



# The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont

To: Vermont Clergy  
From: Bishop Thomas C. Ely  
Date: November 27, 2012  
RE: Blessings and marriage for same sex couples

Dear Vermont clergy colleagues:

This letter is to update you on the policies and practices that will govern our ministry related to marriage of same sex couples and the blessing of gay and lesbian couples in lifelong covenant relationships in the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont. General Convention 2012 adopted an amended resolution (A049) "Authorize Liturgical Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships." Here is a link to the final legislation:

<http://www.generalconvention.org/resolutions/download/115-1342125335>

As a result of this legislation, various theological, pastoral, liturgical and canonical resources were approved for use and study. I commend the full range of resources to you, which will be available shortly from Church Publishing, Inc. Here is a link to these resources.

<https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/index.cfm?fuseaction=productDetail&productID=9743>

In terms of liturgy, General Convention authorized for provisional use *"The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant"* from *"Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing"* beginning the First Sunday of Advent 2012, under the direction and subject to the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority. You will find a free downloadable copy of this liturgy at the CPI address above. By way of this letter, I am authorizing the use of this liturgy for clergy canonically resident in Vermont. Clergy licensed to serve in Vermont, also have my permission to use this liturgy, provide you also have the approval of you canonical bishop. As of Advent One, this will be the only liturgy approved for use in the Diocese of Vermont for the blessing of the covenanted relationships of same sex couples. As has been our policy, the marriage liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer is not authorized for use with same sex couples.

As discussed in my 2009 Pastoral letter on the subject of marriage equality, clergy are permitted to sign civil marriage licenses OR to have a state official (e.g., Justice of the Peace, Judge) do so, while the clergy person presides at the liturgical blessing. Clergy are not required to officiate at any wedding, or blessing service, whether it is a same sex couple or an opposite sex couple. I do request that if you are approached by a same sex couple who desire to be married or receive a blessing in the church and are unable to support them based on theological grounds that you refer that couple to a colleague who can. Here is the link to that 2009 Pastoral Letter, which you may wish to review. Most of it is still pertinent: <http://diovermont.org/archived-site/Elyletters/ElyLetters09/Marriage%20Equality%20Statement%208-23-09.pdf>

If you do choose to sign civil marriage licenses, you may wish to adapt the liturgy to reflect the fact that the couple, in addition to receiving a blessing on their covenant relationship, is also being married according to the laws of the State of Vermont. Such adaptations to the liturgy are permitted when authorized by the Bishop Diocesan. To facilitate such requests, I am hereby authorizing two adaptations to the liturgy, when the clergy person is also signing the civil marriage license.

1. In the Opening address to the assembly, you may add the words in italics below, so that the address reads:

Dear friends in Christ,  
we have gathered together today  
to witness *N. N. and N. N.* publically committing themselves to one another  
*in marriage according to the laws of the State of Vermont,*  
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.

2. In the Pronouncement, you may add the words in italics below, so that the Pronouncement reads:

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  
*and united in marriage according to the laws of the State of Vermont.* Amen

I am open to discussing with you these adaptations, or others you may discover are pastorally appropriate in your use of this liturgy. For now, these are the only two approved adaptations. Others will necessitate conversation with me in advance.

It is important to the integrity of this material, that we use it as approved by General Convention during the course of this triennium and that we keep good records of our use of the material and provide good and full feedback to the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music. The Standing Commission, of which I am a member, is charged with managing an open review process of the material and its use throughout the church. Vermont's experience will be especially important.

I remind you also that the same provisions for preparing all couples for life-long covenant commitments remain in effect, including the provisions for entering into a new relationship when a previous one has ended in divorce or the dissolution of a Civil Union. Forms for your use are available through Linny in my office, or on the Diocesan Web Site under "Clergy Resources." [http://diovermont.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=31&Itemid=233](http://diovermont.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=31&Itemid=233)

Until the new form for the Declaration of Intention is available and other modifications are made to the resources for Holy Union, those forms and resources on the Diocesan Website will continue in force.

Please be in touch with me concerning any other questions or concerns you may have related to this material and its use. I appreciate very much your good pastoral work with all couples and I encourage you to bring the full range of resources to the people among whom you serve.

Faithfully,

*+Thomas*

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