



the episcopal diocese of rhode island

Guidelines for Addressing Same-Sex* Blessings in the Diocese of Rhode Island

from The Rt. Rev. W. Nicholas Knisely, Bishop of Rhode Island

**(The word "sex" is used here in compliance with Resolution A049 of the 2012 General Convention.
Thanks to The Rt. Rev. Stephen Lane from the Diocese of Maine for permission to use their guidelines as
a basis for this document.)*

Preface

The following guidelines are offered to provide clergy and congregations who are considering the blessing of a lifelong covenant between same-sex couples a sense of the possibilities and limitations created by The Episcopal Church. Questions or concerns that are not addressed here should be forwarded to the Bishop's Office for consideration. My thanks to the diocesan *Same-sex Blessing Task Force* for their help in preparing these guidelines.

The Framework Provided by A049 (General Convention 2012)

The decisions of the 2012 General Convention create a framework for the possibility of blessing a same-sex union in the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island. According to Resolution **A049**, a "generous pastoral response" is available to meet the needs of Episcopalians who live in states where same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal. That same resolution also sets limits within which the generous response must be exercised.

A049 stated that beginning the First Sunday of Advent 2012, the bishop may authorize the use of the service titled *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*. The bishop may also adapt that service "to meet the needs of the members of this Church." The Episcopal Church has not changed its canonical definition of marriage, which is that marriage is a "solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God" (BCP, 422), and "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" in the *Book of Common Prayer* may **not** be used for a same-sex couple.

A049 also states that with the Bishop's permission, clergy may choose to host and preside at a service blessing a same-sex union. However, clergy are also free to refuse to preside at the blessing of a same-sex union, and there is no penalty for refusing to preside.

Our work in Rhode Island exercising a generous pastoral response is part of an ongoing conversation within The Episcopal Church about the nature of blessing and of

marriage. The covenant service is authorized for provisional use in the current triennium. We are accountable for our work, and we will report it to the church. Our contribution to the ongoing conversation will be our experience with real couples and real families who seek to establish lifelong and faithful relationships.

Within this framework, I authorize the blessing of same-sex unions by clergy and congregations who choose to do so. This authorization extends to signing of civil union licenses for same-sex couples in the State of Rhode Island.

Some Background

Recent changes in the United States regarding civil unions and marriages have created a challenge for the church. There are now different definitions of marriage. While the majority of states still describe marriage as a commitment between a man and a woman, several states now recognize a marriage between two men or two women. In some states, there are other “equivalent” relationships (unions, partnerships, etc.). This dilemma extends to the mutual recognition of marriages performed in different states. Many states only recognize marriages that fit their definition. Others recognize marriage as it is defined by any state. Rhode Island recognizes marriage as it is defined by any state.

The rubrics of *The Book of Common Prayer* make it clear that a marriage must conform both to the laws of the state and canons of the church (BCP, 422). In states where same-sex marriage and civil unions are legal, faithful gay and lesbian Episcopalians are asking the church to bless them. Clergy must now sort through the pastoral and canonical dilemma of deciding whether or not to preside at same-sex marriages or civil unions.

The General Convention (2012) adopted Resolution **A049** which authorized “Liturgical Resources: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing” for use in The Episcopal Church. These resources include a service for *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, theological and liturgical resources for education in a congregation, and materials to assist in preparing same-sex couples for life together.

The General Convention extended the generous pastoral discretion first authorized in Resolution **C056** (2009). In states where same-sex marriage, civil unions, or

domestic partnerships are legal, **A049** permits bishops to provide “generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this church.” It further provides

“that bishops may authorize adaptation of these materials to meet the needs of members of this church.” I understand that to mean that, under my supervision as bishop, clergy may work with same-sex couples in preparation for civil unions and may preside at the blessing of a civil union or the blessing of a previously effected marriage or civil union using the authorized and adapted rite.

A049 helps us address the needs of our gay and lesbian households, but we continue to confront the challenge created by differing definitions of marriage. The General Convention did not believe that the canonical definition of marriage should be amended by means of a resolution, but through the normal process of prayer book revision. Therefore, the General Convention asked the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to undertake a study of marriage. This may one day result in revising the BCP marriage rite.

Some Reflections on the Episcopal Church and Marriage

The Episcopal Church has historically understood marriage between a man and a woman to be a reflection both of God's intentions in creation and of Christ's relationship with the church, and has recently agreed to provide a pastoral response to same-sex couples effecting a life-long covenant.

The Episcopal Church has understood marriage to be an expression of the body of Christ, a relationship of mutual self-offering on behalf of the Other, and a bond and a covenant established by God in creation. Marriage is one expression of the smallest Christian community (...two or three are gathered in my name...), and its purpose is to help the participants grow up into Christ. That growth, that self-transcendence, is described in the BCP marriage service in three ways: mutual joy, help and comfort, and, if it is God's will, the creation of families.

Although the Book of Common Prayer presently restricts marriage to heterosexual couples, the Episcopal Church has now recognized in A049 that the lifelong covenant described above can be experienced and expressed in same-sex couples.

Theological reflections, discussion guides and other resources in support of A049 have been included in "I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing" distributed by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music at the 2012 General Convention. You will find this document as a link on the Diocesan website.

Bishop Knisely's Statement in support of A049

Episcopalians are not unanimous in our views, but in the Episcopal Church we find our unity in common prayer, not in common opinion. Even so, through many years of prayerful discussion, the majority of Christians in the Episcopal Church have come to believe that it is possible, and even common, for two people of the same-sex to live covenanted, faithful lives together in service to God, just as people in heterosexual marriages do. We have also learned that it is possible to protect the consciences of those who disagree within our church and still live together in community.

Part of what informs my opinion is that before I became a priest and then a bishop, I was a scientist. So I know the importance of trusting evidence that we see with our own eyes. I have seen what St. Paul describes as the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) in the married lives of two men and of two women. I have seen relationships that are loving, mutual, and monogamous and that have lasted a lifetime. Jesus tells us that we must test each tree by looking at the goodness of its fruit (Luke 6:43-45). Across our congregations and communities, I can see the goodness of gay and lesbian couples and their families. The Episcopal Church has been blessed for many years by the life and ministry of gay and lesbian couples, both lay and ordained. I have seen how they contribute to the common good of a congregation and a community by creating stable, loving homes.

With the forgoing in mind, I authorize the following as guidelines for work with same-sex couples. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is authorized for immediate use in the following circumstances:

- Effecting and/or blessing a civil union in Rhode Island
- Blessing a same-sex couple already united legally in another jurisdiction (marriage, civil union or domestic partnership)

I further authorize clergy of the diocese to preside at such services and to sign the civil union license.

Guidelines for the witnessing and blessing of a lifelong covenant in Rhode Island

- The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is to be used for same-sex couples **only**. Heterosexuals couples seeking a blessing liturgy are to use the Liturgy for Blessing of a Civil Marriage in the Book of Common Prayer.
- Under the provisions of **A049**, Rhode Island State Law, and now with my authorization, clergy may preside over a same-sex civil union using the *adaptation of The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* and may sign the license.
- Given that this service is authorized for provisional use, I approve the blessing of same-sex couples only in congregations where both the clergy and vestry agree and document this agreement by passing a resolution to provide this generous pastoral response to same-sex couples.
- Our primary work will be with faithful members of our own congregations. (A set of recommendations for working with out-of-state couples is listed below.)
- There is no expectation that a member of the clergy should or must preside at any service for same-sex couples or for any couple, for that matter. As is the case with every marriage or service of blessing, the decision to preside is at the sole discretion of the priest or deacon who has been asked to preside. No reason need be given for refusing to preside (Canon I.18.4), and there is no associated penalty.
- One member of the couple must be a baptized Christian.
- Same-sex couples must undergo the same regimen of “pre-marital preparation” currently required of heterosexual couples. Pre-marital issues for same-sex couples are much like those of heterosexual couples. These issues should be handled with great pastoral care, and referrals made to professionals for assistance when needed. In addition to the materials authorized by the General Convention, Province I has produced an excellent guide to assist clergy in preparing same-sex couples. That guide is

available through my office and Province I.

- viii. If either member of the couple has been married or has been part of a legal union and has divorced or has had the union legally dissolved, the scrutiny called for in Canon I.19.3 is required. In those cases I will require the priest to submit a *Request for Permission to Solemnize a Marriage or Civil Union* (enclosed). For persons who have lived in civil unions or covenanted relationships, but for whom legal dissolution or divorce is not an option, I ask you to pursue a similar discipline, especially in regard to minor children. You need to bring your best judgment to bear, and I will be available for consultation.
- ix. A Declaration of Intention should be signed as part of "pre-marital preparation" (enclosed).
- x. I expect you to uniformly apply your standards and policies regarding fees and facility use.
- xi. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is the authorized rite for same-sex couples seeking to effect and/or bless a legal union. "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" or "The Blessing of a Civil Marriage" from *The Book of Common Prayer* may **not** be used for the union of same-sex couples. *The Book of Common Prayer* and *Enriching our Worship* may be used for the celebration of Holy Eucharist. Many congregations have local marriage customs, such as the lighting of candles. These may be included in the service.
- xii. The authorized text of *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is available from Church Publishing, Inc. (<http://tinyurl.com/bvc7jnm>). The rite is free as a downloadable pdf. Please destroy any other copies you may have. A comprehensive resource guide, *Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You And You Will Be A Blessing*, is available from Church Publishing.
- xiii. I have adapted *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* by adding the words "in civil union according to the laws of the State of Rhode Island" to the third line of the opening address and changing the penultimate line of the pronouncement to read "...in civil union according to the laws of the State of Rhode Island..." as follows:

Dear friends in Christ,
we have gathered together today to witness *N. N.* and *N. N.* publically committing themselves to one another *in a civil union according to the laws of the State of Rhode Island*, 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, as long as they live.

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 civil union according to the laws of the State of Rhode Island*, as long as they both shall live. *Amen.*

- xiv. Same-sex couples who have been legally united civilly in Rhode Island or elsewhere may wish to have their unions blessed. Before blessing any couple who have been civilly united "pre-marital preparation" is required. We would ask the couple to "reaffirm" their vows.
- xv. All services of civil union should be recorded in the Marriage Register and noted as "civil union". Blessings of civil unions should be recorded only in the register of church services. A separate form for use in reporting our experience with the blessing of same-sex unions to the General Convention, *Form of Report: Witness and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, is enclosed. The completed form is to be returned to my office.

Providing a Generous Pastoral Response for Clergy an Couples from Out-of-State

All couples who have connections with your congregation or with The Episcopal Church in Rhode Island or who come to Rhode Island for a blessing of their union, should be treated in the same manner. Clergy are free to make appropriate arrangements, but must assure that "pre-marital preparation" is completed and that permission has been received for presiding at the civil union and/or blessing of a couple where one or both of the parties have been previously married, or have been in a legal or covenanted relationship that has been dissolved.

Episcopal clergy canonically resident in another Diocese, whether or not they are licensed to officiate in this Diocese, will need the consent of their bishop to preside at

a blessing of a same-sex union in this Diocese. You and I cannot grant permission for clergy to do things their own bishops will not authorize. I will be available for consultation for issues beyond these guidelines.

Transparency and Accountability

My commitment to The Episcopal Church is to be part of the ongoing conversation about same-sex marriage and to report to the House of Bishops and the General Convention. I do require you to submit the *Form of Report: Witness and Blessing of a*

Lifelong Covenant to record pertinent information about such services. This form is attached. Please do not include the names of the couple. I will compile your reports into a diocesan report to submit to the people responsible for the conversation in our communion.

A Few Closing Thoughts

The Episcopal Church will continue to discuss marriage equality for some years to come. It is important that we honor that process and exercise our pastoral care with integrity. Our work

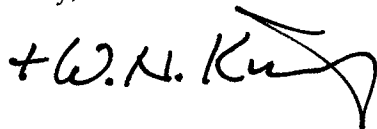
may provide the church with helpful experience and insight, but only as we are careful, thoughtful, compassionate and mutually supportive of one another.

I acknowledge and celebrate the progress made towards marriage equality by the 77th Convention of the Episcopal Church. The inability to use *The Book of Common Prayer* has created in the minds of some a concern that we are creating two classes of covenants between couples. I understand that concern. However, I think the issues of the status of same-sex marriage will have to be worked out in a wider forum both in church and in state. We are clearly in an interim period, and we will need to live with a certain degree of ambiguity for some time. I suggest we leave the question of what might happen if and when there is a new BCP rite until we have such a rite.

You will undoubtedly have many questions. I am open to specific and private conversations about all these matters. I may not have a definitive response to every question, but I'm confident that, with God's help, we can work it out together.

Please keep the whole church in your prayers as together we seek to be faithful to God's call in this work.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+W.N. Knisely". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

The Rt. Rev. Nicholas Knisely
Bishop of Rhode Island