

**The Episcopal Diocese of Colorado
1300 Washington Street
Denver, CO 80203**

Guidelines for Congregations Desiring to Offer Same-Sex Blessings

July 2012

Introduction

In 2009, the General Convention of The Episcopal Church adopted a resolution (Resolution C056) allowing diocesan bishops to “provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church” while at the same time “honoring the theological diversity of this church in regard to matters of human sexuality.”

At its 2012 General Convention, the Episcopal Church subsequently adopted another resolution (Resolution A049) to provide both theological and liturgical resources for “the witnessing and blessing of a lifelong covenant in a same-sex relationship.” The same resolution includes specific language stating that no clergy person or congregation must use these resources if that would be contrary to their beliefs.

Given these decisions by The Episcopal Church, and given the requests from different congregations wanting to provide for the blessing of gay and lesbian couples in those congregations, The Diocese of Colorado has made pastoral provision for the blessing of committed, lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships. Specifically, this includes a liturgy that is currently provided for blessing same-sex relationships that has been developed within The Diocese of Colorado and the liturgy developed by The Episcopal Church that will be available for use on the First Sunday of Advent 2012.

This provision is intended only for those congregations who discern collectively that such blessings are consistent with their identity and calling as parish community, and they can only be offered with the expressed permission of the Bishop in accordance with the following guidelines.

(For additional background, please see Bishop O’Neill’s letters to the clergy of the diocese dated September of 2011, available at [insert link here].)

The Discernment Process

Those congregations wishing to explore the possibility of offering same-sex blessings must engage in a process of prayerful discernment, intentional agreement, and a commitment of accountability to the guidelines governing the exercise of these rites.

The discernment process must follow these steps:

1. The clergy person in charge of congregations (rector or vicar; not interim rector or long-term supply) must meet first with the Bishop to discuss the advisability of exercising this pastoral provision in their particular congregation.
2. After prayerful conversation and consultation with the rector or vicar, the vestry or bishop's committee must determine whether or not to proceed with a parish-wide discernment process.
3. The congregation must then engage subsequently in a process of broad-based discernment, learning, and formation regarding the blessing of same-gender relationships.
4. Based on that discernment process, the vestry or bishop's committee will then determine whether or not offering this pastoral provision is consistent with that congregation's ministry.
5. Should the decision be to proceed, the rector or vicar will write to the Bishop informing the Bishop of congregation's discernment process and asking permission to proceed (see *"Requesting Permission of the Bishop"* below).
6. The vestry or bishop's committee then enters into a covenant that provides for ongoing communication, mutual accountability, and review (see *"The Covenant with the Bishop and Diocese"* below).

Requesting Permission of the Bishop

Once the vestry or bishop's committee has determined that providing for the blessing of committed, lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships is consistent with the ministry of their parish community, the rector or vicar must write to the Bishop to request the Bishop's permission to exercise this pastoral provision.

The letter to the Bishop must include the following:

- An outline of the process that has been followed from beginning to end with the vestry/bishop's committee and the congregation.
- A detailed summary of the methodology and content of the process and the issues it has raised within the congregations
- Insights and learnings that have emerged from the discernment process—whether those learnings are about the issues of same-sex blessings, or about the nature of the congregation itself, or about the mission and ministry of that congregation.
- A description of how those who may disagree with the decision of the vestry or bishop's committee are being supported and meaningfully engaged and incorporated into the ongoing life of the congregation.

The Covenant with the Bishop and Diocese

Having received the Bishop's permission to offer such blessings, the rector or vicar along with the members of the vestry or bishop's committee, must enter into a covenant with the Bishop by reviewing and signing the following covenant.

“We the members of the [vestry or bishop’s committee] of [name of congregation], having faithfully engaged a process of prayerful discernment among the membership of [name of congregation], desire to offer blessings for committed, lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships to those in our congregation who desire it.

“We commit ourselves to following the guidelines of The Diocese of Colorado for such blessings:

- *That such blessings are to be provided only for active and committed members of this congregation;*
- *That couples wishing to have their relationship blessed will provide a minimum of thirty days notice to the rector or vicar;*
- *That couples wishing to have their relationship blessed will undertake counseling (a minimum of three visits) with the rector or vicar prior to any ceremony in order to explore the history of their relationship, the nature of their commitment to one another, and the spiritual and theological meaning of having it blessed in that congregation;*
- *That only one of the two liturgies provided by the diocese may be used and that the rubrics will be strictly followed;*
- *That the rector or vicar will report annually in writing to the Bishop regarding blessings that have taken place.*

“We commit ourselves to the ongoing care, support, and meaningful engagement of those in this congregation who disagree with our decision, and we declare with openness and humility our willingness to learn from and be formed by their faithful witness to us.

“We agree to review our discernment process, evaluate this covenant, and renew our agreement with the Bishop in three years time (on or before [insert month and year])

Signed,

*[rector/vicar]
[members of vestry/bishop’s
committee]”*