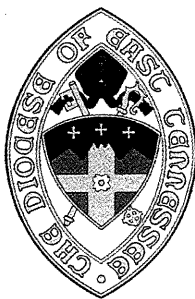


# THE DIOCESE OF EAST TENNESSEE

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Dear members of the Episcopal Church in East Tennessee,

Greetings in the name of Jesus!

On July 10, 2012, the deputies and bishops of the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention of The Episcopal Church, meeting in Indianapolis, adopted Resolution A049, which approves a provisional public rite for the blessing of same-sex unions.

This liturgy is for the blessing of a same-sex couple. The Episcopal Church has not authorized same-sex marriage, and the rite does not refer to marriage. The liturgy provided is for provisional use, which means that the rite, *The Witness and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, is intended for experimental use over a three year period.

In the Diocese of East Tennessee, we prepared for and communicated about the General Convention through our website, as well as Pre-Convention meetings in each of the regions of the diocese, provided full coverage throughout the convention, then hosted Post-Convention gatherings in the three regions the week of August 13.

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 Church-wide discernment process about how we live out that resolution.

As the Church continued to talk specifically about same sex relationships, a 2000 General Convention resolution 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."

The entire report of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music is called *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing*, and is available on the diocesan website. The report provides teaching on Mission, Theology of Blessing, Covenantal Relationships, Christian Unity and Biblical Interpretation, and much more, as well as the text of the liturgy itself. I encourage you to carefully read this report, as it provides significant background and theology of the church.

Over the past year I have talked a great deal about how I have wanted the diocese, in the context of our upcoming February 2013 diocesan convention, to have some input as to how we will live into this new aspect of our life together as Episcopalians in East Tennessee. My desire has been for us corporately to move forward.

I appointed a "Task Force For Same-Sex Blessings" earlier this autumn, and their task has been to advise and guide me as to how we will continue. Their guidance and encouragement, along with that of the Standing Committee of the Diocese, The Bishop and Council, and other wise counsel, has been that I

make an initial statement about the implementation of resolution A049. The General Convention resolution states that the use of the liturgy in each diocese will be “under the direction and subject to the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority.”

Therefore, after extensive prayer, conversation, and with hope for the future, I approve the provisional use of *The Witness and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* in the Diocese of East Tennessee after the 2013 Diocesan Convention under the following basic conditions:

- For the time being, the context for the use of the blessing liturgy is in a particular parish, with the clergy of that parish, and a couple, at least one of whom is a member of that parish. Parishes which want to offer the blessing liturgy will begin with engaging in a prayerful conversation between Clergy and Vestry. When the Rector wants to proceed and the Vestry is in support of this desire, the Rector and Wardens will send a letter signed by them to me stating their intention to do so. When that letter is received and acknowledged, an announcement to the congregation of this intention shall be made at that time, well before a service using the blessing rite takes place.
- At least one member of the couple shall be a baptized member of that parish in the Diocese of East Tennessee, and the couple will participate in appropriate preparation with the clergy well ahead of the celebration of the liturgy.
- Permission shall be requested by the couple from the priest at least 30 days ahead of the service, and the priest will advise the bishop when permission is granted.

One of the phrases of the General Convention resolution states “That this convention honor the theological diversity of this church in regards to human sexuality, and that no bishop, priest, deacon, or lay person should be coerced or penalized in any manner, nor suffer any canonical disabilities, as a result of his or her conscientious objection to or support for the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention’s action with regard to the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships.”

I believe that is an important part of this process, so I want to be sure that you know the following:

- I am neither requiring its use, nor requiring any Clergy and Vestry to consider its use.
- No parish, no Vestry, no member of the clergy will be required to use the liturgy.
- I do encourage each parish’s Clergy and Vestry to set aside some period of time to meet together for thoughtful discussion about the best way forward for their congregation at this time.
- Though I am grateful for the availability of its use in the parishes that so desire, I am not promoting its use in those parishes that are not so inclined at this point.

I will remain open in the future to considering possibilities for providing a context for blessings for those couples belonging to parishes which have not decided to move forward in providing them.

The Task Force will provide tools for conversation among parish leadership. Some parishes may be ready to make a decision to proceed with use of the liturgy as soon as possible, some may not be ready at this time, and some may feel themselves very far away from this consideration. All are acceptable, and we want you all to have access to tools that will assist you.

Clearly, we in this diocese, in all of The Episcopal Church, in our communities, states, and beyond are not of one mind on the issues of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. It is important to note that The Episcopal Church has clearly stated that homosexuality is not a sin, and I strongly stand with that position. I voted in favor of Resolution A049, and I am grateful that the church has provided a means to honor and bless the relationships of gay and lesbian Christians. As we pray they will experience and

exhibit the joy, mutuality, and generativity as do other couples, we also insist on the exclusive, lifelong, and public nature of their relationships.

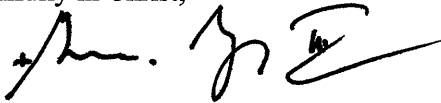
My hope and prayer is that we all will respect the diversity of thought and belief among the people and parishes of the diocese. An important aspect of diversity is freedom, and I affirm the freedom inherent in the General Convention resolution and ask that each parish, through its Clergy and Vestry, prayerfully consider how it will live into this new pastoral activity of the Church.

It is also my hope and expectation that the clergy, leaders, and people of parishes that do not move forward with use of the blessing rite, will extend proactive, heartfelt love and support to the lesbian and gay couples in their communities.

Former Secretary of State James Baker worked with Bishop Andy Doyle in the Diocese of Texas to craft their approach in that diocese. At the end of an article in The San Antonio Express-News about this, he states, and I applaud, "What I really want to see is an end to all this fighting and divisiveness over one issue of human sexuality so we Episcopalians can get back to our primary mission of advancing the Gospel." Amen, Secretary Baker.

Thank you for your continuing prayers for your parishes, for the diocese, for The Episcopal Church, for the Anglican Communion, and for the whole Body of Christ. I trust that God's Spirit will continue to sustain, encourage, and empower us as the followers of Jesus in this part of creation. I hope you do too. God bless you!

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. D. Young, III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

The Rt. Rev. George D. Young, III  
Bishop of East Tennessee

*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 you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (For the Unity of the Church," BCP, 818)*