

I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing

Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships

This portion of the report of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music is intended for the consideration of the 77th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, and for study in preparation for that Convention. It is intended to be read in connection with the Commission's report contained in the Blue Book. None of the material in this document is authorized for use in The Episcopal Church.

Introduction

As members of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music of the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, we give thanks for the many and various ways that the grace of God in Christ is made manifest in our Church and throughout the world. Whenever the Church pronounces God's blessing, it does so with such gratitude always in mind.

For more than thirty years, The Episcopal Church has been responding to the call to seek and serve Christ in its members who are gay and lesbian. In 1976, General Convention Resolution A069 affirmed that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church." Since then, we have been in a Churchwide discernment process about how we live out that resolution. Some congregations and their clergy have welcomed same-gender couples and offered liturgical blessings of their relationships, and some dioceses have developed guidelines for such blessings. Resolution 2003-C051 of the 74th General Convention recognized "that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions." Six years later, General Convention called for the collection and development of resources for those blessings. The materials presented here respond to that call.

Resolution 2009-C056 of the 76th General Convention directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to "collect and develop theological and liturgical resources" for the blessing of same-gender relationships. This resolution instructed the Commission to work in consultation with the House of Bishops and to "devise an open process for the conduct of its work, inviting participation from provinces, dioceses, congregations, and individuals who are engaged in such theological work, and inviting theological reflection from throughout the Anglican Communion." We have understood the process for our work to be as important as the resources themselves.

The Scope of Our Work

Because Resolution 2009-C056 directed us to "collect and develop" resources, we have not debated whether the Church should bless same-gender relationships. Nonetheless, we recognize that Episcopalians and Christians throughout the Anglican Communion have disagreed about whether such blessings are a legitimate development within Christian tradition or an unacceptable departure from biblical teaching. Resolution 2009-C056 acknowledged this dispute in the resolve "that this Convention honor the theological diversity of this Church in regard to matters of human sexuality," and previous General Convention resolutions have also recognized this disagreement. In the theological essay "Faith, Hope, and Love" we acknowledge these differences, and offer an approach to blessing same-gender relationships that reflects the centrality of Scripture in Anglican tradition, interpreted in concert with the historical traditions of the Church and in the light of reason. The discussion guide included in these resources is intended to enable all congregations and dioceses to explore the materials, whether or not they believe the Church should bless same-gender relationships.

As we developed the resources, many people asked whether we were actually preparing a rite for same-gender marriage. In accord with Resolution 2009-C056, the Commission has understood our charge to be the development of a liturgy of blessing, not marriage. Nonetheless, there are a number of parallels to different-gender marriage, as General Convention Resolution 2000-D039 suggested when it acknowledged that "there are currently couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in marriage and couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships." That 2000 resolution then set forth the expectation that "such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God," and denounced "promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members." These expectations have defined the Commission's understanding of the same-gender relationships for which we have developed resources. While the liturgy we have developed is not called "marriage," we recognize significant parallels: two people publicly make a lifelong, monogamous

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commitment to one another with the exchange of solemn vows in a ritual that pronounces God's blessing on their life together.

The question of marriage is complicated by ongoing changes in American civil law. As of August 2011, six states and the District of Columbia issue marriage licenses to same-gender couples, five states allow civil unions, and seven recognize some form of domestic partnership; on the other hand, thirty states have adopted constitutional language defining marriage as between one man and one woman and thirty-nine states have statutes defining marriage in this way.¹ Civil law in other countries where The Episcopal Church is located adds further complexity. Both the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Canons of the Episcopal Church require clergy to conform to the laws of the state regarding marriage and describe marriage as being between a man and a woman. To address this complexity, these resources include an essay on canon law that discusses scenarios likely to arise as same-gender couples request an authorized liturgy for blessing of their relationship and/or civil marriage (or union) in the Church.

In addition to questions about the term "marriage," we received many comments about the terms "gender" and "sex." Following the wording of Resolution 2009-C056, we have used the term "same-gender" rather than "same-sex" to describe these relationships. Previous General Convention resolutions, along with the diocesan resources we have collected, are not consistent in their choice of terminology. This is more than a linguistic question. As the Commission has worked on these resources, we acknowledged but did not address the complexity of contemporary social and academic conversations about the categories of "sex" and "gender." The pastoral resources for preparation of couples prior to a liturgy of blessing offer ways to work with individuals who identify themselves as bisexual or transgender. The resources expect that a bisexual or transgender couple who seeks the Church's blessing of their relationship will commit to monogamy and lifelong faithfulness, the same commitment asked of every other same-gender and different-gender couple.

Collecting Resources

The Commission has gathered a vast amount of materials, including official studies, service leaflets from liturgies of blessing, and diocesan and provincial guidelines for these blessings. The Archives of the Episcopal Church established a digital archive for the project, <http://www.episcopalarchives.org/SCLM/>, where anyone may review the materials we have gathered.

Resolution 2009-C056 allows bishops to "provide generous pastoral response" to meet the needs of the Church's members, so in December 2009, the chair of the Commission asked all diocesan bishops to report what provisions they were making and what resources they were commending to their dioceses. Twenty-seven bishops responded to this request, and a number of these bishops included theological, pastoral, teaching, and/or liturgical resources. Seven other dioceses subsequently submitted materials. All diocesan materials that we received are available for review in the digital archive for Resolution 2009-C056.

We gathered liturgical resources from many places. Clayton Morris, who served as Liturgical Officer for the Episcopal Church until 2009, had accumulated numerous materials over the course of nearly two decades. The Commission received resources from lay and ordained Episcopalians throughout the Church, including some of our own members. Commission members reviewed all of these as we began the process of developing liturgies. A representative sampling of the resources is posted on the digital archive, and all of the resources will be permanently housed at the Archives of the Episcopal Church.

Developing Resources

At our March 2010 meeting, the Commission began our work in response to this resolution with a day of theological reflection. That conversation resulted in a brief outline of the resources to be developed:

- one or more essays setting forth scriptural and theological foundations for blessing same-gender relationships;

¹ This information is from the website of the National Conference of State Legislatures: <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16430>.

- one or more rites for blessing same-gender relationships;
- pastoral and teaching resources to assist clergy and congregations as they consider these blessings; and
- resources designed to help communities understand and address canonical and legal matters.

This proposed outline became the basis for four task groups formed to develop materials. These groups were advisory to the Commission, which made the final decision about the resources to be reported to the 77th General Convention in 2012.

In forming the task groups, the Commission sought the wisdom and experience of lay people and clergy from both academic and congregational contexts. Members of the task groups reflected the diversity of The Episcopal Church in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity, geography, and sexual orientation. The task groups met four times in 2010 and 2011, and the chairs of the task groups met monthly by telephone or video conference. The Commission discussed the work at each of its five meetings during the triennium.

An Open Process ... Inviting Participation

Consultation with the House of Bishops

In September 2010, the chair of the Commission and four of the task-group chairs presented to the House of Bishops a draft of theological and liturgical principles that would guide this work. Responses from the bishops helped refine those principles. At the March and September 2011 House of Bishops meetings, bishops serving on the Commission and/or the task groups updated their colleagues. At the September 2011 meeting, bishops had an informal opportunity to discuss the final draft of the theological essay and the liturgy with the bishops who are members of the Commission.

Province I Hearing

In October 2010, the Commission meeting in New Hampshire included a hearing with bishops, other clergy, and same-gender couples from each of the seven dioceses in Province I, which comprises the six New England states. The evolving legal status of civil unions and marriage equality in those states has meant that many of the dioceses have been addressing questions of blessing same-gender relationships for many years. Province I is the only province of The Episcopal Church to develop a resource for clergy ministering to same-gender couples, and a majority of the dioceses in this province have guidelines for blessing these relationships. Thus, our meeting in one of the dioceses of Province I offered a good opportunity to consult with those engaged in this work, as directed in Resolution 2009-C056.

At the hearing, thirty-three people, lay and ordained, testified about their experiences. Many told the Commission that congregations were transformed when they joined in the celebration of a blessing. For some congregations and couples, the blessing of a civil union as part of the regular Sunday liturgy was an especially powerful expression of the Church's acceptance and care for the couple. Clergy and couples alike were surprised at how jubilant congregations were. We also heard about the cost of secrecy in places where relationships had to be hidden and blessings could not be openly celebrated. Couples and clergy spoke of the joy that came when relationships could be openly acknowledged. A few couples told powerful stories of reconciliation that happened within their families when their relationship was celebrated and blessed in a Church liturgy.

Churchwide Survey Regarding Pastoral and Teaching Materials

In October 2010, the Task Group on Pastoral and Teaching Resources created a Web-based survey asking what resources congregations were using to prepare same-gender couples who came to the Church seeking a blessing, and what teaching materials and resources were used or would be needed to help congregations in a discernment process about welcoming the blessing of same-gender relationships. The Commission used both official and unofficial channels to invite responses to the survey: a press release sent to diocesan communicators, a letter to all members of the 2009 House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, invitations on the unofficial list-serve for bishops and deputies, and networking by members of the Commission and the task groups.

Between October 2010 and January 6, 2011, we received 1,131 responses to the survey from 111 dioceses and all nine provinces of The Episcopal Church. Twenty-three percent of the respondents stated that the blessing of same-gender relationships already occurs in their congregations, and of these, 55 percent confirmed that their congregations had engaged in an educational and/or discernment process before the blessing of same-gender relationships began. With regard to preparing same-gender couples, 32 percent of respondents said that their preparation differed from that provided for different-gender couples, and 43 percent expressed a need for additional resources. The data from this survey helped guide the development of the pastoral and teaching resources.

Churchwide Consultation

The Commission invited every diocese in The Episcopal Church to send two General Convention deputies, one lay and one clergy, to an overnight consultation at the conclusion of its March 2011 meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. Three goals were set forth:

- to *inform* the deputies about the work of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music in response to Resolution 2009-C056;
- to *engage* the deputies in theological reflection in response to the Commission's work, and to solicit feedback that would inform the Commission and its task groups as they continued their work;
- to *equip* the deputies to report to the rest of their deputations and engage them in ongoing theological reflection about the blessing of same-gender relationships.

Materials distributed to participants at the consultation are available for review in the SCLM digital archive, which also includes a link to the webcast of the entire consultation.

One hundred ninety-five deputies from ninety-eight dioceses registered for the gathering. Most responded enthusiastically to the process. A significant majority stated on the evaluation form that they felt either "completely equipped" or "somewhat equipped" to discuss this work in their dioceses and at the 2012 General Convention. When asked what they valued most, one responded, "the thoughtful and prayerful way that people with differing opinions were able to discuss this important work." Another deputy noted "the opportunity to speak and listen to other people and the broader perspective I gained from those interactions; the opportunity to engage the process, principles and issues that are in play as we do this work together; the real and abiding sense that we are doing this work 'together.'" A few deputies commented on the absence of opposing viewpoints in the plenary sessions. One wrote, "The only thing lacking for me was an opportunity for those who are new to engaging this conversation or who are opposed to have enough space to express their reservations, be heard, and maybe to hear constructive, respectful responses."

Review of Draft Resources

After the task groups presented a complete first draft of the resources to the Commission in June 2011, we made the drafts available to a group of consultant reviewers. During July 2011, 133 people, lay and ordained, representing all nine provinces of The Episcopal Church, offered thousands of comments on the draft resources. In August, the task groups' extensive revisions led to final drafts for the Commission.

Inviting Reflection from throughout the Anglican Communion

In addition to the direction of Resolution 2009-C056, the Commission was mindful that the 2004 Windsor Report urged "all provinces that are engaged in processes of discernment regarding the blessing of same sex unions to engage the Communion in continuing study of biblical and theological rationale for and against such unions" (par. 145).

Knowing that the Anglican Church of Canada has been addressing this subject for many years, we requested and received liturgies from several of the Canadian dioceses. The digital archive includes, under "Church-Wide Resources," an issue of *Liturgy Canada* that gives an overview of the history and summarizes the guidelines and rites available on diocesan websites in the Anglican Church of Canada.

International Anglican Liturgical Consultation (IALC)

The IALC, a biennial gathering, includes liturgical scholars, representatives nominated and sent by provinces of the Anglican Communion, and members of liturgical commissions of Anglican provinces. Since provinces may refer matters to the Consultation, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music requested time on the agenda of the August 2011 meeting. The IALC Steering Committee not only granted a half-day for this discussion, but also met in March 2011 with representatives of the Commission to learn more about the work and to prepare for the discussion in the full Consultation.

The IALC meeting included fifty-five people from nineteen provinces of the Anglican Communion. The official representatives of The Episcopal Church, Ruth Meyers (Chair of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music) and Thomas Ely (Bishop of Vermont and a member of the Commission), presented a summary of the theological rationale and liturgical principles guiding the development of resources, along with a draft of the liturgy. Not all participants in the IALC meeting supported The Episcopal Church's decision to develop these resources, but all joined in respectful conversation in a small-group format. In the written notes submitted from the small groups, some stated that the work of The Episcopal Church would be helpful for their own province, while others indicated that blessing same-gender relationships is not on the agenda for them.

Participants in the IALC conversation asked for development of the scriptural foundations for blessing same-gender relationships and clarification of the concepts of blessing and covenant. They urged that the theological and liturgical resources make clear that The Episcopal Church is envisioning these relationships as monogamous and lifelong. Many found the liturgy to be strikingly similar to marriage. They encouraged greater clarity in the liturgy about the nature of the covenant and a more robust form of blessing.

The task groups received a detailed report of the comments from the IALC meeting and took account of them as they prepared the final draft of the resources.

Conclusion

"I will bless you," God declared to Abraham, "so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). The Commission and its task groups have been reminded, at every step in this process, of the many blessings God has bestowed on our Church. The unprecedented opportunities we have had to engage with our sister and brother Episcopalians in every province of The Episcopal Church and with Anglicans from the wider Anglican Communion have illustrated for us the rich diversity of our life together in the Body of Christ. This work has been a divine gift and a blessing to us, which we are eager to share.

We offer these resources with the hope that they will strengthen our shared witness in The Episcopal Church to the love and grace of God in Christ. As in every other aspect of our life together as God's people, we offer these resources, not relying on ourselves alone, but on God, who "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine," and always for the sake of God's glory in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:20-21).