

## **A Pastoral Letter from the Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia Concerning the Blessing of Same Sex Couples in this Diocese**

November 2012

Dear Friends in Christ,

Since the decision by our Church to offer a provisional rite for a Blessing of Same Sex couples this last July at our General Convention, I have been praying to God and listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I have also been listening to the voices of clergy and lay leaders around the Diocese of Georgia. The Holy Spirit also speaks through each of them. All this has been a healthy, holy experience for me. You have assured me of your prayers and you have convinced me that whatever divides us pales in comparison to that which unites us: our calling together as disciples of Jesus to proclaim and live out his Gospel of love, mercy, and redemption.

I want to first remind us all of some recent history. Earlier this year, anticipating General Convention, I wrote the Diocese explaining the challenges before us, as I understood them. I stated clearly that during the search process for the 10<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Georgia, I articulated my support for the Church establishing a Blessing Rite for same sex couples. That support remains and has not wavered. I stated after my consecration, however, that no Blessing Rite would be used in the Diocese of Georgia until the Church took formal action to authorize such a rite. My interpretation of past General Convention actions, prior to 2012, led me to conclude that such specific authorization had never truly occurred.

I also pointed out that my understanding of Holy Matrimony is that it can only be between a man and woman, regardless of what secular governments understand it to be. Secular understandings of marriage should not shape how the Church understands Holy Matrimony. Of course, we know that the culture does shape our thoughts, at least to some extent. It is nearly impossible to hermetically seal the Church off from cultural influences. Nevertheless, I must make decisions as free of cultural influences as possible and rather focus all discernment through the lens of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and his grace bestowed in the New Covenant. Thus, in my judgment, any Blessing Rite that is authorized in the Diocese of Georgia had to be plainly distinguished from Holy Matrimony in order to receive my approval.

The Rite approved by General Convention in July of this year failed, in my judgment, to plainly distinguish between Holy Matrimony and a Blessing. The enabling resolution for the Rite that was passed, however, provided Diocesan Bishops with the ability to “adapt” the Rite for use in their respective dioceses. I had hoped the language would have authorized something more expansive than “adaption,” but that did not happen. So, we must work within the structures of what the Church has decided. None of this is perfect. We all look “through a glass darkly,” as St Paul reminds us. I am unconcerned by what is politically, socially, or culturally expedient, or what will be the majority opinion. I am concerned with doing what is right in the eyes of God.

I have discerned that we in the Diocese of Georgia will offer a Rite of Blessing for our homosexual sisters and brothers using the Adapted Rite found in Appendix 1. This will be the only Rite authorized in the Diocese of Georgia. In Appendix 2, you will find criteria for how the Rite may be offered in the Diocese of Georgia. These criteria are not suggestions. They are expected provisions and guidelines required of clergy and lay leaders who discern within their congregation that they should offer the Rite.

It should go without saying, but I will say it here because uniformed people often create needless alarm. No congregation or priest is required to offer such a rite. The criteria in Appendix 2 requires formal discernment between the parochial priest in charge and the vestry before it may be offered in the congregation and that discernment must be first initiated by the parochial priest. That means I will not allow non-parochial priests (or any deacon) to preside at such a Blessing Rite disconnected from a pastoral cure in a congregation. They may, however, assist the Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge of the Congregation at the Rite.

Doubtless some may conclude from the requirements in Appendix 2 that I am requiring an unfairly high threshold of mutual consent that is not required of other rites of the Church. I certainly understand how some may reach such a conclusion and I am not unsympathetic to the claim. For some my decision will go too far. For others my decision will not go far enough. I understand. Nevertheless, as your Bishop I must lead us through this in the best way I can given the constraints present and the diversity of positions we respectively hold in the Diocese of Georgia.

My fervent hope, as we go forward together, is that we not stoop down to the secular political practice of creating winners and losers. Lord, we have enough of that. My hope and expectation is that we will continue as we have in this Diocese to love and respect one another even when we cannot always agree. I ask each of us to reach out to someone who we know disagrees with us on this, declare to them our unity in Christ, and our promise of love and support in the common bonds of the Gospel of Jesus. This will not negate whatever differences we have, but it will be a clear witness that we do not give only lip service to the unity of our faith, but that we practice amongst ourselves the reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ.

+Scott

## Appendix 1

# A Rite of Blessing for Same-Sex Couples Diocese of Georgia

*This rite is normally used in the context of the Holy Eucharist. The Collect and Propers for the Day are to be used. Absent such a collect and propers, the collect and propers for Christian Service or Baptism are to be used.*

## The Prayers

*Following the Sermon and the Nicene Creed, the Celebrant says*

Let us pray for N. and N. in their life together and for the concerns of this community.

*The couple comes forward and faces the Celebrant. A Deacon or another leader bids prayers for the couple.*

For N. and N., seeking your blessing and the blessing of your holy people; Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer.**

For a spirit of loving-kindness to shelter them all their days; Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer.**

For friends to support them and communities to enfold them; Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer.**

For peace in their home and love in their family; Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer.**

For the outpouring of your love through their work and witness; Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer.**

For the strength to keep our vows and commitments; Lord, in your mercy

**Hear our prayer.**

## Blessing of the Couple

*As the couple stands or kneels, the Celebrant asks God's blessing upon them, saying*

Most gracious God, we praise you for the tender mercy and unfailing care revealed to us in Jesus 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. 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 liturgy continues immediately with the Peace.*

## Appendix 2

### **Guidelines and Provisions for Clergy & Congregational Discernment**

1. The Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge of the Congregation must initiate this discernment. If he or she discerns that this rite could be offered in her or his Congregation, she or he will bring the matter before the Vestry for their deliberation. This deliberation must include the Vestry's thorough review of the materials The Standing Committee on Liturgy & Music published accompanying the Rite. Once the Vestry has completed this review, a formal vote must take place. A 2/3 majority of the Vestry must vote in favor of offering this Rite before the Bishop will allow the Rite to be offered in that Congregation. If such a majority is achieved, the Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge and the Senior Warden will communicate this first to the Bishop and then to the Congregation explaining to them the process undertaken and the resulting vote.
2. A couple who discerns God's call to receive this Blessing, may approach the Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge requesting the Rite. At least one of the couple needs to be a baptized member of the Congregation. The Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge will meet with the couple, review the Rite with them, and if all are in agreement, set a date for the Rite. Before the Rite, the couple will sign *A Declaration of Understanding* (see Appendix 3), which explains what the Rite is and what it is not.
3. For pastoral reasons, a Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge may offer this Rite to members of his/her Congregation somewhere else other than on Church property. In that case, the Provisions in (1) above do not apply, but the provisions in (2) above do apply. The Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge must inform the Bishop and the Vestry within five days before offering the Rite off Church property. The required discernment and 2/3 vote of the Vestry are not applicable in this circumstance.
4. In no case shall non-parochial priests or deacons of this Diocese preside at this Rite except as assisting clergy to a Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge of a Congregation.
5. A Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge must inform the Bishop within ten days after a Vestry vote under the Provision (1) above. A Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge who presides at this Rite must inform the Bishop at least five days before each occasion of the Rite, whether on Church property or elsewhere.
6. In all matters not explicitly provided for above, a Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge shall follow the Canons of the Church and the Rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer.

Appendix 3

**A Declaration of Understanding**

"We, \_\_\_\_\_,  
desiring to receive the blessing of God in the Church and having committed ourselves to a life-long relationship characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection, respect, and holy love, acknowledge and understand that this Rite bestows upon our relationship God's grace-filled blessing. It does not bestow upon our relationship any legal status in civic life or from any civil authority. The Canons of the Church state: "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" Canon 1.18.1(2)(b). We understand that this Rite is not Holy Matrimony.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Officiating Priest

Date: \_\_\_\_\_