

The Solemnization and Blessing of the Marriage of Same-Sex Couples

Liturgical and Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina
Effective the Feast of All Saints, November 1, 2014
Issued by the Right Reverend Michael B. Curry

The policy for the [Blessing of Same-Sex Unions](#), effective the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2012, continues in effect for the blessing of unions that are not legal marriages. This policy addresses the solemnization and blessing of the marriage of same-sex couples.

PREFACE

All Christians are called to bear witness to the good news of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered for such witness by our covenantal relationship with God.

Baptism initiates us into that covenant, making us Christ's own forever and members of Christ's Body, the Church. The Eucharist sustains us in that covenantal life and strengthens us to be Christ's witnesses in the world.

Our covenantal life with God is expressed in relationships of commitment and faithfulness, including those of same-sex couples. It is the Church's joy to celebrate these relationships as signs of God's love, to pray for God's grace to support couples in their life together, and to join with these couples in our shared witness to the gospel in the world.

Liturgical Resources 1: *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing*

BACKGROUND OF SAME-SEX BLESSINGS IN THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NORTH CAROLINA SINCE 2004

In the July and August 2003 issues of *The Communicant*, the newspaper of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, I shared a two-part theological reflection on reading the Bible as the bearer of God's living Word for the living of life in the world in harmony with God's dream for the world. In part two of that series, I shared a bit of my own spiritual journey, which included deep wrestling with the Holy Scriptures, that led me, over time, to the conviction that the lives of faithful disciples of Jesus who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered bear witness to the love of God that has been revealed in Jesus, and they can be models of holiness and sanctity of life and relationships. This led me to affirm that the Church can and should bless the unions of Christian same-sex couples as well as expand the discernment processes leading to ordination to include gay and lesbian persons who may be in covenanted, lifelong unions. It was on this basis that I gave my consent to the consecration of the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, who was in such a lifelong, covenanted union, as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire. In the fall of

that year, at the annual diocesan clergy conference, I shared with the clergy my intention to allow the blessing of same-sex unions in the diocese sometime in 2004.

On July 1, 2004, I issued a Pastoral Statement with Guidelines for the Blessing of the Unions of Same-Sex Couples. This did not authorize a liturgical formulary for such blessing, as only the General Convention bears that authority in our Church. It did, however, allow clergy to extend their pastoral care and spiritual support to Christian same-sex couples to include blessing of their relationships in liturgical ways that would provide such care and support. Guidelines for this pastoral ministry were provided with the Pastoral Statement. After significant periods of theological reflection, education, and parish spiritual discernment, several congregations began to embrace this ministry. Others did not.

Since 2004, I have held fast to the following principal in this matter: *no church or priest will be compelled to exercise this particular way of ministry and none will be prohibited from doing so.* With this rubric in mind, we in the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina have lived together as a community of congregations and clergy who have felt called to exercise this particular pastoral and sacramental ministry and those who have not felt called to this particular way of providing pastoral care and spiritual support for Christian same-sex couples. Thus, in this Diocese, we have worked to live together with theological and pastoral diversity and sensitivity and with mutual respect for each other in Jesus Christ.

BACKGROUND OF THESE MARRIAGE POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

The 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church (2012) “authorized for provisional use....under the direction and subject to the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority” a rite for the blessing of the unions of same-sex couples titled, ‘The Witnessing and Blessing of A Lifelong Covenant’ (A049).” The resolution authorizing this liturgical rite added the following provision:

“That bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church.”

In 2004, when I permitted the blessing of the lifelong union of same-sex couples, marriage was not a legal option in the state of North Carolina. That was still the case in 2012 when I updated our guidelines in light of the “provisional rite” authorized by the 77th General Convention.

Recent actions by the Supreme Court of the United States (October 6, 2014) and by the Federal District Court in Asheville, North Carolina (October 10, 2014) have now made it possible for same-sex couples to be lawfully married in the state of North Carolina.

Policies and Guidelines

Under provision of the authorization provided by the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church (A049), its rubric allowing bishops to “provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church,” and in light of the changes in marriage laws in the state of North Carolina by virtue of the recent actions the Courts, I grant permission to clergy and congregations of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina to exercise the sacramental ministry of solemnizing and blessing the marriages of same-sex couples in accord with the policies and guidelines outlined below.

THE APPROVED LITURGY FOR USE IN THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NORTH CAROLINA

The "provisional" rite, "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant" from *Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing*, authorized by the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, is the only approved liturgy for the blessing of the marriage or the union of same-sex couples in and by clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. As is the case with the Book of Common Prayer, faithful adherence to the rubrics of the liturgy is expected of all clergy.

Further, the following two adaptations are approved for use in the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina:

1. The Opening Address to the gathered community may be amended to read as follows (additional language in italics):

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 North Carolina,
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.

Therefore, in the name of Christ, let us pray
that they may be strengthened for the promises they make this day,
and that we will have the generosity
to support them in what they undertake
and the wisdom to see God at work in their life together.

2. The Pronouncement may be amended to include the following:

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 North Carolina. Amen.

MARRIAGE POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS APPLY EQUALLY TO ALL THE BAPTIZED

The same theological and moral values, pastoral care, liturgical and other parish policies and practices will now apply equally to both heterosexual and homosexual couples. This includes, but is not limited to, expectations and provisions for:

- Who may be married in the church

- Premarital preparation
- Signing of the Declaration of Intention by the couple
- Request of the bishop for remarriage after divorce
- Signing of the marriage licenses by the officiating minister
- Entry of the marriage in the parish register
- Parish policies with regard to use and availability of facilities.

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT BY THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH*

The sacramental ministry of blessing the marriage is a ministry of the community of faith, not just of a priest and a couple. It is intended to be a liturgical and sacramental way for our faith community to provide pastoral care and spiritual support for members of the Church in same-sex relationships.

This sacred ministry should be entered into only after wide and extended communal prayer for discernment; prayerful and thoughtful biblical, theological and pastoral study; holy conversation; and listening to the spiritual needs and voices of the community of faith and of the world. The bishops are always available for consultation as needed.

The ultimate decision – to offer blessings or not to offer blessings for marriages and unions– rests with the rector/vicar in consultation with the vestry. As a result, the vestry must experience a similar process of discernment before engaging the congregation. While the congregational process of discernment is conducted, vestry members must be obviously present and listening and engaging people.

**This provision applies to congregations who wish to consider this sacramental ministry, whether for the purpose of blessing unions or solemnizing and blessing marriages. Those congregations who have already engaged a discernment process for same-sex blessings are not required to engage the same discernment process a second time. The need for additional education and discernment with regard to marriage is left to the judgment of the rector/vicar in consultation with the vestry of the congregation.*

RESOURCES

Dr. Ayliffe Mumford, director of the School of Ministry, has prepared and provided numerous church wide and local resources to assist clergy and congregations. Links to these and other resources, including the “provisional rite” and discernment and educational links, may be found under the [School of Ministry](#) on the diocesan website.

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen