the survey from 111 dioceses and all nine provinces of The Episcopal Church. Twenty-three percent of the respondents stated that the blessing of same-gender relationships already occurs in their congregations, and of these, 55 percent confirmed that their congregations had engaged in an educational and/or discernment process before the blessing of same-gender relationships began. With regard to preparing same-gender couples, 32 percent of respondents said that their preparation differed from that provided for different-gender couples, and 43 percent expressed a need for additional resources. The data from this survey helped guide the development of the pastoral and teaching resources.

Churchwide Consultation

The Commission invited every diocese in The Episcopal Church to send two General Convention deputies, one lay and one clergy, to an overnight consultation at the conclusion of its March 2011 meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. Three goals were set forth:

- to *inform* the deputies about the work of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music in response to Resolution 2009-C056;
- to *engage* the deputies in theological reflection in response to the Commission's work, and to solicit feedback that would inform the Commission and its task groups as they continued their work;
- to *equip* the deputies to report to the rest of their deputations and engage them in ongoing theological reflection about the blessing of same-gender relationships.

Materials distributed to participants at the consultation are available for review in the SCLM digital archive, which also includes a link to the webcast of the entire consultation.

One hundred ninety-five deputies from ninety-eight dioceses registered for the gathering. Most responded enthusiastically to the process. A significant majority stated on the evaluation form that they felt either "completely equipped" or "somewhat equipped" to discuss this work in their dioceses and at the 2012 General Convention. When asked what they valued most, one responded, "the thoughtful and prayerful way that people with differing opinions were able to discuss this important work." Another deputy noted "the opportunity to speak and listen to other people and the broader perspective I gained from those interactions; the opportunity to engage the process, principles and issues that are in play as we do this work together; the real and abiding sense that we are doing this work 'together.'" A few deputies commented on the absence of opposing viewpoints in the plenary sessions. One wrote, "The only thing lacking for me was an opportunity for those who are new to engaging this conversation or who are opposed to have enough space to express their reservations, be heard, and maybe to hear constructive, respectful responses."

Review of Draft Resources

After the task groups presented a complete first draft of the resources to the Commission in June 2011, we made the drafts available to a group of consultant reviewers. During July 2011, 133 people, lay and ordained, representing all nine provinces of The Episcopal Church, offered thousands of comments on the draft resources. In August, the task groups' extensive revisions led to final drafts for the Commission.

Inviting Reflection from throughout the Anglican Communion

In addition to the direction of Resolution 2009-C056, the Commission was mindful that the 2004 Windsor Report urged "all provinces that are engaged in processes of discernment regarding the blessing of same sex unions to engage the Communion in continuing study of biblical and theological rationale for and against such unions" (par. 145).

Knowing that the Anglican Church of Canada has been addressing this subject for many years, we requested and received liturgies from several of the Canadian dioceses. The digital archive includes, under "Church-Wide Resources," an issue of *Liturgy Canada* that gives an overview of the history and summarizes the guidelines and rites available on diocesan websites in the Anglican Church of Canada.

International Anglican Liturgical Consultation (IALC)

The IALC, a biennial gathering, includes liturgical scholars, representatives nominated and sent by provinces of the Anglican Communion, and members of liturgical commissions of Anglican provinces. Since provinces may refer matters to the Consultation, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music requested time on the agenda of the August 2011 meeting. The IALC Steering Committee not only granted a half-day for this discussion, but also met in March 2011 with representatives of the Commission to learn more about the work and to prepare for the discussion in the full Consultation.

The IALC meeting included fifty-five people from nineteen provinces of the Anglican Communion. The official representatives of The Episcopal Church, Ruth Meyers (Chair of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music) and Thomas Ely (Bishop of Vermont and a member of the Commission), presented a summary of the theological rationale and liturgical principles guiding the development of resources, along with a draft of the liturgy. Not all participants in the IALC meeting supported The Episcopal Church's decision to develop these resources, but all joined in respectful conversation in a small-group format. In the written notes submitted from the small groups, some stated that the work of The Episcopal Church would be helpful for their own province, while others indicated that blessing same-gender relationships is not on the agenda for them.

Participants in the IALC conversation asked for development of the scriptural foundations for blessing same-gender relationships and clarification of the concepts of blessing and covenant. They urged that the theological and liturgical resources make clear that The Episcopal Church is envisioning these relationships as monogamous and lifelong. Many found the liturgy to be strikingly similar to marriage. They encouraged greater clarity in the liturgy about the nature of the covenant and a more robust form of blessing.

The task groups received a detailed report of the comments from the IALC meeting and took account of them as they prepared the final draft of the resources.

Conclusion

“I will bless you,” God declared to Abraham, “so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). The Commission and its task groups have been reminded, at every step in this process, of the many blessings God has bestowed on our Church. The unprecedented opportunities we have had to engage with our sister and brother Episcopalians in every province of The Episcopal Church and with Anglicans from the wider Anglican Communion have illustrated for us the rich diversity of our life together in the Body of Christ. This work has been a divine gift and a blessing to us, which we are eager to share.

We offer these resources with the hope that they will strengthen our shared witness in The Episcopal Church to the love and grace of God in Christ. As in every other aspect of our life together as God's people, we offer these resources, not relying on ourselves alone, but on God, who “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,” and always for the sake of God's glory in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Faith, Hope, and Love
Theological Resources for
Blessing Same-Gender Relationships

Preface

The Episcopal Church has been seeking, in various ways and over the last thirty years, to celebrate the goodness of God, the grace of Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our brothers and sisters who are gay and lesbian. A series of General Convention resolutions during that time (1976-A069; 1985-D082; 1991-A104; 1994-C020; 1994-C042; 1997-C003; 2000-D039; 2003-C051) has now led the Church to ask the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” for the blessing of same-gender relationships (Resolution 2009-C056). In response to that call, we offer this essay as a theological resource and invite the wider Church to reflect with us on how God is working today in the committed relationships of same-gender couples.

For generations the Church has celebrated and blessed the faithful, committed, lifelong, monogamous relationships of men and women united in the bonds of Holy Matrimony. In The Episcopal Church, the marriage relationship is held in high regard, included as a “sacramental rite” by some,² and as one of the seven sacraments by others. The Commission has discovered in its work in response to Resolution 2009-C056 that any consideration of the blessing of faithful, committed, lifelong, monogamous relationships of same-gender couples cannot ignore the parallels to marriage, whether from practical, theological, or liturgical perspectives. While this reality may well be inviting the Church to deeper conversation regarding marriage, the similarities between marriage and the blessing of same-gender unions also illuminate our discussions in this resource.

For some Episcopalians, this material will resonate well with their long-standing experience and theological reflection; for others, the call from the 2009 General Convention represents a new and perhaps perplexing moment in the life of our Church. We take that difference seriously. To the best of our ability, given the mandate of Resolution 2009-C056 to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” for the blessing of same-gender relationships, we address those who are eager to receive this theological resource while also acknowledging that others have deep reservations about proceeding in this direction. All of us belong equally to The Episcopal Church and to the worldwide Anglican Communion and, most of all, to the universal Body of Christ. This theological resource honors the centrality of Scripture among Anglicans, interpreted in concert with the historical traditions of the Church and in the light of reason.

An overview introduces and summarizes questions and major theological themes. Four sections follow the overview, each expanding on the themes. While readers may engage with this material in a number of ways, the order of the four sections, which we recommend following, reflects a particular theological approach to this work. Section one affirms the understanding that everything we do as Christians is meant to express the Church’s call to participate in God’s own mission in the world. The second section offers theological reflections on blessing. The third considers blessing same-gender couples within the broader sacramental life of the Church, especially in light of the theological significance of covenantal relationship. The fourth section reflects on the challenge of living into our baptismal bond with each other in the midst of disagreements over biblical interpretation.

In researching and preparing this essay, we discovered and recalled an abundance of resources in Scripture and the traditions of the Church that have informed our response to Resolution 2009-C056. We now invite the wider Church to further study and conversation, mindful that the apostle Paul described our shared life in Christ as one marked by faith, hope, and love, the greatest of these being love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

² “An Outline of the Faith,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 860. Hereafter this edition of the Prayer Book is cited as BCP.

Overview: Theological Reflection on Same-Gender Relationships

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:4-7

In 2009, the General Convention of The Episcopal Church asked for theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same-gender relationships (Resolution C056). In response to that call, we invite the Church to reflect on the theological material collected and developed here for that purpose. In our theological reflection, we have kept in view more than thirty years of deliberation at General Convention on these matters, especially Resolution 2000-D039, which identified certain characteristics the Church expects of couples living in marriage and other lifelong, committed relationships: “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.”³ We understand couples who manifest this manner of life, with God’s grace, to have entered into a covenant with each other, which presents a rich opportunity for theological reflection.⁴

The theological themes in this resource, rooted in baptism, eucharist, and the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection, offer ways to consider how the Church may appropriately bless lifelong, committed covenantal relationships of same-gender couples. Such covenantal relationships can reflect God’s own gracious covenant with us in Christ, manifest the fruits of the Spirit in holiness of life, and model for the whole community the love of neighbor in the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation.

As the Commission responded to the charge to collect and develop theological resources, we focused our attention on four areas of consideration. The first is *mission*: what does the Church believe these blessings will contribute to God’s own work of redeeming and reconciling love in the world? Second, what does the Church believe is happening when it pronounces God’s *blessing*? Third, what does the Church believe are the distinguishing marks of a holy *covenant*? And, finally, what is the relationship between *Christian unity* and our differing approaches to *biblical interpretation* regarding same-gender relationships? This overview introduces and summarizes these areas, and the subsequent sections expand on each of them in turn.

A Focus on Mission

Our starting point is Holy Baptism, which incorporates us into the Body of Christ and commissions us to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation in the world (2 Corinthians 5:17-19). The purpose of this reconciling mission is nothing less than the restoration of all people to “unity with God and with each other in Christ.”⁵ One of the ways Christians participate in this mission is by witnessing to Christ in how we live in our closest relationships. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” Jesus said, “if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

As Christians, then, our closest relationships are not solely private. The Church has always affirmed the public and communal dimension of our covenantal relationships. The character of our love, both its fruitfulness and its failures, affects others around us. The Church, therefore, commissions a couple bound by sacred vows in Holy Matrimony to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation. Such

3 Texts of these resolutions are included in the appendix to these resources. For a fuller discussion of the history of General Convention resolutions and reports on these issues, see the Appendix in *To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report ¶ 135* (New York: The Office of Communication, The Episcopal Church Center, 2005), 63-121.

4 As Paul Marshall points out, the marriage rite of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* uses the language of “covenant” (423). Marshall notes that covenant-making is a key biblical motif, which makes it useful in our theological reflection on the committed relationships of all couples (*Same-Sex Unions: Stories and Rites* [New York: Church Publishing, 2004], 40).

5 “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 855.

relationships are set apart for precisely that divine purpose: to bear witness to and participate in the creating, redeeming, and sustaining love of God.

This missional character of covenantal blessing, reflected in both Scripture and the historical traditions of the Church, deserves renewed attention today. The 2000 General Convention contributed to this renewal when it passed resolution D039, which identified monogamy, fidelity, holy love, and other characteristics of lifelong, committed relationships. Significantly, that resolution was framed as a way to enable the Church to engage more effectively in its mission. Many in The Episcopal Church have witnessed these characteristics in the committed relationships of same-gender couples. That recognition can, and in many places already has, broadened the understanding of the Church's mission of participating in God's reconciling work in the world.

A Theology of Blessing

We understand the celebration and blessing of committed, monogamous, lifelong, faithful same-gender relationships as part of the Church's work of offering outward and visible signs of God's grace among us. "Blessing" exhibits a multifaceted character, yet the Church has always affirmed that blessing originates in God, the giver of every good gift. The Church participates in God's blessing of committed, covenantal couples in three intertwined aspects: first, we thank God for the grace already discerned in the lives of the couple; second, we ask God's continual favor so that the couple may manifest more fully the fruits of the Spirit in their lives; and third, we seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit as the Church commissions the couple to bear witness to the gospel in the world.

This threefold character of blessing, therefore, acknowledges what is already present—God's goodness. The Church's blessing also sets the relationship apart for God's purposes and prays for the divine grace the couple will need to fulfill those purposes. Just as the blessing of bread and wine at the eucharist sets them apart from ordinary usage and designates them for a particular, sacred purpose, so the public affirmation of divine blessing in a covenantal relationship sets that relationship apart from other types of relationship.

The Church expects the blessing of a covenantal relationship to bear the fruits of divine grace in particular ways—and always with God's continual help and favor. This makes the couple accountable to the community of faith as well as to God and to one another. The community, in turn, is held accountable for encouraging, supporting, and nurturing a blessed relationship as the couple seeks to grow together in holiness of life. Through its participation in the blessing of covenantal relationships, the Church is blessed by the goodness of God, who continues to offer blessings in abundance, regardless of merit or circumstance. As we live more fully into our call to discern, pronounce, seek, and return blessing wherever it may be found, we find that we ourselves are blessed with joy.

Covenantal Relationship

Reflecting theologically on same-gender relationships can become an occasion for the Church to reflect more broadly on the significance of covenantal commitment in the life of faith. Both Scripture and our theological traditions invite us to consider, first, the *sacramental character* of covenantal relationships; by this we mean the potential of such relationships to become outward and visible signs of God's grace. And second, covenantal relationships can both reflect and inspire the *eschatological vision* of Christian life. The covenantal commitments we make with each other, in other words, can evoke our desire for union with God, which is our final hope in Christ.

Our understanding of covenant thus derives first and foremost from the gracious covenant God makes with us in Christ. The many types of relational commitments we make carry the potential to reflect and bear witness to that divine covenant. Here we have especially in mind the covenants made by intimate couples in the sacred vows they make to enter into a public, lifelong relationship of faithful monogamy.

Scripture and Christian tradition encourage us to see in these intimate relationships a reflection of God's own desire for us. The long tradition of commentary on the biblical Song of Songs, for example, illustrates this spiritual significance of sexual relationships. Hebrew prophets likewise turned frequently

to the metaphor of marriage to describe God's commitment to Israel (Isaiah 62:5), an image the Pauline writer also used to describe the relationship of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21-33).

Covenantal commitments are thus shaped by and can also reflect the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, which the Church celebrates in baptism and eucharist. Intimate couples who live in a sacred covenant find themselves swept up into a grand and risky endeavor: to see if they can find their life in God by giving it to another. This dynamic reflects the baptismal life all of us share as Christians. As we live out our baptismal vows throughout our lives, we are called to follow this pattern of God's self-giving desire and love.

In the eucharist, we recall Christ's willingness to give his life for the world: "This is my body, given for you." When two people give their lives, their bodies, to one another in a lifelong covenant, they can discover and show how in giving ourselves we find ourselves (Matthew 16:25). When the Church pronounces God's blessing on the vows of lifelong fidelity—for different-gender and same-gender couples alike—the Church makes a bold claim: the paschal mystery is the very root and source of life in the couple's relationship.

This sacramental framework in which to reflect on same-gender relationships has, in turn, led us to consider more carefully several other key theological themes: the *vocational* aspect of covenantal relationship; how such a vocation is lived in Christian *households*; the *fruitfulness* of covenantal relationships in lives of service, generosity, and hospitality; and *mutual blessing*, as God's blessing in covenantal relationship becomes a blessing to the wider community.

Christian Unity and Biblical Interpretation

Baptism binds us to God by binding us to one another. Salvation is inherently social and communal. This bond, furthermore, does not depend on our agreement with one another but instead relies on what God has done and is doing among us. In fact, our unity in God gives us room to disagree safely, ideally without threat of breaking our unity, which is God's own gift. This principle is the very foundation of all covenants, beginning with the covenant between God and God's people, exemplified in baptism, reflected in ordained ministry, lived in vowed religious life and marriage, and encompassing the life of the Church. Our common call as God's people is not to find unanimity in all matters of faith and morals, but to go out into all nations as witnesses to the good news of God in Christ.

Most Christians would, nonetheless, recognize limits to acceptable and legitimate differences. Beyond such limits, unity becomes untenable. Those limits then pose difficult questions: How far is too far? What kind of difference would constitute essential disunity? In the debate over same-gender relationships and biblical interpretation, Episcopalians and other Christians throughout the Anglican Communion have disagreed about the answers to these questions. Some Episcopalians have concluded that blessing such relationships has gone too far and, acting on their conscience, have parted company with The Episcopal Church, while others who disagree have chosen to remain. As a Church, we continue to take different approaches to interpreting Scripture as we consider same-gender relationships.

We who differ profoundly and yet desire unity more profoundly recall that the Church has held this creative tension in the past. In Acts 15, we see that Paul differed from the community in Jerusalem over whether circumcision and the observation of dietary laws should be required of Gentiles in order for them to be baptized into Christ's Body. This difference was a matter of biblical interpretation. As Church members held the tension between their essential unity and their differences in how they understood Scripture, they found themselves guided by the Holy Spirit.⁶

Since then, the Church has faced many other similar times of wrestling over differing views of Scripture concerning a wide range of questions: whether vowed religious life takes priority over marriage, the prohibition on lending money at interest, polygamous households, divorce and remarriage, contraception, the institution of slavery, and the role of women in both Church and society, to name just a few. In all these times, the Church has sought to follow the apostolic process of prayerful

⁶ This process of discernment over scriptural interpretation guided by the Holy Spirit has shaped every era in Christian history, including Anglican approaches. See "An Outline of the Faith," BCP, 853-54.

deliberation, which respects the centrality of Scripture and attends carefully to the Spirit's work among us. This process will not resolve all of our disagreements, but we continue to trust in the unity that comes not from our own efforts but as God's gift to us and for which Christ himself prayed (John 17:11).

The following four sections expand on all of these theological themes and considerations, and we offer them to the wider Church for ongoing, shared discernment as the Body of Christ. No one perspective or community can fully capture the fullness of the truth into which the Spirit of God continually leads the Church. In this work, then, as in every other matter of concern for the Church's life and mission, we take to heart Paul's reminder that now "we know only in part" while awaiting that day when "the partial will come to an end" (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). In that spirit of humility, in which no one knows fully, we offer this theological resource on the blessing of same-gender relationships, trusting that it reflects a shared faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, inspires hope for that union with God which Christ has promised, and, above all, expresses that love which shall not end (1 Corinthians 13:8).

1. The Church's Call: A Focus on Mission

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

The meaning and character of blessing play an important role in our shared calling to participate in God's own mission of reconciling love in the world. Pronouncing divine blessing takes many forms covering a wide range of occasions. When the Church gathers to bless the exchanging of sacred vows in a covenantal relationship, the blessing reflects a threefold action. First, the Church gives thanks for the presence of the Spirit discerned in the lives of the couple. Second, the Church prays for the divine grace and favor the couple will need to live into their commitment to each other with love, fidelity, and holiness of life. And third, the Church commissions the couple to participate in God's own mission in the world. This missional character of covenantal blessing, reflected in both Scripture and the historical traditions of the Church, deserves renewed attention today. While the Church gives thanks for God's presence and blessing, the public affirmation of the blessing of a covenantal relationship also sets that relationship apart for a sacred purpose: to bear witness to the creating, redeeming, and sustaining love of God.

God's promise to Abraham sets the tone for this missional understanding of blessing: "I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2b). Through Moses, God's promise extends to the divine covenant with Israel, a people God chooses to receive divine gifts of protection, guidance, and fruitfulness. In this covenantal relationship, God makes the people of Israel the stewards of these gifts, not for their sake only, but to become a blessing for the world. As God declared to Jacob: "All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring" (Genesis 28:14b). And as God also declared through Isaiah: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

The earliest Christians likewise adopted this missional understanding of covenantal blessing as they recognized that the grace they received in Christ was not for themselves alone but so that they could bear witness to that grace "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Jesus urged this view of the life of faith by reminding his listeners that "no one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house" (Matthew 5:15). In John's Gospel, Jesus models this divine mission by washing his disciples' feet. This act of intimate service provided the example his disciples were to follow in blessing others with the

same life of service (John 13:14-15); the love God shows for us in Christ, in other words, becomes a blessing for mission and ministry. The covenant of grace God has made with us in Christ thus calls all of us to that life of service: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10).

Worship and Mission: An Eschatological Vision

Whenever the people of God gather for worship, we return to this foundational view in Scripture: God continues to bless us through our covenantal relationship with Christ, and this blessing enables and empowers us to provide a blessing to others. In all of the Church’s rites, from the Daily Office to the Holy Eucharist, we give thanks for God’s blessings, and we pray for the grace we need to manifest that blessing in the world, to “do the work [God has] given us to do.”⁷ This pattern appears in the marriage rite as well, which celebrates God’s blessing on loving commitment, not for the sake of the couple alone, but for the world, which stands in need of such witness to love and faithfulness. In that rite, the assembly prays for the couple, that God will “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.”⁸ God’s covenantal blessing empowers the couple as missionaries of grace.

Moreover, the Church blesses and sends in order to lay claim to our part in the fulfillment of salvation history; we collaborate with God as both proclaimers of and instruments for the new creation God is bringing about. “The redemption of the world is not finished, and so human history is not finished. History is going somewhere, and it is not there yet,” one theologian reminds us. “The church exists to be the thing that God is doing, and to become the thing that God will be doing until the End.” What God has done and will continue to do in the life of the Church manifests “not just the inherent goodness of creation but the possibility of *new* creation, of healing and justice and forgiveness.” And so the Church blesses in order to fulfill its “‘eschatological’ project of becoming the kingdom.”⁹

This eschatological vision of the Church’s life of worship and mission carries the potential to deepen our shared reflection on the meaning of blessing itself. In blessing and being blessed, we join in the great work of redemption that God has always been doing, is doing now, and will do until the End. Indeed, this expansive view of blessing, rooted deeply in the covenant God has made with us in Christ, led Paul to declare that God’s own mission of reconciliation has been entrusted to all those who have been blessed by this promise of a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

Same-Gender Relationships and the Church’s Mission

In responding to the call to participate in God’s mission in the world, the Church must attend carefully to the particular cultural circumstances in which it proclaims the hope of the gospel. Over the last sixty years in the United States (among other places), social, psychological, and biomedical sciences have contributed to a gradual shift in cultural perspectives on the complexity of sexual orientation and gender identity. The American Psychiatric Association, for example, no longer considers homosexuality to be a pathological condition,¹⁰ which it did in the mid-twentieth century. Gay and lesbian people now participate openly in nearly every profession and aspect of life. Many openly form stable and enduring relationships and some also raise children in their families. Many churches, including The Episcopal Church, have also discerned in same-gender relationships the same possibility of holiness of life and the fruits of the Spirit that we pray for in those who seek the commitment of marriage and its blessings.¹¹

7 Postcommunion Prayer, BCP, 366.

8 BCP, 429.

9 Charles Hefling, “What Do We Bless and Why?” *Anglican Theological Review* 85:1 (Winter 2003): 91-93.

10 “All major professional mental health organizations have gone on record to affirm that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official diagnostic manual, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*.” From “Let’s Talk Facts about Sexual Orientation,” produced by the American Psychiatric Association, <http://www.healthyminds.org/Document-Library/Brochure-Library/Lets-Talk-Facts-Sexual-Orientation.aspx?FT=.pdf>.

11 *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, 24-25. For a broader overview and analysis, see the collection of essays edited by Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

This cultural shift concerning human sexuality bears on the Church's pastoral care and also on its mission. The 73rd General Convention, for example, identified certain characteristics that the Church expects of all couples in lifelong, committed relationships: "fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love that enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God."¹² Significantly, the Convention framed that resolution as a matter of *mission*. Witnessing the Spirit at work in same-gender relationships, just as we do in different-gender relationships, can and in many places already has broadened the Church's understanding of how it participates in God's own reconciling work in the world.

Many gay and lesbian people (among others) who see same-gender couples exchange vows and receive a blessing are moved, likewise, to seek the Church's support for deepening their own commitments and faithfulness. They, in turn, offer their gifts for ministry to the wider community, gifts that contribute to the Church's mission to "restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."¹³ When the Church pronounces God's blessing on same-gender couples who are also raising children, those children can understand better the sanctity of their own family, and the family itself can receive the same support and encouragement from the Church that different-gender couples receive for their families. The blessing of same-gender relationships in the community of faith can also become an occasion for reconciliation among estranged family members, including those who have not understood or have even rejected their lesbian and gay relatives.

Heterosexual people may also find their own vocations and ministries strengthened and empowered in those moments of blessing, as they may do at the celebration of a marriage, or at the public profession of commitment to a particular ministry or community. In other words, the gifts lesbians and gay men discern in their own lives and committed relationships are not just for themselves alone. One Episcopal priest has observed, "Over and over again, we see lesbians and gay men, people who would have been hiding in the shadows of our church a generation ago, now coming forward to contribute their gifts, their strength and loyalty and wisdom, freely and openly to the whole community of faith. And heterosexual people who have seen this happening have also been freed to give more generously of themselves."¹⁴

Friends of same-gender couples and many others in the general public also take note of these moments of blessing, encountering the expansive and generous reach of gospel welcome. As friends witness the grace of these covenantal commitments, and the generosity of the Church's embrace, many of them will be drawn to the community of faith, perhaps for the first time or after having left. Such has already been the case in many congregations and dioceses in The Episcopal Church.

The Challenge of God's Blessing for Mission

Scripture attests to significant moments in which biblical writers challenged their communities to expand their vision of God's saving work in the world or in which the writers were themselves challenged by that divine word to see past their present horizons. The ancient Israelites, for example, had to struggle with how far the blessing of their covenantal life would reach. Isaiah urged them to see all the nations—not just their own—streaming to God's holy mountain (Isaiah 2:1-4). The early Church was no exception to this struggle.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read about Peter's hesitation to cross traditional boundaries between the clean and the unclean in his encounter with Cornelius, a Roman centurion (Acts 10). In a vision, Peter heard God urging him to eat certain unclean animals in direct disobedience to the injunctions found in Leviticus 11. This vision led Peter to consider anew whether God's saving work and blessing might be found in places and among particular people he had not before considered possible. When challenged

12 General Convention Resolution 2000-D039. Scripture reflects a similar approach to discerning evidence of divine grace and the Spirit's work when, for example, Jesus uses the analogy of assessing the goodness of a tree based on the kind of fruit it bears (Matthew 7:16-18 and Luke 6:43).

13 "An Outline of the Faith," BCP, 855.

14 L. William Countryman, "The Big House of Classic Anglicanism," from a speech given at the Claiming the Blessing Conference in St. Louis, Missouri, in November 2002 and quoted in *Claiming the Blessing*, the theology statement of the Claiming the Blessing coalition, page 11; http://www.claimingtheblessing.org/files/pdf/CTBTheology_Final_.pdf.

about this expansive vision, Peter declared, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). To those who were startled and perhaps scandalized by the extension of the gospel to Gentiles, Peter asked, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47).¹⁵

Time after time in the history of Israel and in the early Church, responding to the challenge of God’s extravagant grace and the richness of divine blessing has expanded the mission of God’s people in the world, even beyond where many had previously imagined. The loving faithfulness and covenantal commitment of lesbian and gay couples presents a similar challenge to the Church today. Many throughout The Episcopal Church and other Christian communions have recognized and discerned the Spirit’s presence and work in these same-gender relationships, and are asking God’s people to ponder why we would withhold a public affirmation and declaration of blessing from those who have received the Holy Spirit just as others have. More importantly, however, this moment in The Episcopal Church’s life calls all of us to consider anew the rich blessings we receive by God’s grace in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. These blessings, in turn, animate the ministry of reconciliation that God has given us as ambassadors of the new creation that is unfolding, even now, in our midst.

2. The Church’s Joy: A Theology of Blessing

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land shall bless by the God of faithfulness.

Isaiah 65:16

The disciples were continually in the temple blessing God.

Luke 24:53

“Blessed are you, Lord God, ruler of the universe, who created everything for your glory!” This classic blessing in Jewish tradition sets the tone for any theological reflection on what it means to bless and to receive a blessing. Rather than ourselves, other people, animals, places, or things, God’s people first and foremost bless God, the giver of life and creator of all. Discerning and giving thanks for the countless reasons that we can and should bless God are, therefore, at the heart of the Church’s work in the world. Indeed, at the heart of Christian worship is the eucharist, or “thanksgiving,” in which we lift up the “cup of blessing” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

In Anglican contexts, the Church’s work in the world is shaped by common prayer and worship. In addition to reading the Scriptures and prayerful meditation, Anglicans have always relied on our shared liturgical life for discerning where God is present and how God is calling us to live in the world as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. While God is active always and everywhere, the community of faith gathers to discern God’s activity and make it ever more visible.

Although ordained ministers are called to the Church’s work in a particular way, they share the work with the whole community of the baptized. In their sacramental vocation, ordained ministers lead the community in offering outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace that is present among God’s people. Clergy do not, in other words, “create grace” where there was none to be found already; rather, the whole Body of Christ, in many and various ways, proclaims God’s gracious activity in our midst. This proclamation offers the assurance of God’s grace promised to us in Christ Jesus and offers support as we strive to manifest the fruits of the Spirit in our daily lives.

Many in The Episcopal Church and other Christian communions believe that the celebration and blessing of the covenantal commitment of a same-gender couple also belongs in the Church’s work of offering outward and visible signs of God’s grace. While “blessing” exhibits a multifaceted meaning,

¹⁵ Paul describes his confrontation with Peter about these very issues in Galatians 2:1-21.

it always originates in God, which the Church rightly and daily acknowledges: “We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.”¹⁶

The Church participates in this fundamental, divine blessing in three related ways: thanking God for God’s goodness and favor; seeking God’s continued favor and grace so that we may manifest more fully that gratitude in our lives; and receiving power from the Holy Spirit to bear witness to that grace in the world. This threefold character of blessing acknowledges what is already present, God’s grace, but it does something more as well: it establishes a new reality. Bread and wine, for example, when blessed at the eucharistic table, are set apart from their ordinary use and designated for a particular, sacred purpose. Similarly, the public affirmation of divine blessing in a covenantal relationship sets that relationship apart from other types. God’s people expect such a blessing to bear the fruits of God’s grace in particular ways, making a couple in such a blessed covenant accountable to the community of faith, as well as to God and to each other. The community, in turn, is held accountable for encouraging, supporting, and nurturing a blessed relationship as the couple seeks to grow together in holiness of life.

In short, the grace and blessing of God already discerned in a couple’s relationship does not thereby render a liturgical rite of blessing redundant. To the contrary, the Church’s blessing performs what it declares, thus changing the couple and the Church. The couple becomes more fully aware of God’s favor and also receives a particular role, as a couple, in the Church’s mission in the world; the Church is likewise changed, as holiness of life is made more visible and as it receives and accepts its commission to support the couple in their life and ministry.

Scripture guides us in this understanding of blessing by placing it in relation to both creation and covenant. In Genesis, God declares the whole creation good, a source of blessing for which we thank God, the giver of every good gift. This blessing is manifested in more particular ways in the covenant God makes with Noah and, by extension, the whole of the creation (Genesis 9:8-16), with Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3), and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 7:12-14). Likewise, the New Testament reflects God’s blessing on all creation, as the Word of God becomes flesh in Jesus; it reflects the blessing of covenant as well, as the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reconcile us with God and assure us of God’s loving faithfulness toward us and the whole creation. In his final meal with his disciples, Jesus blessed God for the bread and cup as signs of the new covenant (Matthew 26:26-29). The blessing we receive by participating in that meal at the eucharistic table strengthens us to live out in all of our relationships the forgiveness and reconciliation to which that meal calls us.

Scripture bears witness to the relational character of blessing: being in relationship with God is not only a blessing for us, but becomes a blessing to others as well. God’s covenant with Israel becomes a blessing not for Israel alone but for “all the nations.” This is the very promise made to Abraham: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3b). The extent of this divine blessing unfolded in Israel’s self-awareness over time and in various ways. “All the nations” referred, of course, to Gentiles, the very ones many in Israel had not expected to share in God’s promises. God’s blessing thus expands the reach of welcome and hospitality not only to the near and familiar neighbor, but also to the distant stranger, who is made neighbor because of God’s own generosity. As Paul noted, through faith “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:14). The blessing of God’s covenant with us in Christ empowers us, through the Spirit, to offer such expansive and generous blessing to the world, in thought, word, and deed. God’s blessings inspire us in countless ways to live as emissaries of divine blessing in all that we do—in our work, our play, and our relationships. In all of this, God’s goodness in our lives becomes a blessing to others, to neighbors both near and far.

As Christians, baptism and eucharist focus our attention on the particular blessings of the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. Those blessings, in turn, encourage us to discern the many other ways God’s blessing is manifested in both creation and covenant. The goodness of God makes everything in creation a potential vehicle for blessing, including the love and faithfulness of covenantal relationship, in which we experience our call to manifest divine goodness. Thus, the Church

¹⁶ “The General Thanksgiving,” BCP, 125.

is continually discerning where the goodness of God, the grace of Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are urging the Church to manifest God's blessing for others and, in response, to bless God with hearts and lives marked by gratitude and praise.

Another aspect of the biblical witness deserves attention as well: the emphasis on *abundance*. In the midst of desert wanderings, Moses struck a rock and "water came out abundantly" for the people of Israel (Numbers 20:11). "Like the vine," we read in Ecclesiasticus, "I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit" (Ecclesiasticus 24:17). "You prepare a table before me," declares the psalmist, and "my cup overflows" (Psalm 23:5). "Give," Jesus says, "and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap" (Luke 6:38). And to the Christians in Corinth, Paul declares, "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Scripture invites us, in other words, to see the blessing of God's goodness, not as a scarce commodity either to hoard or to protect, but rather as an unending font of deathless love and perpetual grace—a veritable embarrassment of divine riches. In sacred covenantal relationship, God's abundance is exhibited in many ways, including the companionship, friendship, and mutual joy of intimacy. By affirming and publicly acknowledging that blessing of abundance already present in vibrant covenantal relationships, including same-gender relationships, the Church expects those relationships to manifest the grace of God, the gifts of the Spirit, and holiness of life.

Jesus' iconic parable about the prodigal son adds a further layer to this biblical witness to God's abundant love and grace. In this story, God pours out the abundance of divine blessing on all, regardless of merit or circumstance. When the prodigal son decides at last to return to his father's house, hoping to be granted, at best, the status of a slave, his father rushes to meet him and welcome him home, and even prepares a lavish feast in his honor. "While he was still far off," Jesus says, and thus well before the son could speak any words of repentance, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). In our lives, as in the parable, God showers us with blessings so that we may receive life abundantly, even though we have in no way earned these blessings.

This parable suggests that the abundance of this household is more than sufficient to open outward to receive the younger son. The abundance of this household is even more than sufficient for the resentful elder son, who begrudges such celebration for his wayward brother. The household brims with abundance, if only the elder son would open his heart to receive it (Luke 15:29-31). Both sons in Jesus' parable stand as potent reminders that the blessing of divine goodness does not automatically transform lives: we must be willing to receive such blessing. And yet even when we are not willing, God will continue to offer blessings in abundance. The teachings of Jesus return to this theme repeatedly, as in the parables of the sower (Mark 4:3-8) and the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-10), as well as the feeding of more than five thousand with just five loaves of bread and two fish (Luke 9:12-17).

The Church's participation in divine blessing can help each of us in various ways to be open to God's abundant goodness. The Church's liturgical life, that is, our practice of common prayer and worship, can create space for God's people to open their hearts and minds to receiving the blessing God offers. For those in a covenantal relationship, that intentional space (for both hearing the word of blessing in their lives and blessing God in return) marks a significant, even an essential deepening and strengthening of their lives with each other, with their community, and with God. In blessing covenantal relationships, just as in the eucharist, we give thanks for God's abundant goodness and pray for the continued presence of the Spirit to empower us to do the work God has given us to do in the world. The blessing of the eucharistic table sets us apart as the Body of Christ in the world, called and empowered to proclaim the gospel, just as the blessing of a covenantal relationship sets that relationship apart as "a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair."¹⁷

Discerning, pronouncing, seeking, and returning blessing describe well the Church's work. Even more, it is the Church's *joy*. Paul urged the Christians in Rome to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with

17 The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, BCP, 429.

those who weep” (Romans 12:15). The early Christians gave themselves to such rejoicing, as they were “continually in the temple blessing God” in their celebration of Christ’s victory over death (Luke 24:53). Whenever and wherever the Church discerns particular instances of God’s abundant goodness, the Church rightly thanks God for such a gift. We also ask God for the grace to live into that gift more fully, as we joyfully bear witness to that blessing in the world.

3. The Church’s Life: Covenantal Relationship

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3-4

Creation, Baptism, and Eucharist

Covenants have taken many different forms across time and in diverse cultural contexts. Both Scripture and Christian history exhibit that diversity as well. The most familiar covenantal relationship is marriage, to which both the Hebrew prophets and New Testament writers turned as a way to describe God’s desire and commitment to be in relationship with us (Isaiah 62:5, Ephesians 5:21-33). Marriage itself has exhibited a variety of forms over the centuries yet still provides a pattern for a number of significant covenantal relationships, such as the vowed religious life or ordained ministry.

In 2000, General Convention identified certain characteristics that the Church expects to see in lifelong, committed relationships: “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” (Resolution D039). These characteristics describe well what we mean by “covenant” as we have reflected theologically on same-gender relationships. A couple enacts their decision to enter into a lifelong commitment of fidelity and accountability in the context of God’s household, the Church, by exchanging vows, and the Church responds by pronouncing God’s blessing. Covenantal relationship then carries the potential to reflect for the Church the gracious covenant God has made with us in the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection, which the Church celebrates in baptism and eucharist.

Some will find this kind of theological reflection on same-gender relationships unfamiliar and perhaps unwarranted. Many different-gender couples would likewise find this to be a new way of thinking about their own marital vows. Thus, General Convention Resolution 2009-C056, which called for these theological resources, becomes an opportunity for reflecting more broadly on the role of covenantal relationship in the life of the Church. In doing so, the blessing of same-gender relationships can then be understood within the broader framework of the Church’s sacramental life and its mission in the world.

The framework for covenantal relationship begins with God’s own declaration of the goodness of creation (Genesis 1:31). That goodness inspires us to give thanks to God, the creator of all things. The heavens declare God’s glory, the psalmist reminds us, and the earth proclaims God’s handiwork (Psalm 19:1). Thus, even in creation’s fragility, limitation, and affliction, the biblical writers discerned signs of God’s providential power, sustaining love, and saving grace. The Church celebrates God’s goodness in worship and with sacramental signs of God’s blessing. These “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace” manifest God’s transforming presence and so are “sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.”¹⁸ Chief among these signs are baptism and eucharist, which derive directly from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and unction also manifest the grace of God at key moments in Christian life, each in its own way, yet these are by no

¹⁸ “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 857.

means the only occasions that do so.¹⁹ As disciples of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, we are called to make God's creating, redeeming, and sustaining love known in all things, in all circumstances, and throughout our daily lives and relationships. The sacramental life of the Church focuses that calling in particular ways.

Baptism and eucharist recapitulate the arc of salvation history in creation, sin, judgment, repentance, and redemption, or the fulfillment of the whole creation in the presence of God.²⁰ In baptism, we are incorporated into the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live more fully into the holiness of life to which God calls all of us. This sacramental act manifests the eternal covenant God has made with us, declaring that we are God's own beloved, inheritors of God's promises, and God's friends;²¹ we are sealed by God's own Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.²² This sign of God's covenant is irrevocable, not relying on our adherence to the covenant but rather on the grace and goodness of God in Christ Jesus. As members of the Body of Christ, we commit ourselves to live in the manner of life appropriate to the body to which we belong. This manner of life is summed up in the two great commandments: to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.²³ Even though we inevitably fall far short of this commitment, God's steadfast love maintains the covenant God has made, and God both seeks and graciously enables our return to fidelity.

In The Episcopal Church, the significance of baptism for Christian faith and life became even clearer with the ratification of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. The Baptismal Covenant shapes the rite of Holy Baptism by beginning with an affirmation of faith (the Apostles' Creed), followed by five distinct promises made by (or on behalf of) those being baptized: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship; to persevere in resisting evil; to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons; and to strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of all persons.²⁴ The rite begins, in other words, with God's own Trinitarian mission of creating, redeeming, and sustaining love in the world. The promises we make are in response to that divine mission and constitute our vowed commitment to participate in that mission—and always “with God's help.” This approach to baptismal theology continues to guide and inform our prayerful discernment as Episcopalians, which is rooted first and foremost in the covenant God makes with us through the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14).²⁵

In the redemptive work of the Incarnation, God draws the whole creation back into union with God, lifting it up through the resurrection and ascension of Christ toward its perfection, when God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). In the eucharist we celebrate this transformative action, accomplished through Christ's self-giving of his own Body and Blood, which nourishes our bodies and souls, equipping us to participate in God's own mission of reconciliation in the world.

In the eucharist, our fragmented lives are gathered together into one offering to God, the giver of all good things. As a community gathered in prayer, we reaffirm our participation in God's covenant as we hear God's holy word, confess and receive forgiveness of our sins, and join with the whole company of saints in prayer for the Church and the world. God receives the gifts we bring, limited and flawed as they may be, blesses them, and then returns them to us as bread from heaven. As we are nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, we are formed ever deeper in holiness of life, conforming to the likeness of Christ. At the table, we are given a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in which all are gathered to God, a foretaste that clarifies and strengthens our longing to witness to God's love. As we are blessed

19 “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 857-58, 861.

20 See “Thanksgiving over the Water,” BCP, 306-307; Romans 8:18-25; and 1 Corinthians 15:28.

21 “I do not call you servants any longer, ... but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). See also Gregory of Nyssa, who understood our incorporation into the Body of Christ to make us God's own “friends” (*Orat. in 1 Cor. xv.28*).

22 Holy Baptism, BCP, 308.

23 See Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, and Matthew 22:37-40.

24 BCP, 304-305.

25 See Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, The New Church's Teaching Series, vol. 12 (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2002), 11-22.

and sent out, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s work of bringing all things to that sanctification and fullness for which God created them. Moreover, as we celebrate eucharist together, we recall all the other tables that we gather around in our various households and come to see them as places where Christ is present. This eucharistic pattern—often described with the actions *take, bless, break, and give*—shapes all the relationships that we bring into our baptismal life with God. We *take* these relationships, *bless* God for their goodness, ask God to bless them and *break* them open further to divine grace, so that we may *give* them to the world as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Baptism and eucharist, as sacraments of God’s covenant of creating, redeeming, and sustaining love, shape our lives as Christians in relation to God and to God’s creation; this calls us to live with love, compassion, justice, and peace toward all creatures, friend or foe, neighbor or stranger. We are not only called to live in this way but also strengthened to do so by our participation in these sacramental acts. The sacramental life of the Church strengthens us to give ourselves and to receive others as we contribute to the coming of God’s realm “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10) and proclaim Christ until he comes again (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Through baptism and eucharist we are brought into and sustained in all these many and various relationships. First and foremost among them is our relationship with the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us. We also participate in countless other relationships with the many diverse people, communities, and institutions that we encounter throughout the world. All of these relationships call us to bear witness to the gospel precisely because our lives as creatures of God are constituted in relation; we are created in the Trinitarian image of God, an image that is inherently relational and rooted and grounded in love.²⁶

Accordingly, same-gender relationships belong in that extensive network of relations in which we are called to bear witness to the gospel. In the next section, we consider the blessing of same-gender relationships in that broader context, beginning with the fundamental call all of us share to love our neighbors as ourselves. Since God calls us into particular forms of loving commitments with others, we turn in the following sections to three interrelated aspects of that calling: covenant-making, intentional Christian households, and faithful intimacy.

Loving Our Neighbors as Ourselves

Christians strive to model all of our relationships on the love, grace, and compassion of Christ, loving our neighbors, both near and distant, as we love ourselves. Loving others is possible only because of the grace of God, who first loved us (1 John 4:19). Baptism and eucharist continually send us out to all our neighbors, where we learn again and again the blessing of offering ourselves and receiving others in gospel hospitality.

Hospitality means more than good manners. Scripture regards hospitality toward both friend and stranger as evidence of covenantal obedience and fruitfulness.²⁷ The story of Sodom’s destruction in Genesis 19, a particularly dramatic biblical reminder of the importance of hospitable relations, has been frequently cited by opponents of blessing same-gender relationships. However, such interpretations of this passage rely less on the biblical story itself than on the cultural reception of this story over many centuries of European history.²⁸

The narrative in this passage turns on whether certain visitors to Sodom will be received graciously and hospitably by the city’s inhabitants or instead will be exploited and even raped. The sin of Sodom’s citizens thus refers explicitly to the codes of hospitality in the ancient Near East rather than to same-

26 “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP, 845.

27 See Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:34, Deuteronomy 24:19-21, Malachi 3:5, and Hebrews 13:2, among many others. For an overview and analysis of the centrality of hospitality in Scripture and in early Christianity, see Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

28 The term “sodomy,” for example, does not appear in Scripture, and what it has come to mean (including within North Atlantic jurisprudence) is not supported by the biblical references to it. See Jay Emerson Johnson, “Sodomy and Gendered Love: Reading Genesis 19 in the Anglican Communion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 413-34; and Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2004).

gender sexual relations.²⁹ Other biblical writers who refer to Sodom never highlight sexuality—or mention it at all. Ezekiel’s interpretation, for example, is quite direct: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).³⁰ Jesus evokes the story of Sodom not to teach about sexual ethics but in the context of sending out his disciples to minister. Those who do not receive his disciples, he promises, will suffer a fate worse than the citizens of Sodom (Matthew 10:15). The threat underscores the centrality of hospitality in that ancient story.³¹

As early as the 1950s, biblical scholars attempted to place Genesis 19 in its original cultural context and to revive an interpretive approach to that story that resonated with the intrabiblical witness to it.³² In this interpretation, Genesis 19 applies to all people rather than only to some, and the lesson for all is the primacy of hospitality, or the love of neighbor, as Jesus himself commanded.³³ We manifest this love of neighbor in countless ways, each instance shaped by the particular individual or community we encounter, whether in our own family, or with coworkers, or strangers.

Relationships, in other words, take many different forms. At times, we choose particular relationships based on our own preferences, needs, or desires; at other times, we are in relationships without a lot of choice, as with colleagues at work or fellow travelers. No matter which, the “neighbor” offers us an occasion for manifesting the love of God in Christ. The gospels proclaim not only the self-giving love Jesus showed to the disciples he chose, but also the love Jesus urged for the stranger encountered by chance, as in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Christ sets the example for us to follow in all of our many and varied relationships, a model that respects the dignity of every person and that encourages giving oneself for the good of the other.³⁴ Relationships are “schools for virtue” and formation, that is, opportunities for us to form dispositions and habits that manifest Christ-like love.

As people joined with God and to each other by baptism and eucharist, we are called to embody in all of our relationships—those we may consider personal or private *and* those we consider corporate or public—a love that is both self-giving and other-receiving. As we endeavor to respond to this calling, we depend on God’s grace as we are gradually brought by the Spirit into that union with God for which Christ himself prayed (John 17:11). We also serve as living proclamations of God’s creative, redeeming, and sustaining love for the world. Given our limitations, that witness is inevitably imperfect and sometimes ambiguous, yet we continue to trust that all things are working together for good (Romans 8:28) as we shape our lives and relationships to the pattern of God’s own love for us and for the world. That pattern may then lead into particular forms of commitment in which we discern a call to covenantal relationship.

Called into Covenant

Some loving relationships with our neighbors exhibit a particular depth of commitment, which can lead to an intentional covenant with another person or with a community. Scripture bears witness to

29 The definition of “sodomy” varied widely throughout Christian history and coalesced exclusively around a particular sexual act between men only in the eleventh century; see Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

30 Ezekiel’s description represents the approach most often taken by writers in the Hebrew Bible, in which the sin of Sodom is always associated with violence or injustice; see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). In the New Testament, Jude 7 is sometimes cited as well, yet that verse does not describe “sexual immorality” precisely (it could refer to rape, for example); the “unnatural lust” of Sodom’s inhabitants could also mean that the strangers sent to Sodom were actually angels (see Genesis 6:4).

31 Patristic writers viewed hospitality as central. See, for example, Origen, *Homilia V in Genesim* (PG 12:188-89): “Hear this, you who close your homes to guests! Hear this, you who shun the traveler as an enemy! Lot lived among the Sodomites. We do not read of any other good deeds of his ... [save] he opened his home to guests”; Ambrose of Milan, *De Abrahamo* 1:6:52 (PL 14:440): Lot “placed the hospitality of his house—sacred even among a barbarous people—above the modesty [of his daughters].” Cited by John Boswell, *Christianity, Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 98.

32 One of the earliest examples of this approach was Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955).

33 Some biblical scholars continue to interpret the story as a condemnation of homosexual behavior. See, for example, Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 71-91.

34 “The Baptismal Covenant,” BCP, 305.

the significance of covenant-making in many ways but especially as an expression of God's blessing, such as the covenant God makes with the whole of creation through Noah (Genesis 9:9-13) and with the people of Israel through Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3). Christians celebrate the covenant that Jesus proclaimed and enacted at the final meal he shared with his disciples (Luke 22:20) and which we mark with the "cup of blessing" (1 Corinthians 10:16) at the eucharistic table.

Scripture invites us, in other words, to see our covenantal commitments with each other as particular expressions of the love of both God and neighbor as well as expressions of God's blessing. As we commit ourselves to the good of the other, we offer that commitment as a witness to God's covenantal love for the world. We discover God's blessing in these covenantal commitments as we are able, more and more, to manifest consistent regard and respect for the other, even as we struggle with our own limitations and flaws. We discover God's blessing even further as we realize, in ever newer ways, how a covenantal relationship can enhance and contribute to the well-being of others, of neighbors, strangers, the Church, and the world.

People who enter a covenant promise each other, a community, and God that their shared future will take a particular shape, one for which they intend to be held accountable, not only by their covenant partners but also by the wider community.³⁵ While the Canons of the Episcopal Church describe marriage as a union of a man and a woman, the patterns of marriage can help us understand other kinds of covenantal relationship, such as vowed religious life and the commitments of same-gender couples. In all of these covenantal relationships, the partners promise to be trustworthy, to remain faithful to one another despite other demands on their time and energy or possibilities for engagement with others. The partners promise to accompany and assist each other in faithfulness; they pledge their support for the well-being of the other. These relationships are directed toward vitality and fruitfulness as they contribute to human flourishing, within and beyond the relationship. The depth of this covenantal commitment means it is a *vocation*, a life of faithfulness to which some are called by God and which God blesses, so that, by God's grace, that blessing will be made manifest to the world.

Recognizing God's blessing and the work of the Spirit in relationships of lifelong commitment, the Church rightly celebrates these moments of covenantal vocation. This divine calling, discerned by a couple and their faith community, draws the Church deeper into God's own mission of redeeming and sanctifying love in the world. Christians express this calling in the ways we live our lives with others. Two of these ways deserve attention here: shaping households and deepening faithful intimacy.

The Vocation of Households

Households today are most often associated with marriage and child-rearing, yet this has not always been the case. The history of the Church offers a broader view of how households can bear witness to the gospel. Since it is finally God, and not another human being or anything else in creation, that fulfills and completes us, some people feel called to remain unmarried or single. A single life, which is not necessarily the same as a solitary life, can be lived in households of various types. Living in this way can allow individuals to be more available as friends and companions; this is often the case with vowed religious life, such as a monastic calling. Indeed, for the first half of its history (more than a thousand years), the Church understood vowed religious life as a calling higher than marriage, a view that changed decisively only during the Protestant Reformation. The diverse forms of an intentional single life may afford greater opportunity for contemplation, service, and mission, which some people understand as a particular vocational calling into deeper relationship with God and the world. This seems to be Paul's understanding of the spiritual significance of remaining unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:25-32).

Paul also discusses human sexuality in relation to God's gracious covenant with us in Christ in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans. This chapter, especially verses 26-27, has been used to support the Church's reluctance to embrace the loving faithfulness of same-gender couples and continues to influence conversation in Christian communities.

35 See Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

In interpreting this Pauline passage, it is difficult to know precisely what Paul meant by “unnatural” in those verses and to whom he was addressing these concerns.³⁶ Significantly, Paul’s description of sexual behavior in the first chapter appears in direct relation to his condemnation of idolatry. For Paul, the consequence—not the cause—of worshiping false gods is a distorted understanding of sexuality, its purpose and goal (Romans 1:22-23). In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, those distortions of sexuality with which Paul was most likely familiar included a range of practices associated with cults devoted to fertility gods and goddesses. Some interpreters have claimed that these cultic rituals may have included self-castration, drunken orgies, and sex with young male and female temple prostitutes.³⁷ Christians rightly condemn all those behaviors as violations of the human body, the very temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul insisted (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Moreover, some interpreters say, those alleged ancient cultic practices have nothing to do with today’s same-gender Christian couples.³⁸

Paul’s broader insight, however, still compels the Church to continual discernment and assessment of its common life: proper worship corresponds directly to proper sexual relations. This insight can shed even further light on Paul’s recommendation to the Christians in Corinth that they remain unmarried.

In the end, human sexual relationships of any kind are not the purpose or goal of human life. Instead, union with God in Christ is the goal for all, including the whole created order, as the rest of Paul’s letter to the Romans makes clear (Romans 8:18-25). At their best, human relationships can only point us toward that final fulfillment. People who make an intentional decision to remain unmarried place important signposts on that spiritual journey to which all of us are called and in which nothing, including marriage, should supplant our primary devotion to God and to God’s household, the Church.

Other types of relationships teach us that to prepare us for life with God, God can bind us with another for life. Thus, some (though not all) covenantal commitments are enacted in households, those intimate spaces where people encounter each other as their nearest neighbors daily and continually.³⁹ Clearly, the character, shape, and form of a household have varied enormously over time, from the patriarchal and polygamous families of ancient Israel to the family Jesus created between his mother and his beloved disciple (John 19:26-27) and the economic reordering of familial relations among early believers (Acts 4:32-37, 5:1-7). What “household” means and how people may be called, as a vocation, into covenantal households matter not only in light of historical differences but also in the midst of the wide range of household customs and organizational patterns found throughout the world today.

Appreciating the significant cultural differences between the households of ancient Israel and today’s Western, nuclear families can also inform our interpretation of two biblical passages cited as a scriptural warrant for rejecting the loving faithfulness of same-gender couples: Leviticus 18:22 and its analogue, 20:13. These two verses belong to an extensive array of dietary restrictions, commandments, and ritual practices often referred to as the “Levitical holiness code.” Two features of ancient Israelite society are important in interpreting these difficult passages: the process of constructing a religious identity for Israel distinct from its surrounding cultures, and the strict gender hierarchy of the ancient Mediterranean world.⁴⁰

36 See L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 119-123. See also Dale B. Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32,” in *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 51-64. Some interpreters have noted that Paul uses the phrase often translated as “contrary to nature” in Romans 1 again in Romans 11:24 to describe the love of God in saving those same Gentiles; see William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 98-99.

37 For the controversy over ancient fertility cults and the alleged sexual practices associated with them, see Robert A. Oden, Jr., *The Bible Without Theology: The Theological Tradition and Alternatives to It* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), especially chapter 5, “Religious Identity and the Sacred Prostitution Accusation,” 131-153.

38 See Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 103-113.

39 Thomas E. Breidenthal, *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

40 Insights from Jewish commentators and scholars on these and other important aspects of biblical interpretation deserve renewed attention in Christian communities. See, for example, Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Leviticus 18:22 condemns sex between men, and, more particularly, treating a man like a woman. The Hebrew word used for this condemnation, translated as “abomination,” appears most often with reference to the cultic practices associated with the worship of foreign gods; similar condemnations of child sacrifice and bestiality in Leviticus 18 strengthen the connection to idolatrous rituals.⁴¹ Equally important, patriarchy placed a high premium on male privilege. Sexual practices reflected this gendered ordering as men were expected to take an active role and women a passive one, reflecting and perpetuating male dominance in all other spheres of cultural and religious life and reinforcing the treatment of women as property. Sexual relations in the ancient Near Eastern cultural context were defined by who had power over whom. So, according to this worldview, sex between men would violate male privilege and disrupt the patriarchal ordering of society.⁴²

Ancient Israelite culture, which the Levitical holiness code was meant to uphold, differs significantly from the egalitarian ideals toward which many Christian families strive in modern Western culture (and indeed in other locales as well).⁴³ Likewise, the distinctive concerns shared by both the ancient Israelites and Paul to reject the sexual practices associated with idolatrous cults are in no way applicable to the lives of faithful Christians today who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. These historical and cultural differences, however, do not render these biblical passages irrelevant: Scripture continues to bear witness to the primacy of covenantal relationship with the one true God of Israel, whom Christians believe and proclaim is revealed decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Scripture would have us make that divine covenant primary in the ordering of our household relations in culturally appropriate ways.

In households formed by married different-gender couples and covenanted same-gender couples alike, the process of conforming to the likeness of Christ and striving toward holiness of life unfolds in deeply shared accountability. The couple continually attempts to place their desires within the vows and commitments they have made to each other. Living together in a household may provide the stability which makes possible the vulnerability necessary to self-giving and other-receiving.⁴⁴ In a household, the members of the couple become one another’s nearest neighbor so that they may grow together in the love of God. The household shelters the daily practice, which Jesus urged, of finding one’s life by giving it to another.

For same-gender couples as for married different-gender couples, households provide the structure for the daily life of covenanted closeness: laboring to provide for one another and to support family, organizing a household and its daily table, maintaining and sharing property, caring for another in sickness and at death.⁴⁵ Households may be schools for virtue and for penance and reconciliation, as well as habitations of mutual support and joy, places for glimpsing and also deepening our experience of the presence of God. People living alone, who are single, bereaved, or divorced, are also called to live out their baptismal vocation by the love, service, hospitality, and accountability of their relationships within the Church and in the communities of which they are a part, as well as through their service of prayer to others.

41 See Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 37-56. Paul would likely have known the connection between the Levitical holiness code and idolatrous cults as well, which lends further support to interpreting the first chapter of Romans with reference to temple prostitution.

42 Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, revised edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 68-69.

43 The treatment not only of women but also of children as property, as well as the practice of keeping concubines and slaves in ancient Mediterranean households, mark these differences even further. See Carol L. Meyers, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 251-59; Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 29-58; and Amy L. Wordelman, “Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 482-88.

44 Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Hefling (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1996), 58-68.

45 See Deirdre J. Good, Willis J. Jenkins, Cynthia B. Kittredge, and Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “A Theology of Marriage including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals,” *Anglican Theological Review* 93:1 (Winter 2011): 63-64.

A household formed by a couple in a covenantal relationship can remind all of us of our incorporation into the paschal mystery through baptism, in which we are received into the household of God and encouraged to “confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share ... in his eternal priesthood.”⁴⁶ In their household, a couple faces the many ways in which their faith forms their daily lives. They offer themselves daily to each other in order to become part of the other’s life, dying to sin and rising to a new life directed toward love of neighbor and love of God. In this giving of self and receiving of another, we see the gracious pattern of God’s own triune life into which we are, more and more, caught up and transformed for mission.

In households we also see an image of the eucharist. The household tables around which couples in covenantal relationship gather evoke the eucharistic table around which we gather as the community of believers. In the household, as at the eucharist, couples take what is given to them and offer it to God. They are nourished and blessed by what they receive, and the Spirit then empowers them to be a blessing to others and to God. In a household, as at the eucharistic table, what God has joined together may become one body, and the Spirit may distribute a household’s gifts to many. In households, same-gender as well as different-gender couples in covenantal relationships strive to imitate Jesus, who gave himself bodily for those he loved.

To give one’s self over to love, care, and commitment in solidarity with another person, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, is daily and bodily to partake in the reconciling work of God in Christ. In the lives of intimate couples, sexual desire for one another can be forged into covenantal witness to the gospel.

Faithful Intimacy

The movement from sexual desire into faithful intimacy and covenantal commitment marks a particular kind of vocational path, which for Christians shapes the passion of *eros* into the affection of *agape* for the good of the Church and the world. Theological reflection on this path begins by affirming the goodness of sexual desire itself. Indeed, sexual desire is a metaphor for God’s desire to be in relationship with us and the whole creation. Scripture and Christian tradition draw on sexually intimate relationships to point to the God who is Love and who stands in relationships of love with all creation. The long tradition of commentary on the biblical Song of Songs, for example, illustrates the spiritual significance of sexual relationships and the fruitfulness of reflecting theologically on the commitment of sexually intimate couples.⁴⁷ In such reflection, we can realize and appreciate that “the whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells us that God desires us.” The good news of God’s desire for us can then shape our intimate commitments and the life of the wider Christian community so that all of us may see ourselves as desired, as “the occasion of joy.”⁴⁸

The gift of human sexuality, established by God in creation, can be a source of sustaining joy, reminding us bodily of the abundance God intends for the whole creation. In the mutual self-offering of one to another in a sexual relationship of fidelity, we can catch a glimpse of the delight God exhibits for each of us. Yet sexual desire is also fraught with risk because it draws us into relationships of vulnerability, where not only the brightest and best dimensions of ourselves are offered to another but also where the painful aspects are exposed, the ones that we often prefer to keep hidden and that need healing. Sexual desire and intimacy make us vulnerable so that God can turn our limits to our good, showing us that we are not our own but belong to someone else.

Faithful relationships of sexual intimacy can also be an occasion to bear witness to God’s love as they form the couples more fully in the image of Christ. In marriage, the Church blesses and celebrates these relationships as potential vehicles for God’s grace. Many in The Episcopal Church today have come

46 Holy Baptism, BCP, 308.

47 David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Douglas Burton-Christie, “Into the Body of Another: *Eros*, Embodiment and Intimacy with the Natural World,” *Anglican Theological Review* 81:1 (Winter 1999): 13-37.

48 Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, 59.

to believe that this is as true for same-gender couples as it is for different-gender couples.⁴⁹ Others, however, understand the doctrine of creation differently and believe that God's gift of human sexuality is intended only for different-gender couples. Even the language of "same-gender" and "different-gender" raises many complex questions, not only biologically, socially, and culturally, but also and especially biblically.

Genesis 1 and 2, for example, are often cited to support two interrelated convictions: first, that "gender complementarity" describes God's creation of human beings as male and female; and second, that such complementarity is best expressed in the procreation of children within monogamous marriage. The extensive biblical scholarship available on these passages—in both Jewish and Christian traditions—nuances those two convictions in some important ways.

In the first of the two creation accounts (Genesis 1:26-27), gender differentiation is attributed to the whole human species rather than to individuals, just as both male and female alike apply to God, in whose image humanity is made.⁵⁰ Similarly, the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) is given to the human species, not to each individual. If this were not the case, people "who are single, celibate, or who for whatever reason do not have children—including Jesus of Nazareth"—would be viewed as "disobedient sinners."⁵¹ Moreover, the generative aspects of a loving and faithful commitment can be seen in many different ways, not only in bearing and raising children. For same-gender couples, as one Episcopal bishop has pointed out, "the care and nurture of those already in the world may be a mission more excellently fulfilled by those who do not have the concerns of child-rearing."⁵²

The second account in Genesis refers specifically to the creation of distinct individuals (Genesis 2:7-22), and introduces something that is *not* good in God's creation: "It is not good," God declares, "for the human being to be alone."⁵³ Here the story turns on the importance of companionship and not, as in the first account, on the procreation of children. Significantly, the companion God provides for the solitary human is not defined by "otherness" but by suitable similarity. In this passage, "there is no emphasis ... on 'difference' or 'complementarity' at all—in fact, just the opposite. When Adam sees Eve, he does not celebrate her otherness but her sameness: what strikes him is that she is 'bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.'" Reducing this story to the fitness of particular anatomical parts misses the poignancy of this story: "God sees the plight of this first human being and steps in and does whatever it takes to provide him with a life-giving, life-sustaining companion."⁵⁴ Rather than focusing on marriage, these creation accounts affirm God as the creator of all things and "the priority of human companionship."⁵⁵

Genesis 1 and 2 can and should continue to shape, inform, and energize the Church's faithful witness to the God revealed in Scripture. These passages can do so as the Church proclaims God as the creator and affirms the goodness of God's creation, which includes the dignity of every human being as created in God's image. This affirmation remains vital, not least for the sake of embracing the full humanity of women. The unqualified dignity with which the biblical writer treated both men and women in the account of their creation stands out as quite remarkable in the patriarchal culture in which it was written.⁵⁶

49 *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, 8-9, 24-25.

50 Some ancient Talmudic commentaries suggest, for example, that the original human shared with God all of the possible gender characteristics, which were later divided between "male" and "female." This text, in other words, raises a host of questions which the text itself does not address concerning gender and sexuality in both humanity and God. See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, ed., *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

51 Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 115-16.

52 Marshall, *Same-Sex Unions*, 38.

53 Genesis 2:18 (for the significance of this translation of the verse, see Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 114-115, 117).

54 Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 120.

55 Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*, 114.

56 William Stacy Johnson notes, for example, that in ancient Mediterranean society, women were considered human beings but decidedly deficient ones and were therefore rightly subservient to men (*A Time to Embrace*, 275, n.16). Dale B. Martin likewise relates this ancient view of the inferiority of women—as "deficient men"—to the difficulties in translating, let alone interpreting, two Greek words in the New Testament that have been frequently cited regarding homosexuality. Those words

Paul, furthermore, would urge Christians to read the Genesis accounts of creation through the lens of the *new* creation, which God has promised in Christ, the first fruits of which God has provided by raising Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-25). Living into that promise and anticipating its fulfillment, Paul urged the Christians in Galatia to understand their baptism as erasing familiar social and cultural hierarchies: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27-28).⁵⁷ Rather than emphasizing the significance of gender, the faithfulness of sexually intimate couples can contribute to the Church’s witness to the new life God offers in Christ and through the Spirit, which the Church celebrates in the “sacraments of the new creation.”⁵⁸ For both same-gender and different-gender couples, then, the theological and moral significance of their covenantal commitment is rooted in the paschal mystery.

As in baptism and eucharist, the covenantal commitments of sexually intimate couples sweep their bodies up into a grand and risky endeavor: to see if they can find their life in God by giving it to another. In these covenants, two people vow to give themselves bodily and wholeheartedly to each other. They do this, in part, to live out the promises of baptism while also living into the self-offering of Christ, as expressed at the eucharistic table: “This is my body, given for you.” The lifelong commitment of covenanted couples can, by God’s grace, testify to the love of God by signifying Christ and the Church. These commitments can thus evoke for the wider community the very promise of the paschal mystery enacted in baptism and eucharist: we are being drawn deeper into God’s own life where we learn that God’s love is stronger than death.

Sexually intimate couples can also testify to the love of neighbor by loving each other, a love that requires both time and the sustenance of God’s grace. Covenantal couples can model this love, not as a static tableau but as an ongoing school for virtue in which the practices of neighbor-love are developed, reformed, and brought toward perfection. The moral significance of a covenantal relationship is its potential to bring each of the covenant partners up against their embodied limits as finite creatures and to become willing to be vulnerable to another. A covenantal commitment challenges and inspires each partner to self-offering as each lives out with the other the relation of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21-33). Members of a couple urge each other forward in growth, which occurs through and with the creaturely limitations that Christ took on for our good: the limits of time and the body. Our desires, including our sexual desires, “can be an especially intense and unsettling reminder of our radical availability to the other. Like parental affection or simple compassion, sexual desire can cause our heart to ‘belong’ to another.... This desire shatters any illusions we may have regarding our ability to choose when and if we shall be connected to others; indeed, it is itself a warrant for the claim that our fundamental relation to one another is one of connection.”⁵⁹

Giving ourselves to another, as Christ gave himself for the world, takes time and the willingness to risk the vulnerability inherent to the commitment of love. The movement of sexual desire toward intimacy and into commitment begins as we give ourselves over to another in faithful relation and continues toward the final moment of committal, surrendering our lives to God. This movement describes a lifelong, deliberate process that, with obedience and faithfulness, produces visible holiness and the fruits of the Spirit. Both for the good of the couple and for the good of the Church, God blesses this

appear in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The words “sodomite” or “homosexual” have appeared in some English translations of those verses, but the meaning of the Greek in both cases is obscure and elusive. Martin believes it likely that these words referred to cultural practices involving sexual exploitation (perhaps including rape) and also effeminate behavior, which for men in that society triggered both alarm and disgust (“*Arsenokoitês* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996], 117-36).

57 See Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 77-90.

58 Among the many sources for this connection between the sacramental life of the Church and the divine promise of the new creation, see Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London: Continuum, 2010), where he refers to the Church’s sacraments as “mysteries of human unity” insofar as we are, through the sacraments, being incorporated into the new creation God is bringing about (xii).

59 Thomas Breidenthal, “Sanctifying Nearness,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 345.

loving, intimate commitment. This blessing, in turn, empowers the couple for their ministry in the world and energizes the Church for mission.

Mutual Blessing and Fruitfulness

As Christians, all of our relationships—as single people, in households, as intimate couples—are occasions to live more fully into our Baptismal Covenant and participate more deeply in the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection enacted at the eucharistic table. The commitment we exhibit in our relationships—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and as God loves each of us in Christ—thus becomes a source of blessing for the whole Church.

This broad framework of covenantal relationship for the Church’s life offers a way to reflect on the significance of the many types of covenants with which the Church is blessed—in ordination, monastic vows, marriage, and also in same-gender relationships. The blessing of any relationship is a blessing not only for those in a relationship but also and equally for the wider community in which the relationship is lived. This mutual blessing is exhibited in many ways, not least by enabling those engaged in such relationships to manifest the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), which they might not have done apart from the relationship. Discerning the gifts of the Spirit in a relationship is one reason a faith community blesses that relationship.

In addition, pronouncing a blessing can become an important occasion for deepening the process of sanctification. Many couples desire this—and they need it. God can use the vulnerability of intimacy and the giving of ourselves to another to expose our weaknesses, make us better, set us apart, and spur our moral growth. The Church in turn can witness to the sanctifying work of the Spirit as God transforms the energy of *eros* into the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

A blessing changes a couple as they become more aware of God’s grace and are commissioned by the Church to bear witness to the paschal mystery. A blessing changes the Church as well: holiness of life is made more manifest, so the community becomes accountable for supporting the couple as they grow into the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

Entering into a covenant of faithfulness with another human being is one among many ways Christians live out their baptismal calling in the world. As covenantal households are shaped by lives given over to service, compassion, generosity, and hospitality, the grace encountered at the eucharistic table is further manifested in the world. Thus, the fruitfulness of covenantal relationships and the blessings they offer to the Church belong to the mission of the Church in its ongoing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and our hope of union with God. This is the very source of our desire for communion with another.

4. The Church’s Challenge: Christian Unity and Biblical Interpretation

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace:
Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

“For the Unity of the Church,” BCP, 818

Christian unity with God and one another in Christ is a precious gift; likewise, our differences as believers are gifts to be honored because these differences belong to God’s created order. Through these

gifts we are equipped for “building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

The Book of Common Prayer (1979) encourages Episcopalians to pray for Christian unity by recalling the Pauline letter to the Ephesians. This letter reminds us that our bonds of affection are rooted not in our own efforts but in God’s gracious gift in baptism. There is but one Body and one Lord. There is but one baptism, by which we are joined—heart, soul, and mind—to one another (Ephesians 4:5). Most of all, as the prayer quoted above reminds us, this baptismal unity serves the Christian call to praise and glorify God.

In baptism, God binds us to God’s own self by binding us to others who are different from us, linking our salvation inextricably to the salvation of others. Furthermore, the divine gift of unity in no way relies on uniformity. We are not united, one to the other, because we agree but because God has joined us together.⁶⁰ The bond we share in baptism makes room for us to disagree with one another within the bonds of affection we share as members of God’s own household of love and grace. We enact this unity by continuing “in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”⁶¹ We cannot live into this gift on our own, but with “sighs too deep for words,” the Spirit “helps us in our weakness” (Romans 8:26). The Spirit slowly takes, offers, and transforms all the prayers of those who disagree with one another to make them occasions to manifest the Body of Christ more visibly in the world and in the Church as well. In this ongoing process of sanctification, we proclaim that we are marked as Christ’s own forever as members of the Body of Christ.⁶² This foundational reality of our shared life sends us out to the world in witness to Christ’s reconciling love.⁶³

The challenges in making God’s gift of unity more and more visible appear, for example, within the New Testament concerning the divisions in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 3:1-9), in Paul’s reminder to the Romans that the body includes many diverse members (Romans 12:3-8), and perhaps most notably in Paul’s baptism of non-Jews, which caused a debate with Peter over how to interpret their inherited Scriptures. Paul recounts this disagreement in his letter to the Galatians (2:2-21). Peter’s vision (Acts 10:9-16) prior to encountering Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and interacting with other Gentiles, moved him to declare that no one should be called “profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28), and to urge his fellow apostles not to withhold the water of baptism from those who had received the Holy Spirit just as they had (Acts 10:47). The inclusion of Gentiles who did not observe dietary laws within the household of the God of Israel overturned centuries of biblical interpretation.

Throughout the Church’s history, Christians have endeavored to follow that apostolic practice of prayerful deliberation in the light of Scripture and to discern the will of God—“what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2)—in each new time and place. As the Body of Christ, our fundamental call is to live together not only when we agree in our discernment but also when the Spirit leads faithful Christians to hold more than one view. Different interpretations of Scripture are possible, provided they lead us to love God and one another.⁶⁴

General Convention Resolution 2009-C056 acknowledges differences of opinion within The Episcopal Church concerning the interpretation of Scripture and same-gender relationships. This theological resource has presented interpretations of some of the most difficult of these biblical passages to support

60 See Thomas E. Breidenthal, “Communion as Disagreement,” in *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism: Responses to the Windsor Report*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker (Ropley, UK: O Books, 2005), 188-198.

61 “The Baptismal Covenant,” BCP, 304.

62 The centrality of baptism in our common life has been championed by a series of Anglican leaders, starting with Thomas Cranmer and including F. D. Maurice and William Reed Huntington. As Paul Avis describes it, Anglican ecclesiology depends on the insistence that “what unites us to Christ [that is, baptism] is all that is necessary to unite us, sacramentally, to each other” (*The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* [London: T&T Clark, 2007], 111).

63 On baptismal ecclesiology, see Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, 22-28.

64 Augustine of Hippo believed that the command in Genesis to “increase and multiply” (1:22, 28) applied not only to the procreation of children but also to the proliferation of textual meanings of Scripture. Augustine also believed that there were limits to multiple interpretations: no interpretation of Scripture could be considered ethically Christian if it violated the commandment to love God and one’s neighbor. See Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 59, 83-84.

the covenants of same-gender couples while understanding that some members of The Episcopal Church continue to hear the word of the Lord differently in these passages. All of us have more to learn from Scripture and from each other. The Spirit baptizes us all in the name of Jesus, who is himself the Word of God and the Lord of Scripture. In faithfulness to Christ, we acknowledge and respect those differences among us in our fervent hope that disagreements over this biblical material need not divide the Church.⁶⁵ Anglican Christians, along with Christians in many other communions and historical eras, have discovered in ever new ways how the grace of God in Christ offers a path toward unity even in the midst of profound disagreement.⁶⁶

Our disagreements today belong in the context of the agreement we do enjoy concerning biblical interpretation: the saving love and grace of God in Christ call us to be a holy people, living in faithfulness and treating the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit as we endeavor, with God's help, to fulfill our baptismal vows to "seek and serve Christ in all persons," loving our neighbors as ourselves, to "strive for justice and peace among all people," and to "respect the dignity of every human being."⁶⁷ In such agreement, the love with which we treat each other is to be modeled on the love of God for God's people, as well as on the life and ministry of Jesus himself.

Scripture offers little material that would address modern notions of sexual orientation, and biblical writers devoted relatively little attention to questions of same-gender relations. Biblical scholars are divided regarding the translation and interpretation of the texts most often cited on this question.⁶⁸ Some maintain that these texts unequivocally forbid same-gender relationships; others argue that these texts do not refer to same-gender relationships as we understand them today and that each text must be interpreted within its own historical and literary contexts.⁶⁹

Similar disagreements over biblical interpretation have marked the Church's life throughout its history. Faithful Christians struggled for centuries to understand whether Scripture encouraged a view of vowed religious life as a higher calling than marriage. Churches have disagreed over the biblical condemnation of "usury," which originally meant charging interest on loaned money, and whether it applies to contemporary economic systems. Protestant reformers disagreed about biblical interpretations of the eucharist and even whether particular biblical books ought to remain in the canon of Scripture. English reformers wrestled with differing biblical views concerning liturgical vestments, Church music, the relationship between Church and state, sacramental theology, and the role of ordained ministers.⁷⁰

The Episcopal Church has struggled with how to interpret Scripture amid cultural change, whether concerning economic reform, divorce and remarriage, or contraception.⁷¹ The practice of slavery and the role of women are two areas in which major departures from the biblical text have been especially

65 Rowan Williams has noted, for example, that writers in our shared Anglican history have often turned to "a theologically informed and spiritually sustained *patience*" as Anglican Christianity continues to grow and change. These writers, Williams says, "do not expect human words to solve their problems rapidly, they do not expect the Bible to yield up its treasures overnight.... They know that as Christians they live among immensities of meaning, live in the wake of a divine action which defies summary explanation. They take it for granted that the believer is always learning (*Anglican Identities* [Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003], 7).

66 While the Church's history is replete with many such examples, for illustrations from Anglican history, see William L. Sachs, *The Transformation of Anglicanism: From State Church to Global Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. chap. 4, "The Struggle to Define the Church and its Belief," 120-63.

67 "The Baptismal Covenant," BCP, 305.

68 Those texts are Genesis 1-2, Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Jude 7.

69 An overview of these positions appears in an issue of the *Anglican Theological Review* devoted to same-sex marriage; it offers "two interpretations of doctrinal and scriptural faithfulness that fundamentally disagree" (Ellen T. Charry, "Preface," *Anglican Theological Review* 93:1 [Winter 2011]: xiv). The two major essays in this issue of the journal originated as a project commissioned in spring 2008 by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church, to be overseen by the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops.

70 For a history of the various ways the Church has read difficult biblical passages, see John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

71 For an overview of challenges in biblical interpretation for a wide range of ethical concerns in the Episcopal Church, see Robert E. Hood, *Social Teachings in the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1990).

controversial. Christians, including Episcopalians, in the nineteenth century used the Bible extensively to justify the institution of slavery, particularly in the United States.⁷² In 1863, for example, Presiding Bishop John Henry Hopkins of Vermont published a paper called “Bible View of Slavery,” which defended slavery as “fully authorized both in the Old and New Testament,” defining it as “servitude for life, descending to the offspring.”⁷³

The struggle to ordain women in The Episcopal Church also involved deep conflicts over biblical interpretation. Supporters of women’s ordination based their arguments on the gospel’s promise of freedom and wholeness for all, while opponents believed that the maleness of the disciples named in the New Testament established an unalterable tradition of male priesthood.⁷⁴

The Episcopal Church eventually changed its positions regarding slavery and the ordination of women. The diversity of approaches to Scripture in both cases made these decisions contentious. Serious questions continue to be posed about how we understand the authority of Scripture, not only concerning slavery and the status of women but also, now, same-gender relationships. All three of these issues have threatened to divide the Church. No one today would justify the institution of slavery, but the worldwide Anglican Communion continues to live with disagreement about ordaining women and blessing same-gender relationships. With previous generations of the faithful who struggled in similar ways, our present disagreements need not compromise our shared witness to the good news of God in Christ as we look toward that day when our partial knowledge will be complete (1 Corinthians 13:12) and when God will be “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

The hope we share for that day of final fulfillment in Christ does not thereby erase the challenge of living into God’s gracious gift of unity today. For most Christians, this means noting carefully the limits of acceptable differences; beyond those limits, the claim to Christian unity would prove difficult if not impossible. The challenge, then, is not whether limits to our differences exist, but how to discern when we have crossed those limits, and over what kinds of questions (whether doctrinal, moral, or liturgical, for example) we may hold differing beliefs and still remain in communion.⁷⁵ In the debate over same-gender relationships and biblical interpretation, Anglican Christians have disagreed about this process of discernment. Some Episcopalians have concluded that blessing such relationships goes beyond the limits of acceptable difference, and, acting on their conscience, they have parted company with The Episcopal Church, while others who disagree have chosen to remain. Our Church will continue to live with varying approaches to Scripture on this question.

At a pivotal moment among early believers, recorded in Acts 15, the possibility of including Gentiles in the Christian family sparked considerable controversy. The importance of this historical moment today lies not in the first-century differences between Jews and Gentiles but in the process of prayerful deliberation those early believers adopted. Facing the real possibility of irreparable division, the apostles sought a way to honor the centrality of Scripture while also attending carefully to the ongoing movement of the Spirit in their midst.

The Acts of the Apostles recounts that certain believers from the sect of the Pharisees were insisting that men could not be saved unless they were circumcised and kept the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). As the apostles and elders in Jerusalem considered this question, Peter (who had been persuaded by Paul’s point of view) confirmed the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles: “God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us” (Acts 15:8-9). James considered this

72 Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

73 John Henry Hopkins, “Bible View of Slavery,” *Papers from the Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge*, no. 8 (1863): 132, 117; see also John Henry Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, From the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. I. Pooley and Co., 1864), 6.

74 Pamela W. Darling, *New Wine: The Story of Women Transforming Leadership and Power in the Episcopal Church* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1994), 149.

75 For observations concerning matters that are essential to Christian life and those over which we may have legitimate differences of opinion, see *To Set Our Hope on Christ*, 49-52.

testimony and concluded that the Spirit's work urged a reconsideration of Scripture and an expansion of the gospel's reach to include Gentiles (Acts 15:13-21).

Acts 15 stands among other key biblical moments in which God's people have found their vision broadened to see a new thing God is bringing about (Isaiah 43:18-21), their assumptions challenged by the outpouring of God's Spirit where they had not expected it (Numbers 11:26-29; Joel 2:28), and the startling first fruits of God's new creation in raising Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-25). These biblical turning points, in themselves, will not settle today's disagreements, yet they urge the same apostolic process of prayerful deliberation: reliance on the centrality of Scripture while attending carefully to the Spirit's work in our midst.⁷⁶

The Episcopal Church listened closely to the Spirit concerning slavery and the ordination of women. We are summoned today to listen to the narratives of sanctification and holiness within the relationships of same-gender couples and to discern and testify to the work of God in their lives. As we listen, we trust in that Spirit who, as Jesus promised, will lead us further into truth (John 16:13), praying as Christ himself did for our unity with each other in God (John 17:11) and blessing God for God's abundant goodness in Christ so that, with Paul, we may share more fully in the blessings of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:23).

⁷⁶ See Stephen E. Fowl, "How the Spirit Reads and How to Read the Spirit," in *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 97-127; Jeffrey S. Siker, "How to Decide? Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion," *Theology Today* 51:2 (July 1994): 219-34; and Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 89-90.

The Church's Canon Law and Laws of the States

The Impact of Civil Law on Church Blessings

This essay is the work of a group called together by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to provide analysis and insight into the canonical and legal issues arising from the Church's blessing of same-gender relationships.⁷⁷ As The Episcopal Church considers these resources, many people will want to know how the civil law affects the Church. Do state laws restricting civil marriage to different-gender couples present problems or risks for The Episcopal Church and for Episcopal clergy celebrating the liturgy?

Those who studied this question for the Commission concluded that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbids a state from enforcing a law prohibiting same-gender blessings. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which applies both to the federal government and to the states, provides:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Some thirty-five states define marriage as between a man and a woman; these states expressly withhold recognition of a same-gender marriage that a couple obtains lawfully in another state or country. Preliminary research indicates that this legal scenario is common among the states that forbid and do not recognize same-gender marriages. The statutory or constitutional language used varies, but the intended result is the same.

So long as clergy in these states are *blessing a same-gender couple's covenantal relationship*, rather than purporting to establish a *civil marriage*, lawyers within the Church anticipate no successful state criminal prosecution or other adverse state action against the member of the clergy or his or her Church. The reason is that blessing a covenantal relationship is an exercise of religious faith, whereas establishing a civil marriage (through officiating at a "civil ceremony" and signing a marriage license) is an official act as an agent of the state. Well-settled First Amendment jurisprudence recognizes the difference between the two and protects the former.

The Book of Common Prayer and Canon I.18.1 require Episcopal clergy to conform to the laws of their state governing the creation of a civil marriage. Disciplinary consequences are clearly outlined for Episcopal clergy who perform a civil marriage ceremony and sign a state marriage license for a couple not permitted to marry in their state; civil law consequences could result, as well. However, celebrating a same-gender blessing ceremony using an authorized Church liturgy would not be counter to the Canons or the *Book of Common Prayer*—assuming that the language of the liturgy does not use the text of the *Book of Common Prayer's* marriage rites. This also assumes that the clergy person is not attempting to create a civil marriage contrary to state law and canon law.⁷⁸

The above conclusion and assumptions are the same where the blessing ceremony takes place in a diocese located in a state that prohibits same-gender civil marriage, but where the same-gender couple was previously married or joined in a civil union in a state where same-gender civil marriage is legal.

Some states not only forbid (or do not recognize) same-gender marriage, but also do not recognize any legal status for same-gender couples who have a civil marriage or civil union from another state where that status is legal. This analysis and conclusion apply to these "non-recognition" states as well.

Clergy and lay members of the Church with questions or concerns about a specific impact or application of a marriage or civil union law in their state should ask their bishop for guidance.

⁷⁷ This essay on canons and civil law is presented for study and as a resource for diocesan chancellors and others, providing an interpretation of canon and civil law that we believe to be sound but with which some may differ.

⁷⁸ Canon I.18.2(b) describes Holy Matrimony as a "physical and spiritual union of a man and a woman." The structure and text of parts of Canon I.18 seem to contemplate that wherever a member of the clergy is officiating at a civil marriage, he or she is also solemnizing Holy Matrimony when, in fact, the two are distinct and separate acts.

The Requirements of the Marriage Canon in Different State Contexts

The following discussion of the “marriage Canon” (Canon I.18) continues with exploration of various scenarios of same-gender couples expected to request the proposed liturgy developed in response to General Convention Resolution 2009-C056 and/or civil marriage. It considers possibilities both in dioceses that permit blessings of same-gender relationships or same-gender marriage and in those that prohibit it.

The Marriage Canon

The “Marriage Canon” is Canon I.18, “Of the Solemnization of Holy Matrimony.” Section 1 of the Canon requires clergy to conform to (i) their state’s civil marriage laws (“shall conform to the laws of the State governing the creation of the civil status of marriage”) and (ii) the “laws of this Church governing the solemnization of Holy Matrimony.”

Section 2 sets forth five conditions for a member of the clergy to ascertain prior to solemnizing a marriage. This section does not always distinguish between the act of officiating at a civil marriage as an agent of the state, and the act of solemnizing Holy Matrimony using the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage from the *Book of Common Prayer*. The structure and text of portions of the Canon seem to contemplate that the celebrant is performing both of these acts, not one or the other. The five conditions are:

- (a) both parties have the right to contract a marriage under state law;
- (b) both parties understand that “Holy Matrimony is a physical and spiritual union of a man and a woman, entered into within the community of faith, by mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, and with intent that it be lifelong”;
- (c) both parties “freely and knowingly consent to such marriage, without fraud, coercion, mistake as to identity of a partner, or mental reservation”;
- (d) at least one of the parties is baptized; and
- (e) both parties “have been instructed as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of Holy Matrimony 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.”

Items (a) and (c) are conventional findings required of agents of the state (e.g., justices of the peace, judges, clergy) when performing a civil marriage ceremony, but they are critical canonical requirements for the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage as well. The other three conditions are additional requirements of the Church, unrelated to state law.

Section 3 of the Canon states four additional requirements to be satisfied in connection with the solemnization of a marriage:

- (a) The announcement of the banns of marriage (this may be waived by the celebrant);
- (b) The requirement of at least two witnesses;
- (c) The recording of required data in the parish registry;
- (d) The signing of the declaration of intention, the contents of which are spelled out in subsections I.18.3 (e)-(g).

Section 4 of the Canon states that a member of the clergy has the discretion to decline to solemnize any marriage.

Scenarios

The following scenarios present a spectrum of likely fact patterns arising under the proposed liturgy. In each scenario, “eligible same-gender couple” means that at least one of the couple is baptized and participating in a Christian community of faith, and that a divorced person has obtained the required consent of the Bishop Diocesan. The term “civil union” may be substituted for “civil marriage” with the same results in most cases. Clergy and lay members of the Church with questions or concerns about

a specific impact or application of a marriage or civil union law in their state should seek guidance from their bishop.

Variations on these scenarios should generally be consistent with the following analysis.

Scenario A

In a state that authorizes same-gender civil marriage, an eligible same-gender couple asks a member of the clergy to celebrate the proposed liturgy for them and officiate at their civil marriage.

The member of the clergy must respond consistently with the directives of his or her Bishop Diocesan:

1. The Bishop Diocesan's directive is that neither is available in the diocese.
2. The Bishop Diocesan's directive is that a priest may celebrate the proposed liturgy but not officiate at the civil marriage.
3. The Bishop Diocesan's directive is that a priest may officiate at the civil marriage but not celebrate the proposed liturgy.
4. The Bishop Diocesan's directive is that a priest may both officiate at the civil marriage and celebrate the proposed liturgy.

Where a Bishop Diocesan is silent about officiating at a civil marriage, state law permits the clergy member to do so (although when in any doubt about this, the clergy member should seek guidance from his or her bishop). Where a Bishop Diocesan is silent about use of a proposed liturgy, such liturgy may not be celebrated.

Under these scenarios and those that follow, a priest disobeys the Bishop Diocesan's directive and/or the applicable Canon or rubric at her or his own risk of Title IV disciplinary action.

Scenario B

In a state that authorizes same-gender civil marriage, an eligible same-gender couple asks a priest to celebrate Holy Matrimony using the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage from the *Book of Common Prayer* and also to officiate at their civil marriage.

Both the rubrics of the *Book of Common Prayer* and Canon I.18 reserve the rite of Holy Matrimony to a man and a woman. This is not subject to the discretion of either a bishop or priest. If the Bishop Diocesan has authorized use of a liturgy for Blessings, the priest may celebrate that. And, unless directed not to do so by the Bishop Diocesan, the priest may officiate at the civil marriage. However, the structure and text of parts of Canon I.18 may be interpreted as not authorizing a member of the clergy to officiate at a civil marriage where the couple is not eligible for Holy Matrimony, e.g., a civil marriage of a same-gender couple.

A bishop, priest, or deacon who violates the rubrics or the Canon risks disciplinary action under Title IV.

Scenario C

In a state that prohibits same-gender civil marriage, an eligible same-gender couple seeks both the proposed liturgy and civil marriage from a priest.

Since state law prohibits civil marriage for the couple, the priest may not officiate at their civil marriage.

If the Bishop Diocesan has authorized use of the proposed liturgy, the priest may celebrate that liturgy.

Scenario D

In a state that prohibits same-gender civil marriage, an eligible same-gender couple seeks only the proposed liturgy.

If the Bishop Diocesan has authorized use of the proposed liturgy, the priest may celebrate that liturgy.

Scenario E

In a state that authorizes same-gender civil marriage, an eligible same-gender couple with a marriage license from another state where that marriage is legal seeks the proposed liturgy from a priest.

If the Bishop Diocesan has authorized use of the proposed liturgy, the priest may celebrate that liturgy.

Scenario F

In a state that prohibits same-gender civil marriage, an eligible same-gender couple with a marriage license from another state where that marriage is legal seeks the proposed liturgy from a priest.

If the Bishop Diocesan has authorized use of the proposed liturgy, the priest may celebrate that liturgy.

Other Materials

The National Conference of State Legislatures, a nonpartisan association providing resources to state legislatures and legislators, maintains a useful Web resource on state marriage, civil union, and related laws.

**Hearing, Seeing,
and Declaring New Things**
*Preparing Same-Gender Couples for a
Liturgy of Blessing*

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Overview: Pastoral Care for Same-Gender Couples

You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known.

Isaiah 48:6

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Isaiah 49:6

The pastoral resources in this essay are provided to assist clergy and trained lay people who are preparing same-gender couples for a blessing of their relationship, using the liturgy “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant.” The expectation of such preparation is equivalent to the canonical requirement that couples preparing for marriage receive instruction “as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of Holy Matrimony” (Canon I.18.2[e]).

Preparation is similar for all couples, whether same-gender or different-gender. Most clergy and lay people who currently offer premarital preparation to different-gender couples are more than capable of working with same-gender couples. However, understanding the differences is necessary—and helpful.

The pastoral resources described in this essay address differences in the preparation of same-gender and different-gender couples and include some of the available resources for preparing same-gender couples for the blessing of their relationships.

Contextual Competence

Clergy and qualified lay people preparing couples for blessings need to be *contextually competent*, a concept derived from *cultural competence*. In fields such as health care, social work, and education, culturally competent professionals embody awareness, a positive attitude, knowledge, and skills that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Consider the different situations that one might encounter when preparing a couple for a blessing or marriage:

- Preparing a couple in their seventies for a blessing of their relationship is very different from preparing a couple in their twenties.
- Preparing a couple entering a new relationship is different from preparing two people who have been living in a committed relationship for a long time.
- Preparing an interracial couple differs in some aspects from preparing a couple of the same race.
- Preparing a couple without children differs from preparing parents.

Being “contextually competent” means understanding and appreciating these, and many more, differing situations. Clergy and trained lay people need to examine their own contextual competence as they consider working with same-gender couples. If they feel they cannot work with—or learn to work with—a same-gender couple with appreciation and awareness, then they must refer the couple to another clergyperson or trained layperson.

The materials below will help clergy and trained lay people adapt their skills to work with same-gender couples in a contextually competent manner.

1. Available Resources: Materials for Pastoral Preparation

In their Churchwide survey regarding pastoral and teaching materials, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music found that the following resources are among those commonly used to prepare same-gender couples for a blessing.

Prepare/Enrich (Life Innovations, Inc.)

Prepare/Enrich is a relationship inventory that assesses couples' strengths and growth areas on topics such as finances, communication, conflict resolution, and sexuality. This assessment tool is by far the one used most frequently among respondents to the Commission's survey.

"Facilitators" (the term that Prepare/Enrich employs) must be trained in its use; see website for cost of materials.

Positives

- newly revised (2008), customized version easily used with same-gender couples
- uses the language of "partner"
- most comprehensive tool to address personality, conflict resolution, family, health, and financial and spiritual issues
- assesses goals, strengths, and growth areas
- large, national norm base (more than five hundred thousand couples)

Negatives

Currently, research results are standardized only for different-gender couples, so there is no "norm" against which to compare a same-gender couple's data.

Premarriage Awareness Inventory (Logos Productions)

This resource is preferred by persons not trained in Prepare/Enrich.

Positives

- three customized formats, including inventories for those living together or previously married
- thorough personality assessment
- coverage of major areas, such as faith, finances, family of origin, children, power issues, life goals

Negatives

This is also standardized for different-gender couples only, though the author indicates that he will be implementing a same-gender version (no target date given).

2. Particular Issues Affecting Same-Gender Couples

Issues or differences that are particular to same-gender couples are not necessarily challenges in blessing preparation. They are more often gifts, especially if the clergyperson or layperson preparing a couple understands variation as part of God's plan for the world and a sign of God's blessing. Contextual competence is important here, especially in a preparer's awareness of places where skills for preparing different-gender couples do not transfer to same-gender couples. In addition, the person working with the couple needs to examine his/her own understanding of same-gender blessing, as well as the assumptions of the couple's faith and civil communities, including diocesan authority and various state laws.

Same-gender couples come to ask for a blessing with a variety of life backgrounds; thus provision for some variations and differences appear, for example, in the prayer choices in the liturgy. Other variations that clergy or lay preparers will meet in their work with same-gender couples follow below.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ This material is adapted from "Pastoral Resources for Province One Episcopal Clergy Ministering to Same-Gender Couples," which covered these topics well.

Legal Civil Unions / Same-Gender Marriages and Diocesan Policies

Currently the laws regarding state-recognized same-gender civil unions or marriages are very much in flux throughout the United States and other countries where The Episcopal Church is located. As a result, tracking these laws can be confusing. Some states recognize civil unions while others recognize marriages. A marriage or civil union in one state may not be recognized in another. Some states may have residency requirements for civil unions or marriages, or for the dissolution of those unions. Likewise, diocesan bishops have differing guidelines as to how clergy should respond pastorally to couples seeking a blessing for their union.

Therefore, clergy and couples seeking blessing must be familiar with the laws of their state and with the policies or guidelines of their diocese. Because some dioceses require professional counseling for a couple if one member of the couple (or both) has been divorced more than once or has had more than one previous long-term relationship, clergy should check with the diocesan office for guidance on what is expected in such situations.

Clergy who feel they cannot confer formal blessings upon same-gender couples may wish to provide a pastoral response to those couples. Such a pastoral response might involve:

- Affirming and supporting their desire for God's blessing upon their relationship
- Attending their union ceremony conducted by a civil authority
- Referring the couple to another Episcopal clergyperson or minister of other denomination who would be willing to conduct a formal blessing (those who choose to refer couples to other clergy might think about ways to continue and reaffirm a pastoral relationship with the couple after the blessing)
- Acknowledging the relationship within the congregation and reaffirming the congregation's ties to, acceptance of, and love for the couple, remembering that the blessing is transformative not only for the couple but also for the congregation.

A final issue: very few denominations authorize their clergy to conduct same-gender blessings or marriages, so an Episcopal clergyperson may be approached by a couple seeking a blessing of their union simply because it is not an option for them within their own denomination. Episcopal clergy may expect that some of these couples from other denominations feel tender and vulnerable in their relationship to the wider Church and so may need particular nurture and support.

Issues Arising from Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity

"Late bloomers" who "come out" later in life: Some gay and lesbian people recognize their orientation from a very young age. Others may have a growing realization that does not become fully clear until much later in life; some may have understood their sexual orientation for some time but are only recently "coming out" publicly. A "late bloomer" may need some time to begin to live into his/her sexual orientation or explore with a counselor this core change in self-perception before entering into a lifelong commitment.

Gay/lesbian/bisexual: Despite studies of sexuality since the 1940s, many people commonly perceive that a person is either homosexual or heterosexual—with no category in between. However, sexual orientation is a spectrum with many gradations, and a person's primary orientation may vary at different times in life.

One or both members of the couple may have been in previous heterosexual relationships. While some individuals may have done so in an attempt to conform to familial, societal, and/or religious expectations, others may have done so as bisexuals for whom a different-gender relationship was satisfactory.

A bisexual person who seeks the Church's blessing of a same-gender relationship is expected to commit to monogamous, lifelong fidelity. In preparing a couple with a bisexual member for a blessing of their relationship, a clergyperson or trained layperson should treat the bisexual member's previous relationships in the same manner as any other person's previous relationships would be considered.

Transgender: The term “transgender” includes a wide range of people who experience and/or express their gender differently from broader societal expectations. This includes expressing a gender that does not match the sex listed on one’s original birth certificate or physically changing one’s sex. This complex situation for both the individual and the couple needs to be explored during the process of preparing for a blessing. (This is not unique to same-gender couples because one member of a different-gender couple may be transgender.) Preparers are encouraged to seek out and study some of the excellent sources on this complex subject, and/or to consult with a professional counselor experienced in working with transgender people.

Internalized homophobia: One or both members of a same-gender couple may have been subjected to a continual societal onslaught of negative or stereotypical messages. These messages may have been internalized, with the result that a person may be severely uncomfortable with his/her sexual orientation. A clergy person or trained lay person who perceives that a person has significant negative feelings or stigma about his/her orientation may appropriately refer the person for counseling with a therapist trained to handle this issue.

Long-Term Relationships

Preparers may be working with people who have been together for many years or have previously had long-term, monogamous relationships. This means the preparers must be open to learning and benefiting from the wisdom generated by a couple’s long years together.

Higher Level of Hurt

One or both members of a same-gender couple may have been wounded by exclusion or marginalization, that is, experiences and feelings of being “other” or “less than.” Certainly, lesbian and gay people are at greater risk in their teen years of being victims of abuse or exploitation. Clergy and lay people preparing couples for blessings need to be sensitive to these issues.

All too often, one or both members of the couple may have a history of being excluded from benefits that heterosexuals receive from the state and especially from the Church. For the couple, a clergy person or lay person providing blessing preparation represents the Church, so a preparer will need to build a trusting relationship with the couple in order to support them in dealing with the anger, hurt, or confusion that erupts from rejection.

In or Out?

Although a couple is seeking a public union, one or even both members of the couple may need to remain “closeted” in some aspects of their individual lives. For instance, one person may be employed in a workplace or profession where being “out” could jeopardize the ability to function there at top form or even to continue to work there. Unfortunately, a prime example is the Church. For gay and lesbian clergy in many denominations, “coming out,” especially when in a relationship, can result in being stripped of the ability to function as ordained clergy or to hold any position of leadership in the Church. In secular places of employment, where lesbian or gay people might be protected by law, their orientation or relationship could affect their ability to be hired or result in a tense and unfriendly work environment. Being “out” could have a negative impact on seeking or maintaining a position in public office. Lesbians and gays serving in the military no longer need to remain closeted, but many who were in the military previous to this change might need to talk about their pasts as closeted members of the armed services.

Gay and lesbian couples take risks, even to their lives, when they display affection in public; when they cannot hold hands, they hold secrets. Because of this, there can be tension in a relationship when one person is fully “out” and comfortable with some public, visible displays of affection while the other is not. In some work situations, one person in the relationship may need to be careful when calling a partner at the workplace or taking messages at home.

Couples need to discuss when, where, and with whom it is okay to be open about their relationship in general. Specifically, as part of their preparation, they need to discuss each other’s comfort levels and needs regarding making their relationship known in a public ceremony.

Relational History and Resolution of Previous Relationships

All couples have to deal with what went before; however, since legal recognition for same-gender relationships has only recently been available, it is less likely that couples have recorded formal, written, legal dissolutions of these relationships. Couples will be freer to proceed into a new relationship when they have processed what one or the other has learned from earlier relationships and when they have resolved matters of finance, property, child custody, and responsibility to former spouses or partners.

Families of Origin

Most clergy and trained lay people inquire about each individual's family of origin when preparing different-gender couples for marriage. The answers can give the couple insights regarding a number of issues, including their understanding of what a healthy or unhealthy relationship looks like and their attitudes toward finances and parenting practices; the responses may also enable couples to identify unresolved issues that could affect the relationship.

One area which may be unique to same-gender couples is their families' responses to their orientation, their public lives as lesbian or gay people, and their life together as a couple. Couples will benefit from exploring questions such as: Have the individuals "come out" to their own families? If so, what was the response? Has either member of a couple told his/her family about the intended blessing liturgy? Is the family supportive, hostile, or grieving, or simply absent? How will each family respond to the individual's partner: will the family define a partner as a spouse and therefore part of the family, or will they treat one's partner as a friend or roommate? In other words, has the couple discussed what they anticipate their relationship with the in-laws will be as they enter into a lifelong, committed relationship? Likewise, is the couple able to engage a network of support, individually and as a couple, and do they perceive how it will become a part of their new life together?

Legal Matters

For different-gender couples, marriage automatically comes with legal protections and obligations (above and beyond the legality of the union itself). In states where no civil union or same-gender marriage is allowed, and even in states which make legal provision for same-gender couples, it is critical that same-gender couples pursue private legal protections that substitute for some of the legal protections flowing from civil marriage (though private measures cannot cover all of the legal attributes of civil marriage). The couple should consider arranging for medical and financial durable powers-of-attorney, wills, and living wills, and may need to seek professional advice regarding financial and property matters. In addition, couples should consider soliciting legal advice on their rights and risks, especially regarding issues of tax, Social Security, or other state and federal legal matters (for example, Social Security benefits do not pass to the survivor of a same-gender couple).

Children

As with any different-gender, childless couple preparing for marriage, same-gender couples should also discuss with each other whether one or the other wants children. This discussion might include topics such as when to have children, how to reproduce, the impact of children on finances and employment, and matters of parenting, such as childcare and discipline. Couples entering the relationship with children should discuss how to help the children adjust and integrate into the new family constellation. Same-gender couples, especially those blessed with children from a previous heterosexual relationship, also need to support their children through their various stages of development, particularly as the children relate to their peers, who may have no understanding of, or possibly even a hostile reaction to, a friend with same-gender parents.

Same-gender couples should be aware of the legal ambiguity, in both federal and state law, pertaining to custodial cases and may want to seek counsel to protect themselves and their children. This applies whether or not the couple resides in a state that provides civil unions or marriage for same-gender couples.

3. Presenters

Presenters are people chosen by the couple to support and present them to the presider and the assembly during the blessing liturgy. The proposed liturgy for same-gender couples provides for the option of presenters, just as some congregations offer to different-gender couples. This option gives a voice to important people in the life of the couple during the liturgy and enriches the experience for all present. Presenters can also serve an important role in supporting the couple before and after the blessing liturgy. The selection of a couple mature in their relationship can be particularly helpful to a couple starting life together. The couple, together with the clergy or lay preparer, should talk as soon as possible about selecting presenters, so that the prayerful work of the presenters can begin early on.

Two short handouts (one for the couple and one for presenters) detail the role of presenters and are intended for use at the conclusion of the initial pre-blessing preparation session.

4. Outline of Pre-Blessing Preparation for Same-Gender Couples

Below is a guideline for a five-session, pre-blessing preparation that may be used along with the two assessments described above. In their Churchwide survey regarding pastoral and teaching materials, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music found that a large number of trained lay people and clergy want a very specific template; however, those with experience preparing couples may choose to adapt, combine, or reorder this outline. Ideally, sessions last 60 to 90 minutes each, and both partners should be present for all sessions (although the preparer may decide to meet with one of the individuals to address specific issues).

Goal

Pre-blessing preparation sets as its goal the strengthening of a lifelong, monogamous partnership rooted in Christ. General Convention Resolution 2000-D039 addresses the hope—the Church’s and the couple’s—for an enduring relationship:

Resolved, That we expect such relationships will be 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; and be it further

Resolved, That we denounce promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members; and be it further

Resolved, That this Church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values, and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement, and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them.

Expectations

Realities

- Clergy and lay people are trained in many different ways to conduct premarital preparation.
- Clergy and trained lay people apply a wide variety of methods for pre-blessing/marriage preparation.

Assumptions

- The priest or bishop is prepared to preside at the blessing.
- The clergyperson or trained layperson is experienced in preparing couples before marriages and / or blessings.
- The clergyperson or trained layperson is willing to refer the couple to a professional therapist should circumstances warrant.

Truth

- Each couple is unique, requiring adaptations as appropriate.

Preparing Same-Gender Couples in Long-term Relationships

When preparing people who have been together for many years, the session structure may need to be changed, and fewer sessions may be needed. One suggestion is to adapt the first session to get to know the couple, introduce the liturgy, and so on. The second session could employ the following questions or discussion topics, which respect the length of the couple's relationship and invite them to discuss their understanding of the Church.

- What does it mean to you to have your relationship blessed by the Church after all these years?
- How will having the Church's blessing and making a commitment in public, even if you have done so privately or in a non-Church setting, affect you or your relationship?
- What can your relationship teach the Church?

Finally, the third session could be adapted from the current fifth session: wrapping up, clarifying the liturgy, and fielding any other questions that may have arisen.

Session One: Getting To Know You and an Overview

This session focuses on getting to know one another. It also starts to address the details of the rite, offering the couple and the clergy person an opportunity to study the rite together, looking at its meaning and choices and affirming that the blessing, grounded in God, is given through the Church. Some clergy, however, may prefer to do a very general overview of the rite in this session, then study it more intensely later in the process.

Addressing the practical issues of the blessing at the outset helps to build trust and allows the couple to open themselves to the substance of the next four sessions. By providing even a general overview of the rite, the preparer can address questions and alleviate anxieties about the actual day.

Session One includes a great deal of material, some of which may be moved to another session. Handouts for this session include:

- The liturgy "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant"
- Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Gender Couples
- Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant
- About Presenters—For the Couple
- Information for Presenters

Outline of Session One

- Pray together.
- Get to know one another (varies as to how well the preparer knows the couple).
- Explore the couples' religious backgrounds, their experiences with the Church(es), and their reasons for being in this congregation.
- Reflect on the theological significance of the couple's relationship. The handout Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Gender Couples may be useful in this discussion. (This reflection might be moved to a later session.)
- Review and ask the couple to sign the Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant.
- Walk through the blessing rite, raising theological issues and naming liturgical choices:
 - Discuss the eucharist as normative in the service. However, including a celebration of the eucharist may not be appropriate if only one member of the couple is Christian.
 - Emphasize the difference between a civil service and an ecclesial blessing.
 - Answer general questions regarding details of the service and the Church's practice.
 - Introduce the possibility of presenters.

At the end of the session, provide written handouts and suggest "homework" topics for the couple to think about for Sessions Two and Three:

- Families of origin and growing up in them
 - What worked and didn't work so well in their families of origin (this topic may also influence work in Session Four)

- Family Church/religious history as well as each individual's history—positive and negative—with the Church/religion
- Marriages of family members, particularly parents
 - Parents' ways of dealing with conflict
 - Parents' styles of child-rearing
 - Family tolerance of children's sexual orientation.

Session Two: Learning from the Past, Part 1

This session provides a time for one member of the couple to speak and for the other to listen. Session Two opens with prayer, then looks back to focus upon the relationship of one partner with his/her family of origin, including exploring the marriage(s) of his/her parents and siblings and, if possible, grandparents and close friends. This discussion includes what the individual would or would not replicate from the past in his/her own ongoing and future relationships, particularly the relationship that is to be blessed. In addition, the individual can look at levels of acceptance of his/her relationship by his/her family and at other issues from family of origin and childhood.

The guiding assumption underlying this analysis is that certain issues are replicated from generation to generation, and that, once the issues are identified, individuals can choose to continue those patterns or deliberately alter them. This session works most effectively if the conversation flows naturally, rather than following a rigid interview, and if it includes the following important areas:

- Family: number and birth order of siblings
- Money: its role and influence in the family
- Sex: attitudes in family of origin about monogamy, fidelity, and the role of sex in relationship
- Alcohol and drugs: their places within the family as children grew
- In-laws: relationship with in-laws and greater family
- Children:
 - agreement or disagreement between parents about child-rearing
 - the individual's feelings about being a child in his/her family
- Conflict: parents' methods of arguing and disagreeing.

As the conversation concludes, the preparer invites the individual to identify what he/she would or would not replicate in his/her own adult relationship with the life partner. Following that, the silent partner is given the floor to comment on what he/she has heard and learned, especially any surprises.

Session Three: Learning from the Past, Part 2

This session continues the look back by extending the chance for the other member of the couple to speak about his/her family of origin. Both members of the couple need the opportunity to explore the topics and to hear each other's stories so that each can learn and appreciate more deeply what the other brings to their relationship.

Session Three, which also begins with prayer, duplicates with the second person the process with the first from Session Two. If time permits at the end, the couple might discuss the impact of family history on their own relationship.

Session Four: Looking to the Future

This session, an opportunity to look at the relationship today and into the future, invites the couple to name areas in the relationship that appear strong and supportive while also opening a space to identify and address areas that may be problematic. Thoughts, questions, and new information from previous sessions may help determine where the couple is today and where their relationship and household may need attention in the future.

After opening with prayer, this session should include discussion of:

- The couple's relationship in general: in-depth exploration of where they have been and where they are now
- Role of sex and intimacy in the relationship (for example, potential changes of sexual behavior as a result of committing to a monogamous relationship)

- Role of alcohol and drugs in the relationship
- Money (for example, household finances and financial planning)
- Legal protections (for example, medical and financial durable powers-of-attorney, wills, and living wills, insurance)
- Household roles (for example, who takes out the trash, who keeps the social calendar?)
- Communication:
 - How the couple talks things through
 - What happens when they disagree
- Concerns for the future
- Decision-making as a couple
- Dealing with families as individuals (one's own as well as one's partner's) and as a couple
- Support networks, now and in the future.

Session Four concludes with a discussion of the need for boundaries between generations so that the couples' life as a unit may be seen as distinct from older and younger generations.

Session Five: Liturgical Decisions and Wrap-up

Session Five, focused on the blessing service itself, is an opportunity to make choices for the liturgy, based on the Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship handout (and discussed) at the first session. The depth of this discussion will be determined by what was or was not addressed in Session One. In addition, as the final session, Session Five serves as a time to consider questions that may have arisen from previous sessions.

Outline of Session Five

- Pray together.
- Address questions and concerns regarding previous sessions and other issues that have arisen.
- Review theological reflections in light of previous sessions and what is to come. The preparer can help the couple connect the spiritual practices of their life as a couple and the "staging" of the service. For example, will they process into the service together or separately, or will they be already in the worship space as the liturgy begins? Will they sit together during the Ministry of the Word or across the aisle from one another?
- Discuss details of the service itself:
 - Scripture (which passages speak particularly to the couple's life together?) and whether non-biblical readings may be included
 - Will the liturgy take place at the congregation's principal weekly celebration? Is celebration of the eucharist to be omitted for pastoral cause?
 - Other liturgical choices, especially:
 - Which collect will be used?
 - Which of the two vows will be used?
 - Will rings be exchanged, or, if rings have already been worn, are they to be blessed?
 - What music, if any, will be included? (The couple should consult with the congregation's musician.)
- Discuss presenters and their roles in supporting the couple in the service and in their ongoing life.

In closing, the preparer can assure the couple that they have done hard and important work together, work that is a gift both to the preparer and to the couple. The preparer can express his/her eager anticipation of the couple's blessing and of meeting their close and extended families, seeing them with their friends, and celebrating their relationship in the sight of God.

Handouts

1. Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Gender Couples
2. Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant
3. About Presenters—For the Couple
4. Information for Presenters
5. Model Congregational Guidelines

The Declaration of Intention requires the replacement of *N.N.* and *N. N.* in the first sentence with the couple's names. Handouts 3 through 5 are samples that may be adapted for the use of a specific congregation. In these, "*N. Episcopal Church*" should be replaced with the congregation's name, and a similar change made for "*Episcopal Diocese of X.*"

Handout 1 - Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Gender Couples

Christian Life and Covenants

All Christians are called to bear witness to the good news of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered for such witness by our covenantal relationship with God.

Baptism initiates us into that covenant, making us Christ's own forever and members of Christ's Body, the Church. The eucharist sustains us in that covenantal life and strengthens us to be Christ's witnesses in the world.

Our covenantal life with God is expressed in relationships of commitment and faithfulness, including those of same-gender couples. It is the Church's joy to celebrate these relationships as signs of God's love, to pray for God's grace to support couples in their life together, and to join with these couples in our shared witness to the gospel in the world.

Themes for Theological Reflection and Spiritual Practice

A sacramental framework for covenantal relationships offers a way to reflect on the grace of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of faithful, committed couples. Several theological themes can assist couples as they consider their covenantal vows as a form of spiritual practice.

Vocation

God calls people into various kinds of relationship, whether as single people, in monastic communities, or as intimate couples. These vocational callings can empower our witness to the gospel. The decision to enter into a covenantal union is a vocation marked by these characteristics: "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."

Households

Covenantal relationships are often lived in households in which we practice daily the giving of ourselves for the good of another. While households take many different forms, they create a space of mutual trust and accountability. The joy, intimacy, and shared vulnerability of households can thus help us learn the spiritual disciplines of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation in lives of committed monogamy and fidelity.

Fruitfulness

The divine grace that sustains a covenantal relationship bears fruit in countless ways, not only for the couple but for the wider community as well. Covenanted couples manifest this grace in their shared gifts for ministry and in lives of service, generosity, and hospitality.

Mutual Blessing

A blessed relationship is set apart for a divine purpose: to bear witness to the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying love of God in the world. As the Spirit empowers the couple for this witness, the Church is likewise blessed and strengthened for its mission and ministry.

In all of these ways and more, the blessing of a same-gender relationship invites the couple and the whole Church to renew our commitment to the Baptismal Covenant. That commitment is expressed by *faith* in the good news of Jesus Christ, in the *hope* for union with God that Christ promised, and with the *love* that knits us together as the Body of Christ. As the apostle Paul says, we live our life together as God's people with faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Handout 2 - Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant

NOTE: This template is presented for use with same-gender couples since a similar declaration is required by the Canons of the Episcopal Church (Canon I.18.3[d-g]) for different-gender couples prior to their marriage.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We, *N.N.* and *N.N.*, desiring to receive the blessing of a Lifelong Covenant, do solemnly declare that we hold this covenant to be our lifelong commitment as provided by The Episcopal Church gathered in General Convention.

We believe that our covenant is intended by God for our mutual joy, for the encouragement and support given one another in daily life and changing circumstances, for bringing God's grace to our community, for the deepening of faith as we experience God's love in our love for one another, and (if it may be) for the physical and spiritual nurture of children. This covenant shall be nurtured and characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which shall enable us to see in each other the image of God.

And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this covenant and to seek God's help hereto.

Signature

Signature

Date

Date

Handout 3 - About Presenters—For the Couple

At N. Episcopal Church, we consider the “Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” to be a celebration supported by the congregation, much as candidates for baptism are supported by all the members of the Church. Just as those who are baptized are initiated into the full life of the Church, those who receive the Church’s blessing upon their relationship are embraced in a new way in the faith community.

The Blessing Liturgy

The presentation takes place immediately after the sermon, as follows:

The couple comes before the assembly. If there is to be a presentation, the presenters stand with the couple, and the Presider says to them

Presider Who presents N. and N., who seek the blessing of God and the Church on their love and life together?

Presenters We do.

Presider Do you promise
to love, respect, and pray for N. and N.,
and to do all in your power
to stand with them in the life they will share?

Presenters We do.

Choosing Presenters

There are a variety of possibilities for choosing presenters who will stand with you and present you at the liturgy. It can be helpful to choose at least one member of this faith community to walk with you through this process. If you are new to the congregation, the priest (or other person designated) can help you discern whom you might consider. The selection of a couple mature in their relationship can be particularly helpful if you are just beginning your life together. Often, couples will choose their own parents, children, or other supportive family members to be their presenters.

Presenters can pray for you during the period of preparation before your blessing, keep you connected to the congregation, and continue to support you in your ongoing covenanted life together.

Finally, in choosing, remember that these people will stand with you during the liturgy and present you at this rite. Also remember that, immediately after you are presented, the entire congregation will vow to support you as you, in turn, become a blessing and bear grace to the entire congregation.

Because presenters serve an important role before and after the blessing, you and your clergy person should talk early about selecting presenters, so that your prayerful partnership may begin as soon as possible.

Handout 4 - Information for Presenters

At N. Episcopal Church, we consider the “Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” to be a celebration supported by the congregation, much as candidates for baptism are supported by all the members of the Church. Just as those who are baptized are initiated into the full life of the Church, those who receive the Church’s blessing upon their relationship are embraced in a new way in the faith community.

At the blessing service, you present the couple to the presider and to the assembly, as follows:

The couple comes before the assembly. If there is to be a presentation, the presenters stand with the couple, and the Presider says to them

Presider Who presents N. and N., who seek the blessing of God and the Church on their love and life together?

Presenters We do.

Presider Do you promise
to love, respect, and pray for N. and N.,
and to do all in your power
to stand with them in the life they will share?

Presenters We do.

As a presenter, your role begins even before the blessing. We encourage you to pray for the couple both privately and in the Prayers of the People at Sunday services during their period of preparation. You can continue to support their ongoing life by acknowledging the anniversary of their blessing and offering your presence whenever their household experiences times of difficulty or celebrates occasions of joy. If you are a member of the congregation, you also have a role in keeping them connected to others in the congregation.

As a presenter, you promise to support the couple as they become a blessing and bear grace to their families and friends, the Church, and the world. In this role, then, you are a witness to the blessing given and received in the liturgy and carried forth by the couple into the world.

Handout 5 - Model Congregational Guidelines

NOTE: Most congregations adopt some form of “marriage policy” expressing norms and guidelines for different-gender couples preparing for marriage. All congregations may engage in a helpful and fruitful exercise to develop guidelines that reflect the Christian community in which they worship; the guidelines that are developed should apply to both different-gender couples and same-gender couples. Obviously, such a policy is optional at the discretion of the clergy in consultation with the vestry or bishop’s committee. As always with liturgical matters, final decisions are the responsibility of the clergy. Following is a model of a guideline that applies for all couples preparing for marriage or a blessing. It may be modified to meet specific situations and needs.

Information for All Couples Seeking the Church’s Blessing at N. Episcopal Church

A. Introduction

The Christian community at N. Episcopal Church understands that relationships are complex and that making a lifelong commitment to a relationship through a marriage or blessing is a significant, exciting, and wonder-filled event in people’s lives. We also believe that a Christian community that agrees to bless such a relationship needs to be intentional about supporting the couple as they prepare for the blessing and as they live out their lives.

We understand that committed, lifelong relationships, whether for same-gender or different-gender couples, are to be outward and visible signs of an inward, spiritual, and God-given love. In this context, N. Episcopal Church seeks to support all couples in their commitment to one another and to help make the love of God more visible for the whole community.

B. Guidelines

The following guidelines have been adopted by the lay and ordained leaders of N. Episcopal Church:

1. As required for different-gender couples seeking marriage according to the *Book of Common Prayer*, at least one member of a same-gender couple must be baptized.
2. It is desirable that at least one member of the couple be an active member of this, or some other, Christian community. We hope this membership might include giving serious, prayerful consideration to supporting the congregation through time, talent, and/or treasure.
3. Approximately six months’ notice should be given to allow for planning and pastoral preparation.
4. If the couple has no connection with N. Episcopal Church but wishes to have the blessing at N. Episcopal Church or to use the services of N. Episcopal Church’s priest:
 - they should be able to show that at least one of the couple has active membership in another Episcopal or Christian congregation;
 - they need to complete marriage or blessing preparation with their own or other clergy person or a qualified lay preparer;
 - they might consider making a financial contribution to N. Episcopal Church in thanksgiving for their marriage or blessing and for the ongoing support of the Church, its ministry and mission. A creative formula to calculate this contribution might be to consider a tithe (10 percent) of the budget for the entire celebration. (Clergy have discretion here, as resources vary greatly from couple to couple. Also, if a couple is returning to Church for the first time, an unconditional welcome may be the best pastoral response.)

In all cases, it is important that all concerned comply with the laws of the state, the Canons of the Episcopal Church, and the canons and policies of the Episcopal Diocese of X as well as the directives of the diocesan bishop, including compliance with diocesan policies for cases in which the relationship is not the first marriage or committed relationship for one or both people.

**The Witnessing and Blessing
of a Lifelong Covenant**
*Liturgical Resources for Blessing
Same-Gender Relationships*

Concerning the Service

This rite is appropriately celebrated in the context of the Holy Eucharist and may take place at the principal Sunday Liturgy. This rite then replaces the Ministry of the Word. A bishop or priest normally presides. Parallel texts from *Enriching Our Worship 1* are included as options for elements of this rite.

Two or more presenters, at least one of whom is baptized, who may be friends, parents, family members, or drawn from the local assembly, may present the couple to the presider and the assembly.

To comply with the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the rite is celebrated, the priest shall consult the bishop, who may authorize modifications of the Pronouncement.

The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant

The Word of God

Gathering

The couple to be blessed joins the assembly. A hymn of praise, Psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.

The Presider says the following, the people standing

 Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
People And blessed be God's kingdom, now and for ever.
 Amen.

In place of the above may be said

Presider Blessed be the one, holy, and living God.
People Glory to God for ever and ever.

From Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost

Presider Alleluia. Christ is risen.
People The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

In place of the above may be said

Presider Alleluia. Christ is risen.
People Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Then may be said

Presider Beloved, let us love one another,
People For love is of God.
Presider Whoever does not love does not know God,
People For God is love.
Presider Since God so loves us,
People Let us love one another.

The Presider may address the assembly in these words

Dear friends in Christ,
we have gathered together today
to witness *N. N.* and *N. N.* publically committing themselves to one another
and, in the name of the Church, to bless their union:
a relationship of mutual fidelity and steadfast love,
forsaking all others,
holding one another in tenderness and respect,
in strength and bravery,
come what may,
as long as they live.

Ahead of them is a life of joy and sorrow,
of blessing and struggle,
of gain and loss,
demanding of them the kind of self-giving love
made manifest to us in the life of Jesus.
Christ stands among us today,
calling these two people always to witness in their life together

to the generosity of his life for the sake of the world,
a life in which Christ calls us all to share.

Let us pray, then,
that they may be strengthened for the promises they make this day,
and that we will have the generosity
to support them in what they undertake
and the wisdom to see God at work in their life together.

The Collect of the Day

Presider The Lord be with you.
or God be with you.
People And also with you.
Presider Let us pray.

The Presider says one of the following Collects

Gracious and everliving God:
assist by your grace *N.* and *N.*,
whose lifelong commitment of love and fidelity we witness this day.
Grant them your blessing, that with firm resolve
they may honor and keep the covenant 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.*

or this

Almighty and everliving God:
look tenderly upon *N.* and *N.*,
who stand before you in the company of your Church.
Lift them up in joy in their life together.
Grant them so to love selflessly and live humbly,
that they may be to one another and to the world
a witness and a sign of your never-failing care;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, to the ages of ages. *Amen.*

or this

O God, faithful and true,
whose steadfast love endures for ever:
we give you thanks for sustaining *N.* and *N.* in the life they share
and for bringing them to this day.
Nurture them and fill them with joy in their life together,
continuing the good work you have begun in them;
and grant us, with them, a dwelling place eternal in the heavens
where all your people will share the joy of perfect love,
and where you, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, live and reign,
one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

or this

For those who bring children

Holy Trinity, one God,
three Persons perfect in unity and equal in majesty:
Draw together with bonds of love and affection
N. and *N.*, who with *their families*
seek to live in harmony and forbearance all their days,
that their joining together will be to us
a reflection of that perfect communion

which is your very essence and life,
O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
who live and reign in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

The Lessons

The people sit. Then one or more of the following passages of Scripture is read. If the Holy Communion is to be celebrated, a passage from the Gospels always concludes the Readings. When the blessing is celebrated in the context of the Sunday Eucharist, the Readings of the Sunday are used, except with the permission of the Bishop.

Ruth 1:16-17
1 Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a;
 or 1 Samuel 18:1-4
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
Song of Solomon 2:10-13, 8:6-7
Micah 4:1-4

Romans 12:9-18
1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13
2 Corinthians 5:17-20
Galatians 5:14, 22-26
Ephesians 3:14-21
Colossians 3:12-17
1 John 3:18-24
1 John 4:7-16, 21

When a biblical passage other than one from the Gospels is to be read, the Reader announces it with these words

Reader A Reading from _____.

After the Reading, the Reader may say

 The Word of the Lord.

or

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

or

 Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.

People Thanks be to God.

Between the Readings, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said. Appropriate Psalms are

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

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

 The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to
 _____.

or

The Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ according to

People Glory to you, Lord Christ.

After the Gospel, the Reader says

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

Appropriate passages from the Gospels are

Matthew 5:1-16

Mark 12:28-34

Luke 6:32-38

John 15:9-17

John 17:1-2, 18-26

The Sermon

The Witnessing of the Vows and the Blessing of the Covenant

The couple comes before the assembly. If there is to be a presentation, the presenters stand with the couple, and the Presider says to them

Presider Who presents N. and N., who seek the blessing of God and the Church on their love and life together?

Presenters We do.

Presider Do you promise
to love, respect, and pray for N. and N.,
and to do all in your power
to stand with them in the life they will share?

Presenters We do.

The Presider then addresses the couple, saying

Presider N. and N., you have come before God and the Church to make public your commitment to one another and to ask God's blessing.

The Presider addresses one member of the couple

Presider N., do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to N.?

Answer I do.

Presider Will you live together in faithfulness and holiness of life as long as you both shall live?

Answer I will.

The Presider addresses the other member of the couple

Presider N., do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to N.?

Answer I do.

Presider Will you live together in faithfulness and holiness of life as long as you both shall live?

Answer I will.

The assembly stands, the couple faces the people, and the Presider addresses them, saying

Presider Will all of you here gathered uphold and honor this couple and respect the covenant they make?

People We will.

Presider Will you pray for them in times of trouble and celebrate with them in times of joy?

People We will.

The Prayers

Presider Then let us pray for N. and N. in their life together and for the concerns of this community.

A Deacon or another leader bids prayers for the couple.

Prayers for the Church and for the world, for the concerns of the local community, for those who suffer or face trouble, and for the departed are also appropriate. If the rite takes place in the principal Sunday worship of the congregation, the rubric concerning the Prayers of the People on page 359 of the Book of Common Prayer is followed.

Adaptations or insertions may be made to the form that follows.

A bar in the margin indicates a bidding that may be omitted.

Leader For N. and N., seeking your blessing and the blessing of your holy people;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For a spirit of loving-kindness to shelter them all their days;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For friends to support them and communities to enfold them;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For peace in their home and love in their family;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For the outpouring of your love through their work and witness;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For the wisdom to care for the children you may entrust (*have entrusted*) to them;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For the growth of their children from strength to strength;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For the strength to keep our vows and commitments;

Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

After a time of silence, during which the assembly voices its petitions, the leader may add the following biddings

Leader For all who have been reborn and made new in the waters of
Baptism;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For those who lead and serve in communities of faith;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For those who seek justice, peace, and concord among nations;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For those who are sick and suffering, homeless and poor;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For victims of violence and those who inflict it;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader For communion with all who have died in the hope of rising
again [especially ____];
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

The Presider concludes the Prayers with the following or another appropriate Collect

Giver of every gift, source of all goodness,
hear the prayers we bring before you
for N. and N., who seek your blessing this day.
Give them a share in the saving work of Jesus,
who gave himself for us,
and bring about the fullness of life he promised,
who now lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*

If the Eucharist is to follow, the Lord's Prayer is omitted here.

Leader

As our Savior Christ
has taught us,
we now pray,

People and Leader

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

Leader

And now, as our Savior
Christ has taught us,
we are bold to say,

People and Leader

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Commitment

The people sit. The couple stands, facing the Presider.

Presider *N.* and *N.*, I invite you now, illumined by the Word of God
and strengthened by the prayer of this community,
to make your covenant before God and the Church.

Each member of the couple, in turn, takes the hand of the other and says

In the name of God,
I, N., give myself to you, *N.*
I will support and care for you by the grace of God:
enduring all things, bearing all things.
I will hold and cherish you in the love of Christ:
in times of plenty, in times of want.
I will honor and keep you with the Spirit's help:
forsaking all others,
as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.

or this

In the name of God,
I, N., give myself to you, *N.*
I will support and care for you:
enduring all things, bearing all things.
I will hold and cherish you:
in times of plenty, in times of want.
I will honor and keep you:
forsaking all others,
as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.

If rings are to be exchanged, they are brought before the Presider, who prays using the following words

Let us pray.

Bless, O God, these rings
as enduring signs of the covenant
N. and N. have made with each other,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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

N., receive this ring as a symbol of my abiding love.

*If the two have previously given and worn rings as a symbol of their commitment, the rings
may be blessed on the hands of the couple, the Presider saying*

Let us pray.

By these rings N. and N. have shown to one another and the world
their love and faithfulness.
Bless these rings, Holy God,
that they may now be signs of the covenant
N. and N. have made this day,
through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Pronouncement

The Presider says

Inasmuch as N. and N. have exchanged vows of love and fidelity
in the presence of God and the Church,
I now pronounce that they are bound to one another
in a holy covenant,
as long as they both shall live. *Amen.*

Blessing of the Couple

As the couple stands or kneels, the Presider invokes God's blessing upon them, saying

Let us pray.

Most gracious God,
we praise you for the tender mercy and unending care
revealed to us in Jesus the Christ
and for the great joy and comfort bestowed upon us
in the gift of human love.
We give you thanks for N. and N.,
and the covenant of faithfulness they have made.
Pour out the abundance of your Holy Spirit upon them.
Keep them in your steadfast love;
protect them from all danger;
fill them with your wisdom and peace;
lead them in holy service to each other and the world.

God the Father,
God the Son,
God the Holy Spirit,
bless, preserve, and keep you,
and mercifully grant you rich and boundless grace,
that you may please God in body and soul.
God make you a sign of the loving-kindness and steadfast fidelity
manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior,
and bring you at last to the delight of the heavenly banquet,
where he lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The Peace

The Presider bids the Peace.

Presider The peace of the Lord be always with you.
People And also with you.

In place of the above may be said

Presider The peace of Christ be always with you.
People And also with you.

The liturgy continues with the Holy Communion. When the Eucharist is not celebrated, the Presider blesses the people. The Deacon, or in the absence of a Deacon, the Priest, dismisses them.

At the Eucharist

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

The following proper preface may be used.

Because in the giving of two people to each other in faithful love
you reveal the joy and abundant life
you share with your Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The following postcommunion prayer may be used.

God our strength and joy,
we thank you for the communion of our life together,
for the example of holy love that you give us in *N.* and *N.*,
and for the Sacrament
of the Body and Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ.
Grant that it may renew our hope
and nourish us for the work you set before us,
to witness to the presence of Christ in the world,
through the power of your Spirit,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Discussion Guide to
I Will Bless You,
and You Will Be a Blessing

Contents

Introduction to the Discussion Guide

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Study Area Two:

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Study Area Three:

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Handouts for Discussions

A. Covenant for Discussion

Study Area One:

B. Understanding the History

C. An Introduction to General Convention

D. Relationships and Blessing: Reflection Questions

A Review of General Convention Legislation (appended to the full collection of resources)

Study Area Two:

E. Theological Reflection on Same-Gender Relationships: A Summary of "Faith, Hope, and Love"

Study Area Three:

F. Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials

Introduction to the Discussion Guide

This discussion guide invites the people of The Episcopal Church into a process of thoughtful consideration of the liturgical and theological resources for blessing same-gender relationships. Each of the five modules contains introductory teaching material and questions for group discussion; the first three also have handouts. The questions are shaped to equip individuals and groups to explore the materials in this collection in a reflective Christian manner.

These materials encourage participants to approach the discussion of resources for blessing same-gender relationships with respect for one another and for the various perspectives that individuals will bring to the conversation.

Because the same ideas will not inspire or challenge all groups, each area of study is wide-ranging and could span more than one session. Many congregations currently gather for Bible study and adult formation or education, and leaders can adapt these materials for such forums. Congregations may choose to engage in this process over an extended period of time or plan a one- to two-day retreat in order to enter more deeply into conversation and study. The amount of time suggested for particular discussions may be adjusted to meet the needs of a group. We strongly encourage that each session include time for Bible study related to the topic.

Encouraging time for participants to speak from their own experiences is essential when people engage in theological reflection on any topic. Significant factors in the conversation will include the cultural context of individuals and the makeup of the community. Each session's opening gives participants an opportunity to introduce themselves.

Ideally, the facilitator of these conversations will be someone who is respected by the community and who is respectful of, and familiar with, the group. Facilitators should read the entire resource *I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing* in preparation for leading discussion; they should also be familiar with local civil law and diocesan policies.

Establishing Group Norms for Conversations

Prayers and practices that make for good conversations

Parishioners enter the conversation about blessing same-gender relationships from many different starting points. Some congregations and individuals do not understand why any Episcopal church would bless same-gender relationships; others do not understand why the blessing of same-gender relationships continues to be controversial. Recognizing these differences, facilitators should begin these conversations with agreement for respectful conversation; a *Covenant for Discussion* is included among the handouts found at the end of this discussion guide. Beginning and ending each session with prayers of thanksgiving for the opportunity for dialogue can underscore the value of respectful discussion.

The idea that the Church is a safe place to disagree is attractive, but living it out is difficult. Doing so requires that we expand our boundaries to accept those we do not understand or with whom we do not agree on matters of great importance. We do this because, more than anything, Christians do agree on matters of the *greatest* importance—the love and salvation offered by Jesus Christ. While we may disagree over the definition of marriage and how we understand biblical texts about divorce and sexuality, we can agree on our shared participation in Christ's mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

The goal of dialogue is not to win the day for one's own point of view, but for all participants to grow in understanding of both themselves and others. If participants come to this conversation with open hearts and minds, it is possible to honor both the integrity and holiness of gay and lesbian couples and their families, and the deep traditions of the Church.

Recommended Background Materials

*To Set Our Hope on Christ*⁸⁰ was prepared as a response to the request by the Windsor Report that The Episcopal Church explain how “a person living in a same gender union may be considered eligible to lead the flock of Christ.” This document provides an overview as to how and why The Episcopal Church has moved toward the fuller inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church. The appendix comprises a historical summary of beliefs and policies concerning sexuality in The Episcopal Church.

The June 2009 “Report of the Task Force on Holiness in Relationships and the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships,” from the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego,⁸¹ presents different points of view in an even-handed manner. The report considers the interpretation of Holy Scripture; marriage and holiness in Scripture; biblical texts that may condemn same-gender relationships and those that may portray positive roles of gays and lesbians; Church history and tradition; practical, pastoral and sacramental theology; and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

80 *To Set Our Hope in Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report ¶135* is available on the website of the Episcopal Church: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/ToSetOurHope_eng.pdf.

81 *Report of the Task Force on Holiness in Relationships and the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships* is available on the website of the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego: <http://www.edsd.org/mediafiles/holiness-in-relationships-task-force-report.pdf>.

Study Area One

History: Reviewing the history of The Episcopal Church's decisions regarding same-gender relationships and reflecting on the current context

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handouts ready (included at the end of this Discussion Guide, unless otherwise noted):

- A. Covenant for Discussion
- B. Understanding the History
- C. An Introduction to General Convention
- A Review of General Convention Legislation (appended to the full collection of resources)
- D. Relationships and Blessing: Reflection Questions

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Go around the room to have each person introduce herself or himself and share what he/she is most looking forward to in these conversations.
- Establish group norms for engaging in respectful conversation. Facilitators may distribute and review the Covenant for Discussion provided in the handouts, or choose a set of norms from their own resources.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Distribute the worksheet Understanding the History and give participants about 10 minutes to complete it.

After everyone has had time to write something, ask everyone to share their answers to “A” (how long The Episcopal Church has been talking about same-gender relationships and its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members). Continue by inviting deputies to share whatever is comfortable from “B” for each decade. Listen to see whether there is a thread or theme that runs through the memories.

D. General Convention Legislation

Give a very brief description of what General Convention is, who attends, and what it does, using the handout An Introduction to General Convention.

Distribute A Review of General Convention Legislation, and discuss it in light of responses to the worksheet. Here—and throughout the balance of the sessions—clearly distinguish when you are expressing an idea or opinion based on your own experience and when you are communicating official Church stances.

E. The Blessings of Relationships

Ask the group to call to mind at least three committed relationships they are familiar with: for example, relationships of family members, friends at work or school, or couples in your congregation; or their own committed relationship. Remind them that they may know people in committed relationships who are not married for one reason or another.

Divide into groups of threes, and distribute the handout Relationships and Blessing; Reflection Questions. Instruct the group to reflect for 15 or 20 minutes on the questions in the handout, which

explore the nature of committed relationships. Afterward, have them reflect back to the larger group by asking these questions:

- What was especially illuminating or challenging in your conversations?
- Regarding the complexities of the relationships you discussed, were there any surprises?
- Based on your conversations, why do you think the Church blesses any committed relationships at all?

F. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Study Area Two

Theology and the Bible: Examining our understanding of God's blessing through the lens of theology and Scripture

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handouts ready (included at the end of this discussion guide):

- A. Covenant for Discussion (or other norm for discussion)
- E. Theological Reflection on Same-Gender Relationships: A Summary of “Faith, Hope, and Love”

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the Covenant for Discussion or other set of norms established in the first session.
- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that occurred to them regarding the history of The Episcopal Church, rites of blessing same-gender relationships, and their own experience of blessings revealed in committed relationships.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce the theological principles with these or similar words:

In The Episcopal Church, we develop our theology, or the way we think about God, through Scripture, tradition, and reason. Consider, for example, the concept of “hospitality.” Numerous examples in Scripture tell of God’s hospitality toward God’s people and of the people of God issuing or withholding God’s hospitality from others. Although some of the stories seem to show behavior that conflicts with the ways God might have us respond to outsiders today, these biblical stories still help guide us. Other theological principles, like eschatology (beliefs about final events in the history of the world) and the triune nature of God, take a little more exploration from Scripture to interpret in light of Christian experience and understanding over the millennia since biblical times. We believe that God continues to reveal God’s self to the world. We experience this revelation in many ways, including faithful, lifelong, committed relationships.

Distribute Theological Reflection on Same-Gender Relationships and ask participants to read and reflect on this summary of the essay “Faith, Hope, and Love.” Describing relationships as “covenantal,” this document identifies four themes for theological reflection: vocation, households, fruitfulness, and mutual blessing. Invite the group to discuss some or all of these principles, using the introductions and discussion questions that follow.

D. Covenant

Introduce the concept of “covenant” with these or similar words:

Covenants are made and held in relationships not only between the individual and God but within a community, which is also held accountable. The Baptismal Covenant is an example that will be familiar to Episcopalians, where commitments are made by (or for) the individual being baptized as well as by the sponsors and the gathered community.

Covenants take many forms in Scripture. They typically, but not always, contain a solemn agreement in which all parties pledge themselves to the others, outlining mutual obligations and responsibilities. Scripture tells about covenants concerning marriage, water rights, tribal relationships, protection, and faithfulness; the covenants include rituals involving animals, exchanges, and other gestures of the now-sealed relationship. The book of Genesis contains a series of covenants God made. For example, after making a covenant with Noah (Genesis 6:18) to protect his family from the impending flood, God makes a covenant with creation: “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11).

Relational commitment can lead a couple to enter into a lifelong covenant in which their love and faithfulness participate in and reflect God’s own gracious covenant with us in Christ.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

One description of the difference between a contract and a covenant reads: “A contract is an agreement made in suspicion. A covenant is an agreement made in trust.” What are some examples of contracts and covenants in your own life?

Where have you seen God’s graciousness evidenced in committed relationships of couples you have known?

E. Vocation

Introduce the theme of “vocation” with these or similar words:

Some people are called into long-term committed relationships as a vocation, defined here as a responsibility or way of life to which one is called by God. In Scripture, we find an example of this kind of relationship in Abraham and Sarah, who are vocationally linked to God and to one another. They are sent on a journey together that changes not just their names but the world (Genesis 11:27–25:11). Many other examples of committed relationships in the Bible—for example, Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1), Eli and Samuel (1 Samuel 18), Jesus and his disciples—might be considered vocational, that is, carrying a function called by God. These partnerships defined not only the individuals but also the work they had to do together as a function of God’s life in the world.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

Have you been in, witnessed, or read about relationships you could consider “vocational”? If so, what makes them so?

In the Bible we are told that Paul, when counseling early Christians about the complexities and persecutions Christians were facing at the time, suggested that remaining single is a way to serve God, a vocation to “promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:35). Not everyone is called into long-term committed relationships; being single may be a vocation for some. Have you experienced, or do you know other people who have experienced, singleness as a vocation?

F. Households

Introduce the theme of “households” with these or similar words:

Households take many different forms. Consider the story of the prodigal son, in which obligations of loyalty and love were made, broken, and reconciled. Families of origin come with implicit household covenants. When individuals join together to create new households, they have the opportunity to bind themselves to one another in new ways. In these newly created households, the covenanted relation-

ships within allow for holy love, care, risk-taking, and sacrifice on behalf of the other. People have reflected that, in such relationships, they begin to understand God's unconditional love of, and faithfulness to, us. They experience many of the gifts that such a household can bring, including mutual joy, companionship, faithfulness, compromise, charity, grace, and forgiveness.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

The Theological Reflection on Same-Gender Relationships handout states: "While households take many different forms, they create a space of mutual trust and accountability" where we can "learn the spiritual disciplines of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation." Have you known or experienced households that provide that "sacred space"? How does thinking about households as a theological concept resonate with your experience?

In the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the household celebrates when the father welcomes the younger son with compassion, despite the son's disregard for their family agreements. What similar responses have you seen in households you have known, and what do such responses reveal about the nature of households?

In the same story, the elder brother resents the prodigal. What do you think gets in the way of healing the break in mutual trust and accountability between these two members of the same household?

G. Mutual Blessing and Fruitfulness

Introduce the themes of "mutual blessing" and "fruitfulness" with these or similar words:

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan summed up the essence of the apostle Paul's message to the world in three words: grace, love, and fellowship: "These are the key words of what has become the second-best-known prayer in the Christian Church: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.'"⁸² Grace. Love. Fellowship. These blessings are abundant in Christian relationships and in Christian communities.

The apostle Paul tells us, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). Just as Abraham was blessed by God in order to be a blessing (Genesis 12:2), the commitment exhibited in covenantal relationships becomes a source of blessing for the whole Church. When divine grace sustains a covenantal relationship it bears fruit in countless ways, not only for the couple but for the wider community as well.

When we are present in any public naming of graces or gifts, be it baptism or graduation or the giving of an award, we are often reminded that the individual or group upon which the recognition is bestowed is expected to return that value back to society. At a liturgy of blessing, we are reminded of the value of the individuals entering into a covenant with one another—of their love, faith, loyalty, and devotion to each other and to God. As we bless their relationship we expect in return that this naming and strengthening of the couple will bless the congregation.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

In your experience, how have you seen covenantal relationships that are blessed in the Church become in turn a blessing for the Church?

In your experience, how have you seen covenantal relationships bear fruit?

⁸² Donald Coggan, *Meet Paul: An Encounter with the Apostle* (London: SPCK, 1998), 73-75.

How can the blessing of a same-gender relationship sustain and enable a couple to embody service, generosity, and hospitality beyond their household?

H. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Study Area Three

Liturgy: Discussing liturgy in general and the liturgical resources developed for the blessing of same-gender relationships

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handouts ready (included at the end of this discussion guide, unless otherwise noted):

- A. Covenant for Discussion (or other norm for discussion)
- F. Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials
- “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” (liturgical resources document)

Prior to the session, solicit volunteers to walk through the liturgy (ending with the greeting of the Peace) during the session. Ask them to be respectful of the process and to recognize that even when role-playing the words and actions in a liturgy can have an impact on the people saying and doing them.

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the Covenant for Discussion or other set of norms established in the first session.
- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that have occurred to them regarding the interaction of the Bible and theology with the blessing of same-gender relationships.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce a discussion of the meaning and purpose of liturgy with these or similar words:

Christians over the centuries have found ways to ritualize our story as a people of God, our place in God’s life today, and our hope for an eternity with Christ. Liturgy, as an event, retells salvation history in word and sacrament: by the proclamation of Scripture, through preaching and prayer, and in the liturgy of the table. Each time we celebrate liturgy, we become active participants in re-presenting this history—life with God, from creation and fall through covenant, redemption, and fulfillment—and in bringing it into the present. When we consecrate water during baptism, we go back to the waters of creation at the beginning of our story. We are buried with Christ in this water and brought forth into a new life in Christ, a new future. Scripture calls us to keep rituals when we are told to “make this day holy” or to “remember this place” or to “do this” from this day forward in order to keep our inherited faith as present as it ever was.

Liturgy can be understood as an exchange between heaven and earth. All that we have comes from God, and that is what we return. In our prayers, we as a community breathe in and out our petitions, thanksgivings, sorrows, hopes, and praises.

Celebrating important moments in the lives of individual Christians and in the community often happens in the context of liturgy. In the liturgies of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and ordination, we join together to enact and celebrate our commitment to a vocation with Christ and with one another.

D. Qualities of Anglican Liturgy

Distribute the handout *Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials*, and introduce the principles with these or similar words:

In Resolution 2009-C056, the General Convention directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” for the blessing of same-gender relationships. The Commission discovered a vast array of unofficial liturgies, some dating back to the 1970s, and, more recently, rites of blessing commended for use in dioceses in The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. These liturgies were created in response to the pastoral needs of same-gender couples in various local jurisdictions. The Commission found strong similarities in the rites; many used The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage from the *Book of Common Prayer* as a template.

This research led the Commission to develop liturgical principles to assess the resources it had collected and as the basis for creating a new liturgical resource to present to General Convention in 2012. Consistency with Anglican theological tradition and the liturgical style of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* was essential in developing these materials. Keeping proposed rites as an expression of the whole Church, not only the two people seeking a blessing, was also important. A full list of those qualities is in the handout.

These qualities can be gathered into two general categories: words and actions. In liturgy, words and actions together express and shape what we believe. In “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant,” this combination of words and actions expresses what we understand and hope about blessing, households, and the revelation of God’s love in the world through these committed relationships.

E. Exploring the Liturgy for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships

Distribute copies of “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” and invite participants to keep in mind the principles outlined in the handout for evaluating liturgical materials as they role-play the liturgy.

Before reading through the liturgy with the volunteers selected in advance of the session, explain that it is not the intention of this “couple” to receive this blessing. Acknowledge that there may be anxiety when role-playing the rite, and invite participants to engage the experience prayerfully. When finished, remind the “couple,” the “presider,” and the “assembly” that the role-play is not binding, and thank the volunteers for their help.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- What did you hear?
- What did you see?
- What did you feel?
- How does this liturgy hold to the liturgical principles set forth in the handout?
- What words, symbols, and actions in this liturgy stand out for you and draw you into reflection on your own experience of covenantal relationship?
- What do the words, symbols, and actions call forth, challenge, or offer to the couple who experience them in the context of a blessing of their relationship?
- In your experience, which elements seem to have the most meaning when a community gathers to receive God’s blessing?

F. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Study Area Four

Civil and Canon Law: Exploring legal, canonical, and spiritual issues that arise as the Church considers blessing same-gender couples

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handout ready:

- A. Covenant for Discussion (or other norm for discussion)

Set up two pages of newsprint, each with two columns:

Page One		Page Two	
Marriage		Blessing	
Secular Benefits/ Obligations	Sacred Benefits/ Obligations	Secular Benefits/ Obligations	Sacred Benefits/ Obligations

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the Covenant for Discussion or other set of norms established in the first session.
- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that have occurred to them regarding the liturgy for the blessing of same-gender relationships.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce the discussion of civil and canon law with these or similar words:

Resolution 2009-C056 directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to develop resources for blessing same-gender relationships. As the Commission went about its work, Episcopalians asked about the relationship between these blessings and marriage. Following the direction of General Convention, the Commission developed a resource for blessing relationships, not marriage, while also recognizing the complexity of civil and canon (that is, Church) law.

Some states allow same-gender couples to marry; others permit civil unions or provide other legal status for these couples. Other states forbid (or do not recognize) same-gender marriage or unions; some of these states also do not recognize any legal status for same-gender couples who have a civil marriage or civil union from another state where that status is legal.

The Book of Common Prayer (p. 422) and Canon I.18.1 require Episcopal clergy to conform to the laws of their state governing the creation of a civil marriage.

D. Exploring the Benefits and Obligations of Marriage and Blessing

Invite people to brainstorm about the secular benefits and obligations of marriage, and note their answers in that column of the newsprint page headed “Marriage.” Then ask about the sacred benefits and obligations of marriage and note their answers. Now, do the same on the page with the heading

“Blessing” (that is, blessing a lifelong, committed relationship)—secular benefits and obligations first, then sacred benefits and obligations. Step back and ask people what they notice about the four lists. Have a conversation.

The following are lists of responses people might give.

Marriage: Secular Benefits/Obligation

- Legal status given by the state: global for different-gender couple; local/state for same-gender couple
- Defined by some states as only between a man and a woman—supporting the traditional view of marriage
- Part of the institution of marriage and its social benefits
- Potential financial benefits—joint tax returns, automatic joint ownership, etc.—global for different-gender couple; local/state for same-gender couple
- Clarity about the relationship—fits a known model, people know what you are talking about if you say you are married; clarity about monogamy and faithfulness
- Legal responsibilities shared by the couple
- Social status
- Usually, acceptance of parents, family, and friends of the relationship

Marriage: Sacred Benefits/Obligations

- God’s blessing proclaimed by the Church
- Recognition of spiritual nature of relationship
- Public religious and spiritual commitment of love
- Call to constant reconciliation and assurance of forgiveness
- Spiritual preparation and counseling prior to ceremony
- “Church wedding” and social recognition and support of religious community
- Exchange and blessing of symbols of relationship—ring(s)
- Done as part of the Prayer Book and Episcopal Church norms—not true for same-gender couples

Blessing: Secular Benefits/Obligations

- Possible gained clarity about the relationship; commitment statements made to one another
- Possible social status
- Possible acceptance/recognition of parents, family, and friends

Blessing: Sacred Benefits/Obligations

- God’s blessing proclaimed by the Church
- Recognition of spiritual nature of relationship; clarity about monogamy and faithfulness
- Public religious and spiritual commitment of love
- Call to constant reconciliation and assurance of forgiveness
- Spiritual preparation and counseling prior to ceremony
- “Church wedding” and social recognition and support of religious community
- Exchange and blessing of symbols of relationship—ring(s)
- Falls within Episcopal Church norms, if permitted by bishop as pastoral response

Follow Up

Invite the group to draw conclusions from the lists and their discussion of them. They might discover that when the Church blesses same-gender couples such blessings seem to carry most but not all of the “sacred benefit” that one finds in marriage, and when the Church blesses same-gender couples such blessings seem to carry much less of the “secular benefit” that one finds in marriage.

E. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Study Area Five

Mission: Exploring the blessing of same-gender relationships as part of the Church's mission and God's reconciling work in the world

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handout ready:

- A. *Covenant for Discussion* (or other norm for discussion)

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the Covenant for Discussion or other set of norms established in the first session.
- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that have occurred to them regarding the comparison of marriage and blessings.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce this final session by reminding participants that we are a part of a larger story, using these or similar words:

Using the “three-legged stool” of Anglicanism, we have explored Scripture, tradition, and reason relating to the development of rites for blessing same-gender relationships in The Episcopal Church. We have explored God’s call to us to live in relationship to God and to one another. We may have disagreed, misunderstood, or challenged one another, but we have been reminded at each turn that our life together, centered in baptism and the eucharist, is central to being people of faith in this time and in this Church.

The essay “Faith, Hope, and Love” has this to say about the significance for mission of blessing same-gender relationships:

This missional character of covenantal blessing, reflected in both Scripture and the historical traditions of the Church, deserves renewed attention today. The 2000 General Convention contributed to this renewal when it passed resolution D039, which identified monogamy, fidelity, holy love, and other characteristics of lifelong, committed relationships. Significantly, that resolution was framed as a way to enable the Church to engage more effectively in its mission. Many in The Episcopal Church have witnessed these characteristics in the committed relationships of same-gender couples. That recognition can, and in many places already has, broadened the understanding of the Church’s mission of participating in God’s reconciling work in the world.

Our willingness to continue to receive a new thing while remaining in communion and in love with one other models a gift we have to offer the world.

We began our study by exploring The Episcopal Church’s recent history regarding same-gender couples seeking acceptance and blessing of their relationships in the Church, and by reflecting on our own experiences of lifelong, committed relationships. We continued with a study of the theological and liturgical resources that

the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music developed. Finally, we compared the benefits and obligations of marriage and blessing same-gender relationships.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- Over the past few weeks, how have our conversations emerged in the course of your daily lives? Have you found yourselves talking (or e-mailing or Facebook-ing) with colleagues, friends, or family regarding the willingness of The Episcopal Church to provide these blessings?
- This discussion guide was designed to equip participants to understand the presence of rites of blessing same-gender relationships in our common life in The Episcopal Church. Did it fulfill that purpose for you? Why or why not?
- If your community is not considering offering these rites to same-gender couples seeking a blessing of their relationship, are you able to explain why other parishes or dioceses in The Episcopal Church are? If yes, where would you begin that explanation? If no, what more information or background would be helpful?

D. Conclusion

Thank everyone for participating, for their hard work and dedication, and for loving the Church and those who come through the doors enough to have these conversations together.

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Handouts for Discussions

A. Covenant for Discussion

Study Area One:

B. Understanding the History

C. An Introduction to General Convention

D. Relationships and Blessing: Reflection Questions

Study Area Two:

E. Theological Reflection on Same-Gender Relationships: A Summary of “Faith, Hope, and Love”

Study Area Three:

F. Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials

Handout A - Covenant for Discussion

As we gather in the name of Christ to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, we accept this covenant to guide our conversation along God's path of love.

- I recognize that everyone comes to this experience with very different backgrounds, experiences, and views. I will respectfully seek clarification of other perspectives to add to my understanding.
- If I choose to disagree with a perspective different from mine, I will do this in a loving and respectful way.

I will:

- Speak only for myself (using "I" statements)
- Take responsibility for my own thoughts and feelings
- Remember my baptismal promise to "respect the dignity of every human being"
- Seek and acknowledge common ground
- Honor confidentiality unless permission to share is explicitly given
- Practice "sacred listening" by:
 - Listening for God in the experiences of others
 - Accepting those experiences as valid for the speakers
 - Searching for strengths in the other's position
 - Avoiding interruptions and argument
 - Avoiding applause or other reactions to speakers
 - Allowing each person to speak before I speak again.

If a particular group or person is going to be discussed, some of them should be present.

Adapted from *Our Covenant for Conversation*, the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont; *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*, by the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston (2003); and *Intimate Human Relationships: Resources for Conversation in the Congregations and Deaneries of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont*, edited by Anne Clarke Brown (2004).

Handout B - Understanding the History

Please use this worksheet to record your memories and thoughts about discussion of same-gender relationships over the past few decades.

A. The Episcopal Church has formally been talking about same-gender relationships and its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members for how many years? _____

B. Under each decade list briefly—using just key words—what you remember about:

1. What was going on in your own life
2. What was going on in the world and/or the Church
3. What was going on with issues of same-gender relationships.

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
What I remember in my own life					
What I remember happening in the world and/or the Church					
What I remember about issues of same-gender relationships					

Handout C - An Introduction to General Convention

Adapted from an introduction to the 2009 General Convention prepared by the Rev. Dr. Gregory S. Straub, Executive Officer and Secretary of General Convention

With few precedents for a republican form of Church governance, the first General Convention met in 1785 in Philadelphia. That convention began work on a constitution and a revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Church's book of worship. Within ten years the General Convention had agreed on its form of governance and its pattern of worship, both of which endure to the present day.

Uniquely for its time, the first General Conventions determined on a bicameral house in which elected (rather than royally appointed) bishops would make up one house, and lay and ordained deputies (equally represented) would make up the other house.

All bishops of The Episcopal Church, active and retired, are entitled to seat, voice, and vote in the House of Bishops (unless deprived of the privilege). Each of The Episcopal Church's dioceses (and the Convocation of Churches in Europe and the Navajoland Area Mission) is entitled to elect eight deputies, four laypersons and four priests and/or deacons, to the House of Deputies. (The diocesan electors of deputies are themselves elected representatives from local parishes.) Deputies are not delegates; that is, they are not elected to represent the electing dioceses.

Deputies vote their conscience for the good of the Church. They cannot be instructed to vote one way or another, for to do so would preclude godly debate and preempt the work of the Holy Spirit. Deputies are expected to serve on committees, if appointed, to attend forums and hearings, to read the reports to the Church from its commissions, committees, agencies, and boards, to listen to, and if so moved, to respond to resolutions on the floor of the house.

The House of Bishops and House of Deputies meet, deliberate, and vote separately. To be enacted, resolutions must pass both houses in the same language. Both houses have the right to amend legislation, but the amendment must be accepted by the other house. Resolutions presented to Convention come from four sources: committees, commissions, agencies, and boards of the Church; bishops; dioceses and provinces; and deputies.

The House of Bishops is chaired by the Presiding Bishop, and the House of Deputies is chaired by an elected President of the House. In the absence of the presiding officer, a Vice Chair (in the House of Bishops) or Vice President (in the House of Deputies) chairs. In each house, a secretary and parliamentarian assist the presiding officer.

General Convention meets prayerfully. Each day, bishops, deputies, registered alternates, and delegates to the ECW Triennial Meeting gather for Bible study and the Holy Eucharist. Both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops have chaplains, who lead their houses in regular prayer at the beginning and end of sessions and daily at noon. Chaplains are also asked to pray before the enactment of important legislation. Organizations within the Church sponsor additional worship services, while volunteers staff a prayer room in which there is continual intercession for the work of Convention.

Much of the work of Convention is carried out by legislative committees. The Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies determine the number of persons who serve on committees and their membership. In their appointments, the presiding officers consider previous experience, expertise, and interest, ensuring the committees represent diverse points of view, geographic, ethnic and gender diversity, and participation by younger deputies.

Resolutions proposed for discussion at Convention are referred to legislative committees, which consider, amalgamate, and perfect them before presenting them on the floor of Convention. Legislative committees hold hearings on legislation at which the following can speak: bishop, deputy, registered alternate deputy, or registered visitor.

Debate on the floor is governed by the Constitution and Canons of the Church, Rules of Order for each house, Joint Rules of Order (that apply to both houses) and Roberts' Rules of Order. Deputies are expected to listen respectfully to the views of others and to adhere to the rules, which require, for example, that persons of different points of view alternate at microphones.

Convention is more than legislation. One of the most interesting parts of Convention is the Exhibit Hall, a marketplace of goods and ideas in which the organizations and interest groups within the Church present their wares, recruit members, and do their best to influence legislation.

Many Church-related organizations hold meetings in conjunction with Convention, and there are lunches and dinners hosted by seminaries, provinces, societies, boards and staff offices of the Church. The Episcopal Church Women (ECW) holds its triennial meeting simultaneously with the General Convention. The ECW meeting has changed over the past several decades; today it focuses on the mission and service of the Church, and many of the Church's most distinguished members are invited to address this body.

General Convention is a combination of legislative assembly, bazaar of goods and services, and family reunion. It is one of the most exciting and, truth be told, one of the most awe-inspiring gatherings in the world.

Handout D - Relationships and Blessing: Reflection Questions

I invite you to reflect on the committed relationships of couples you know (friends, colleagues, family members, and so on), whether same-gender or not, including your own, if you are in such a relationship.

Consider questions such as these:

- How is each relationship named or described: marriage? covenant? union? some other way? Are those involved in the relationship considered husband and wife? partners? lovers? Does the term vary depending on circumstances? How important (or not) is the terminology used for your understanding and experience of the relationship?
- As you reflect on these relationships, what about them (their qualities, gifts, character) would make them appropriate for a liturgical blessing? Or, to put this in another way, why do we “bless” committed relationships in a Church at all?

For those who are in a committed relationship:

- Have you discerned any spiritual gifts that have emerged from your commitment that you may not have recognized apart from that commitment?
- What role does your faith community play in your ongoing commitment? Does the community offer something you find important in your relationship?
- What role (if any) did your Christian faith play in the early and now ongoing development of your relationship and in discerning your commitment to each other?
- Would you consider your committed relationship as part of your Christian calling and vocation to ministry? If so, how and in what ways?

For those who are reflecting on another couple’s relationship:

- Have you discerned any spiritual gifts emerging from their relationship that benefit the wider community or perhaps yourself?
- Have you discerned what you or your faith community contributes to their relationship?
- How would you name the primary “blessing” of that relationship in your own life and in your faith community?
- Have you learned anything or gained fresh insights about your own life from observing the relationship and interacting with the couple?

Handout E - Theological Reflection on Same-Gender Relationships: A Summary of “Faith, Hope, and Love”

Baptism, Eucharist, and the Paschal Mystery

All Christians are called to bear witness to the good news of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered for such witness by our covenantal relationship with God. Baptism initiates us into that covenant, making us Christ’s own forever and members of Christ’s Body, the Church. The eucharist sustains us in that covenantal life and strengthens us to be Christ’s witnesses in the world.

Our covenantal life with God can shape and be expressed in our relationships of commitment and faithfulness with others. Our committed relationships can thus reflect a *sacramental character* (making divine grace visible) and evoke *eschatological hope* (our ultimate union with God). These relationships thus invite further reflection on the mission of the Church, what it means “to bless,” and the distinguishing marks of a covenantal relationship.

Themes for Theological Reflection

A sacramental framework for covenantal relationships suggests several other key theological themes for reflection and shared discernment, including the following.

Vocation

God calls people into various kinds of relationship, whether as single people, in monastic communities, or as intimate couples. These vocational callings can empower our witness to the gospel. The decision to enter into a covenantal union is likewise a vocation marked by these characteristics: “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.”

Households

Covenantal relationships are often lived in households in which we practice daily the giving of ourselves for the good of another. While households take many different forms, they create a space of mutual trust and accountability. The joy, intimacy, and shared vulnerability of households can thus help us learn the spiritual disciplines of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation in lives of committed monogamy and fidelity.

Fruitfulness

The divine grace that sustains a covenantal relationship bears fruit in countless ways, not only for the couple but for the wider community as well. Covenantal couples manifest this grace in their shared gifts for ministry and in lives of service, generosity, and hospitality.

Mutual Blessing

A blessed relationship is set apart for a divine purpose: to bear witness to the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying love of God in the world. As the Spirit empowers the couple for this witness, the Church is likewise blessed and strengthened for its mission and ministry.

In all of these ways and more, the blessing of a same-gender relationship invites covenantal couples and the whole Church to renew our commitment to the Baptismal Covenant. That commitment is expressed by *faith* in the good news of Jesus Christ, in the *hope* for union with God that Christ promised, and with the *love* that knits us together as the Body of Christ. As the apostle Paul reminds us, we live our life together as God’s people with faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Handout F - Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials

Materials proposed for blessing same-gender relationships must above all be consistent with the implicit theology and ecclesiology of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. This would suggest, for example, that they must reflect the Prayer Book's underlying assumption that the entire life of the Church finds its origin in baptism.

Nearly as important is that the proposed liturgical materials embody a classically Anglican liturgical ethos and style. Recognizing the varying notions of what makes public prayer recognizably Anglican, the task group identified these qualities:

- It resonates with Scripture and proclaims the gospel.
- It is rooted in Anglican theological tradition.
- It has high literary value; it is beautiful according to accepted and respected standards.
- It uses the recurring structures, linguistic patterns, and metaphors of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.
- It is formal, not casual, conversational, or colloquial.
- It is dense enough to bear the weight of the sacred purpose for which it is intended.
- It is metaphoric without being obtuse.
- It is performative: that is, it effects what it says.

At the same time, these rites must resonate as natural speech in contemporary ears. A religious or sacred tone must be achieved without the use of arcane or antiquated words or patterns of speech.

The rites should provide explanatory notes and rubrics. The material must be considered as the script for an event, not merely a collection of texts.

Any rite of blessing must be an expression primarily of the entire Church, not of the couple seeking a blessing. These rites must allow for robust communal participation, reflecting the baptismal ecclesiology of the Prayer Book. Related to this, since the eucharist is the symbol of the unity of the Church through unity with Christ, these services of blessing should normatively take place within a celebration of the eucharist.

Such rites must enact the notion of sacramental reciprocity by suggesting that, even as the Church blesses the relationship of the couple, the relationship of the couple is a blessing to the Church.

Options for various elements of the rites, particularly Scripture and the Prayers of the People, must be provided so that this action of the entire Church—this common prayer—does not degenerate into a generic rite.

Any rite of blessing a couple must hold up the two people making the covenant as the primary ministers within this action of God and of the entire Church. Such rites should give expression to the Church's understanding that the couple is freely assuming a vocation that can be expected to yield the fruits of mutual fidelity for the couple, for the Church, and for the entire world, and that points ultimately toward the fulfillment of all human relationships and unity in the eschatological Reign of God, when God will be all-in-all.

The rites must be what they purport to be—liturgical prayer—not didactic or polemical statements in the guise of liturgy.

Appendices

A Review of General Convention Legislation

Glossary

A Review of General Convention Legislation

Introduction

The legislative history here shows the development of General Convention deliberations about the place of gay men and lesbians in the life of the Church, particularly with regard to the blessing of their faithful, monogamous, lifelong relationships. Successive conventions have both acknowledged the work of their predecessors and reached new decisions. Resolution texts are from the website of the Archives of the Episcopal Church: <http://www.episcopalarchives.org/e-archives/acts/>.

Minneapolis, 1976

For the first time, General Convention adopted a resolution that acknowledged and affirmed the presence of persons of homosexual orientation in the Church.

Resolution 1976-A069

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That it is the sense of this General Convention 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.

Anaheim, 1985

General Convention reaffirmed the 1976 resolution and encouraged dioceses to deepen understanding.

Resolution 1985-D082

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That the 68th General Convention urge each diocese of this Church to find an effective way to foster a better understanding of homosexual persons, to dispel myths and prejudices about homosexuality, to provide pastoral support, and to give life to the claim of homosexual persons “upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral care and concern of the Church” as recognized by the General Convention in 1976.

Phoenix, 1991

General Convention affirmed the traditional understanding of marriage as between a man and a woman, and acknowledged “discontinuity” between that teaching and the experience of many members of The Episcopal Church.

Resolution 1991-A104

Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, That the 70th General Convention of the Episcopal Church affirms that the teaching of the Episcopal Church is that physical sexual expression is appropriate only within the lifelong monogamous “union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind” “intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord” as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer; and be it further

Resolved, That this Church continues to work to reconcile the discontinuity between this teaching and the experience of many members of this body; and be it further

Resolved, That this General Convention confesses our failure to lead and to resolve this discontinuity through legislative efforts based upon resolutions directed at singular and various aspects of these issues; and be it further

Resolved, That this General Convention commissions the Bishops and members of each Diocesan Deputation to initiate a means for all congregations in their jurisdiction to enter into dialogue and deepen their understanding of these complex issues; and further this General Convention directs the President of each Province to appoint one Bishop, one lay deputy and one clerical deputy in that province to

facilitate the process, to receive reports from the dioceses at each meeting of their provincial synod and report to the 71st General Convention; and be it further

Resolved, That this General Convention directs the House of Bishops to prepare a Pastoral Teaching prior to the 71st General Convention using the learnings from the diocesan and provincial processes and calling upon such insight as is necessary from theologians, theological ethicists, social scientists and gay and lesbian persons; and that three lay persons and three members of the clergy from the House of Deputies, appointed by the President of the House of Deputies be included in the preparation of this Pastoral Teaching.

Indianapolis, 1994

General Convention added sexual orientation, along with marital status, sex, disabilities, and age as categories to which non-discrimination in Church membership is assured.

Resolution 1994-C020

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That Title I, Canon 17, Section 5 be amended as follows:

No person shall be denied rights, status [in], or [access to] an equal place in the life, worship, and governance of this Church because of race, color, [or] ethnic origin, national origin, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, disabilities or age, except as otherwise specified by [this] Canon.

General Convention also called for a study of “the theological foundations and pastoral considerations involved in the development of rites honoring love and commitment between persons of the same sex.”

Resolution 1994-C042

Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, 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; and be it further

Resolved, 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 be it further

Resolved, That the sum of \$8,600 be appropriated to support this work, subject to funding considerations.

Philadelphia, 1997

General Convention reaffirmed the traditional understanding of marriage and called for continuing study.

Resolution 1997-C003

Resolved, That this 72nd General Convention affirm the sacredness of Christian marriage between one man and one woman with intent of life-long relationship; and be it further

Resolved, That this Convention direct the Standing Liturgical Commission to continue its study of theological aspects of committed relationships of same-sex couples, and to issue a full report including recommendations of future steps for the resolution of issues related to such committed relationships no later than November 1999 for consideration at the 73rd General Convention.

Denver, 2000

General Convention acknowledged relationships other than marriage.

Resolution 2000-D039

Resolved, That the members of the 73rd General Convention intend for this Church to provide a safe and just structure in which all can utilize their gifts and creative energies for mission; and be it further

Resolved, That we acknowledge that while the issues of human sexuality are not yet resolved, there are currently couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in marriage and couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships; and be it further

Resolved, That we expect such relationships will be 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; and be it further

Resolved, That we denounce promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members; and be it further

Resolved, That this Church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values, and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement, and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them; and be it further

Resolved, That we acknowledge that some, acting in good conscience, who disagree with the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality, will act in contradiction to that position; and be it further

Resolved, That in continuity with previous actions of the General Convention of this Church, and in response to the call for dialogue by the Lambeth Conference, we affirm that those on various sides of controversial issues have a place in the Church, and we reaffirm the imperative to promote conversation between persons of differing experiences and perspectives, while acknowledging the Church's teaching on the sanctity of marriage.

Minneapolis, 2003

Acknowledging continuing differences, General Convention recognized "that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions."

Resolution 2003-C051

Resolved, That the 74th General Convention affirm the following:

1. That our life together as a community of faith is grounded in the saving work of Jesus Christ and expressed in the principles of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: Holy Scripture, the historic Creeds of the Church, the two dominical Sacraments, and the Historic Episcopate.
2. That we reaffirm Resolution A069 of the 65th General Convention (1976) 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."
3. That, in our understanding of homosexual persons, differences exist among us about how best to care pastorally for those who intend to live in monogamous, non-celibate unions; and what is, or should be, required, permitted, or prohibited by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church concerning the blessing of the same.

4. That we reaffirm Resolution D039 of the 73rd General Convention (2000), that “We expect such relationships will be 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,” and that such relationships exist throughout the church.

5. That we recognize that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions.

6. That we commit ourselves, and call our church, in the spirit of Resolution A104 of the 70th General Convention (1991), to continued prayer, study, and discernment on the pastoral care for gay and lesbian persons, to include the compilation and development by a special commission organized and appointed by the Presiding Bishop, of resources to facilitate as wide a conversation of discernment as possible throughout the church.

7. That our baptism into Jesus Christ is inseparable from our communion with one another, and we commit ourselves to that communion despite our diversity of opinion and, among dioceses, a diversity of pastoral practice with the gay men and lesbians among us.

8. That it is a matter of faith that our Lord longs for our unity as his disciples, and for us this entails living within the boundaries of the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church. We believe this discipline expresses faithfulness to our polity and that it will facilitate the conversation we seek, not only in The Episcopal Church, but also in the wider Anglican Communion and beyond.

Anaheim, 2009

The General Convention directs the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” for blessing same-gender relationships.

Resolution 2009-C056

Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, That the 76th General Convention acknowledge the changing circumstances in the United States and in other nations, as legislation authorizing or forbidding marriage, civil unions or domestic partnerships for gay and lesbian persons is passed in various civil jurisdictions that call forth a renewed pastoral response from this Church, and for an open process for the consideration of theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same gender relationships; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, in consultation with the House of Bishops, collect and develop theological and liturgical resources, and report to the 77th General Convention; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, in consultation with the House of Bishops, devise an open process for the conduct of its work inviting participation from provinces, dioceses, congregations, and individuals who are engaged in such theological work, and inviting theological reflection from throughout the Anglican Communion; and be it further

Resolved, 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; and be it further

Resolved, That this Convention honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality; and be it further

Resolved, That the members of this Church be encouraged to engage in this effort.

Glossary

This glossary of legal and canonical terms, along with other terms often used in discussing same-gender blessings, is intended to inform and enhance discussions of the theological and liturgical resources, as well as preparation for and use of any liturgy authorized by General Convention. Most of these terms are discussed in greater depth in the essay “Faith, Hope, and Love: Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships.”

Blessing. “The active outgoing of divine grace.”⁸³ When a blessing is given, for example, at a Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage or during a rite for blessing a same-gender relationship, the Church understands that God’s blessing has been recognized in the lives of the couple and also imparted in a new way because of the Church’s action. The marital blessing involves three distinct but interdependent aspects: we (the Church) bless God in thanksgiving for God’s grace already evident in the lives of the couple; we pronounce God’s blessing upon those in covenantal relationships to strengthen their covenantal bonds; and we commission couples as witnesses of God’s love for the world.

Blessing of a Civil Marriage. *The Book of Common Prayer* rite by which a husband and wife who were previously married by competent civil authority, with appropriate documentation, have their civil marriage blessed by the Church.

Canon. The Canons of the Episcopal Church are the laws which set out the enactments of the ecclesiastical polity of the Church as governed by The Episcopal Church’s Constitution and revised by General Convention. Each diocese of The Episcopal Church has its own canons, which must be consistent with the Canons of the Episcopal Church.

Civil marriage. A civil marriage is a marriage obtained by following the legal requirements of the state or jurisdiction in which the marriage is created. A civil marriage is often described as a special form of legal contract, established and regulated by each state and entered into by two consenting parties. A civil marriage carries both legal benefits and responsibilities under both state and federal law. A state’s civil marriage statutes specify which couples are permitted to marry or are prohibited from marrying and who is authorized to officiate at a civil marriage.

Civil union. A civil union is a state-recognized legal contract, the status of which is authorized under the laws of some states. The enacting statutes typically grant couples, including same-gender couples, in a civil union the rights, benefits, and obligations of married couples under state law. These benefits and responsibilities vary from state to state and in some cases do not replicate all of the benefits of civil marriage. The statutes specify who is eligible to enter into a civil union and who is authorized to officiate at a civil union. Under current federal law and the laws of at least thirty-five states, civil unions are either not recognized at all or are not recognized as the equivalent of civil marriage. Some states that do not authorize civil unions will recognize a civil union lawfully obtained in another state.

Common-law marriage. A common-law marriage is established when a man and a woman live together and identify themselves as husband and wife for a sufficient time, with the express mutual intent of establishing a marriage. Some states require seven years of continuous cohabitation; but others do not specify the number of years. In states that recognize common-law marriage, the status of common-law marriage is generally accorded all of the benefits and obligations of a civil marriage. Fewer than twenty states recognize common-law marriages.

Constitution. Unless otherwise noted, this word refers to the Constitution of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, otherwise known as The Episcopal Church, as adopted by the General Convention in October 1789 and amended in subsequent General Conventions.

Covenant. The fundamental relationship between God and God’s people. The concept has a long and varied history, biblical and otherwise. Christians understand covenantal relationship to derive primarily from the gracious covenant God has made with us in Christ. We enact this covenant in baptism and

83 Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 33.

sustain it in the eucharist. For the Church, a covenant is a relationship initiated by God through Jesus Christ to which a body of people responds in faith; in which God promises that the people will be God's; and in which God requires God's people to be faithful, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God; and to whom, through the Holy Spirit, God gives the grace to do so. As Christians, we respond to God's gracious covenant in Christ by living faithfully in all of our various relationships. Scripture and Christian history bear witness to these essential elements of covenantal relationship: taking vows, intending lifelong commitment, and bearing the fruit of God's grace in the relationship.

Covenant of marriage. The *Book of Common Prayer* proclaims that "Christian marriage is a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God" (BCP, 422). In the Catechism (BCP, 861), in response to the question "What is Holy Matrimony?" we read: "Holy Matrimony is Christian Marriage, in which the woman and man enter into a life-long union, make their vows before God and the Church, and receive the grace and blessing of God to help them fulfill their vows."

Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). The Defense of Marriage Act, commonly known as DOMA, is a federal law which defines marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman for purposes of all federal laws and which provides that states (or other governmental entities) do not need to recognize a marriage from another state if it is between people of the same sex. DOMA was signed into law in 1996. Some state laws prohibiting same-gender marriages are known as "state DOMAs."

In addition, at least thirty-five states have their own Defense of Marriage Acts, while two more states have strong language that defines marriage as only between one man and one woman. In approximately thirty states, voters have approved amendments to state constitutions that also define marriage as between one man and one woman only.

DOMA has raised serious legal issues when people of the same gender marry legally in one state but then move to another state that does not recognize or permit same-gender marriages.

Divorce. The legal process under state law by which a marriage is ended and through which the court determines the parties' future legal and financial obligations to each other and to their children. In states with civil unions, the termination process generally is known as "dissolution," or some term other than "divorce."

Domestic partnership. Some states and cities have enacted domestic partnership laws or ordinances, granting same-gender and different-gender couples a bundle of specific rights, less than those granted under marriage or civil-union laws. These laws vary considerably in their scope.

Holy Matrimony. Holy Matrimony is Christian marriage, as defined above under "Covenant of Marriage," using The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage or An Order for Marriage from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Judgment of marital status. Under Canon I.19.2, a "member of the Church whose marriage has been annulled or dissolved by a civil court may apply to the Bishop or Ecclesiastical Authority of the Diocese in which such person is legally or canonically resident for a judgment as to his or her marital status in the eyes of the Church. Such judgment may be a recognition of the nullity, or of the termination of the said marriage." A judgment of marital status may be requested at any time, not just when contemplating remarriage. Many Church members find support and comfort, after the termination of a civil marriage, in seeking this judgment, which establishes the unmarried status in the eyes of the Church. Such a judgment is also useful if the person seeks to remarry and, under Canon I.19.3(a), must provide evidence of the end of the prior marriage through annulment or divorce. This process is distinct from the consultation with the Bishop Diocesan regarding remarriage after divorce, found in Canon I.19.3(c).

Same-gender marriage. Some states give same-gender couples access to their civil marriage statutes, which typically use the phrase "same-sex marriage." In those states, these marriages are accorded all

of the rights and obligations of civil marriage under state law. Currently, the federal government and more than thirty-five states do not recognize these as civil marriages (see “Defense of Marriage Act”).

Vow. A solemn and voluntary promise. Marital vows are voluntary pledges instituted and accepted by the Church, by which the woman and man give and bind themselves to each other. Vows exchanged in Holy Matrimony or in the proposed liturgy for the blessing of a same-gender couple represent commitment, fidelity, and witness.

As Christians have come to understand covenantal relationship, especially in the light of God’s gracious covenant with us in Christ, a “vow” signifies permanence and inviolability. The Church affirms and supports this definition of a vowed relationship for couples entering into marriage as well as for same-gender couples entering into covenantal relationship using the proposed liturgy. The Church also recognizes that human covenants will sometimes, perhaps often, fall short of the model established in the covenant God makes with us in baptism. Nonetheless, Christians strive to enter into a vowed relationship with God’s help and in the power of the Holy Spirit.