

Bishop's Guidelines for Same-Sex Marriages
Episcopal Diocese of Washington
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Background

At General Convention 2012, the Episcopal Church authorized the use of liturgical resources for the blessing of same-sex relationships, with special provision for those churches in jurisdictions in which same-sex marriage is legal. Same-sex marriage is already legal in the District of Columbia, and as of January 1, 2013, it will be legal in the State of Maryland as well. Thus there is no longer a legal impediment to same-sex couples seeking to marry in any civil jurisdiction within the Diocese of Washington.

I have previously given permission to Episcopal churches and clergy in the diocese to bless same-sex relationships. Same-sex marriage was already legal in the District of Columbia at the time of my consecration, and I kept in place Bishop Chane's policy authorizing clergy of the Diocese to preside at same-sex marriage services in certain circumstances.

Updated Policies Concerning Same-Sex Marriages in the Diocese of Washington

I now give permission for same-sex couples to marry in the Episcopal Churches in the District of Columbia and to have Episcopal clergy preside at same-sex weddings. Beginning on January 1, I extend that permission to churches and clergy in Maryland. I lift Bishop Chane's previous restrictions on same-sex marriage for those coming from other jurisdictions.

For congregations and clergy who feel called to preside at same-sex marriages, I ask that marriage policies be the same for both heterosexual and homosexual couples. For example, if membership is not required for opposite sex couples, please do not require membership for same sex couples. Conversely, if you restrict weddings at your congregation for members only, please be consistent. The same is true for pre-marriage counseling requirements. Congregations and clergy vary in their approach to marriage preparation. My request is that you offer and require the same preparation for all couples.

Given that the legal right to marry is new for same-sex couples, counseling and preparation for those who were previously involved in a committed relationship should be nuanced to best serve the couple's needs. If it would be helpful to use the diocesan application for the authorization to re-marry in the Church, feel free to do so, but I do not require it.

Please use the liturgical rite passed at General Convention 2012: *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, as the foundational text, with the appropriate adaptation made at the pronouncement: Other resources and prayers may be included at the couples' request, subject to the approval of the presiding clergy.

As required by General Convention, I authorize for use in the Diocese of Washington the liturgical rite passed at General Convention, appropriately adapted for same-sex weddings:

*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 Sate of Maryland
(or the Distria of Columbia.) Amen.***

Theological Reflections

From the convictions of my Christian faith, I am proud to serve in a diocese in which same-sex marriage can be celebrated in the congregations that feel called to do so. Congregations and clergy who do not feel so called cannot be compelled, thanks to canonical provisions put in place long ago to protect clergy from having to preside at weddings to which they could not in conscience consent. I respect and honor those who oppose same-sex marriage for theological reasons.

For over 30 years, the Episcopal Church has prayed, studied, and wrestled with issues of human sexuality, holding in tension ancient assumptions about marriage with new spiritual, relational, and scientific insights that have led to a growing acceptance of homosexual orientation and awareness of God's blessing in the lives of same-sex couples. Across the Anglican Communion, there are many Episcopalians and other Anglicans who have been drawn further into fidelity and service to the world by living in committed same-sex partnerships based on holy love and the gift of seeing Christ in one another. Throughout this period, a growing number of congregations and dioceses permitted the sacramental blessing of same-sex relationships, a practice that culminated in the General Convention's 2012 decision to approve *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*.

The majority of Christians who oppose same-sex marriage often base their positions on seven references in the Old and New Testaments that condemn homosexual activity. Each one of those passages, however, condemns exploitative sexual activity that is the antithesis of loving, committed relationships. The Bible is silent on the subject of same-gender monogamous relationships.

In contrast, the Bible has strong teachings against divorce. Jesus himself is quite clear on the subject. Yet over the ages, most Christian churches have come to

recognize that God forgives the human sin and frailty that precipitate divorce. We now take a more compassionate approach to this issue than our biblical forebears would have condoned. If the teaching on divorce can change in the light of further theological reflection, I believe that the teaching on same-sex relationships can change as well.

However we interpret the seven texts used to argue against marriage equality, they pale in comparison to the over-arching biblical imperatives to love one another, work for justice, and recognize that each of us is created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus, for Christians, is God incarnate. He not only shows us how to live, but reveals to us that God loves us unconditionally. Indeed, gay and lesbian Christians often speak of the overwhelming experience of being assured that they are loved by God as they are.

No matter how devoted to the scriptures of our faith we may be, few of us shape our moral opinion based on holy texts alone. If God is at work in the world, then our experience is a kind of scripture, and we must pay careful attention to what it is teaching us. Jesus said, “you will know people by their fruits.” St. Paul wrote: “The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Many of us in the Episcopal Church know same-sex couples whose relationships can only be described as holy, and thus we have come to support the blessing of such unions. They stand in stark contrast with many exploitative and casual patterns of sexuality that both heterosexual and homosexual Christians are right to reject.

The struggle to determine what sorts of people God approves of is an ancient one. Jewish Christians, the original followers of Jesus, struggled over whether to include non-Jews into their fellowship. Gentiles, according to Jewish law, were unclean. But in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter was led by a vision to the home of a Gentile family that was eager to learn of Jesus’s teaching. After sharing a meal with them, he made one of the most memorable declarations in all of scripture: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

Every generation, it seems, has struggled to include someone previously thought to be outside the realm of God’s grace and full humanity. In our time, we in the Episcopal Church have come to understand that God shows no partiality between straight and gay people. Not every same-sex couple is a paragon of holiness, but neither is every heterosexual couple. Life long relationships are hard, which is why the support of religious and societal institutions is so important.