

Policy Regarding the Sacramental Blessing of Life-long Covenants in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles

The joining of two persons in a life-long relationship of mutual love and fidelity is a gift of God given to the whole human family. In particular, Christian Marriage is a sacramental gift of grace offered and opened to all the baptized. All who enter this covenant have the opportunity to serve as an icon of the love between Christ and the Church, create a place where God's reign may break into the world and become a prophetic sign that Paradise, lost by our first parents, will one day be restored. The Church continues to discern its theology of marriage in light of the ongoing work of the Spirit who continues to lead the Church into the truth of the Gospel (John 16:12-13).

When a couple desires to be married, the Church recognizes and blesses the covenant that already exists between two people. The sacramental act of marriage is not something conferred on the partners by the priest, but is rather a grace given by God from one partner to the other. The Church points to, holds up and blesses the covenant as a holy sign of ongoing grace for the persons in the relationship and as a gift to the whole Body of Christ.

In our day, the Church is discovering that this blessing must reflect the inclusive love of God for all Christians as a sign of the royal and priestly dignity imparted in baptism. In the Episcopal Church, we have made clear that recognizing and blessing faithful unions between persons of the same gender is within the boundaries of our common life, despite the continuing struggles experienced by some members of our church and in some places in the Anglican Communion.¹

¹ Resolution D-039 accepted by the General Convention 2000 and C-051 from the General Convention of 2003 are perhaps the clearest articulation of the mind of our church to date.

Text of D-039

Resolved, That the members of the 73rd General Convention intend for this Church to provide a safe and just structure in which all can utilize their gifts and creative energies for mission; and be it further

Resolved, That we acknowledge that while the issues of human sexuality are not yet resolved, 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; and be it further

Resolved, That we expect 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 be it further

Resolved, That we denounce promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members; and be it further

Resolved, That this Church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values, and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement, and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them; and be it further

In response, the policy of this Diocese has been to allow the blessings of same-sex relationships as warranted by pastoral need. We affirm that in this diocese, relationships of mutual love and fidelity may be experienced as blessed and holy between two women or two men as much as between a man and a woman, while recognizing that some among us may not yet be able to accept same-sex relationships as consistent with orthodox faith.

Secondarily, the Church currently serves as an agent of the State in that its priests solemnize civil marriages. Yet this function in civil law must not overshadow the primary action of the Church in acknowledging the action of the Holy Spirit already at work in the lives of God's people.

Resolved, That we acknowledge that some, acting in good conscience, who disagree with the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality, will act in contradiction to that position; and be it further

Resolved, That in continuity with previous actions of the General Convention of this Church, and in response to the call for dialogue by the Lambeth Conference, we affirm that those on various sides of controversial issues have a place in the Church, and we reaffirm the imperative to promote conversation between persons of differing experiences and perspectives, while acknowledging the Church's teaching on the sanctity of marriage.

Text of C-051

Resolved, That the 74th General Convention affirm the following:

1. **That our life together as a community of faith is grounded in the saving work of Jesus Christ and expressed in the principles of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: Holy Scripture, the historic Creeds of the Church, the two dominical Sacraments, and the Historic Episcopate.**
2. **That we reaffirm Resolution A069 of the 65th General Convention (1976) 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."**
3. **That, in our understanding of homosexual persons, differences exist among us about how best to care pastorally for those who intend to live in monogamous, non-celibate unions; and what is, or should be, required, permitted, or prohibited by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church concerning the blessing of the same.**
4. **That we reaffirm Resolution D039 of the 73rd General Convention (2000), that "We expect 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 that such relationships exist throughout the church.**
5. **That we recognize 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.**
6. **That we commit ourselves, and call our church, in the spirit of Resolution A104 of the 70th General Convention (1991), to continued prayer, study, and discernment on the pastoral care for gay and lesbian persons, to include the compilation and development by a special commission organized and appointed by the Presiding Bishop, of resources to facilitate as wide a conversation of discernment as possible throughout the church.**
7. **That our baptism into Jesus Christ is inseparable from our communion with one another, and we commit ourselves to that communion despite our diversity of opinion and, among dioceses, a diversity of pastoral practice with the gay men and lesbians among us.**
8. **That it is a matter of faith that our Lord longs for our unity as his disciples, and for us this entails living within the boundaries of the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church. We believe this discipline expresses faithfulness to our polity and that it will facilitate the conversation we seek, **not** only in The Episcopal Church, but also in the wider Anglican Communion and beyond.**

Functioning as agents of the State raises questions as to the appropriate role of the Church in performing marriages. This has been especially true in recent months. The Supreme Court of the State of California upheld the right of two persons of the same sex to enter into civil marriage, however, the passage of Proposition 8 means that our State Constitution no longer provides for same-sex civil marriage. Nevertheless, these developments in public discourse regarding same-sex marriage have provided an opportunity for the Church to address the issue of same-sex covenants as well as marriage more generally.

In response to our theological understanding, it is the policy of the Diocese of Los Angeles that any priest canonically resident or licensed to function may officiate at the sacramental blessing of the life-long covenant of persons of the same sex following the provisions of this policy despite the civil law of our state at this time. While the state will not allow us to officially marry same-sex couples, we believe the same blessing ceremony afforded to men and women should be afforded to same-sex couples.

Our policy with regard to same-sex marriage further responds to the canonical provision that “Clergy of this Church shall conform to the laws of the State governing the creation of the civil status of marriage and also to the laws of this Church and of the Diocese in which the office is being exercised” (I.18.1). Thus, the sacramental blessing of covenants cannot be understood as civil marriages at this time. We understand the current policy to be provisional as regards future changes that may be made in the Canons of this Church, the resolutions of General Convention and changes in civil law.

All policies with respect to the sacramental blessing of covenants shall equally apply to same-sex couples and to heterosexual couples without prejudice. In particular:

- 1) While civil marriage is not currently an option for same-sex couples in California, the canons of this church regarding the Solemnization of Holy Matrimony, preservation of marriage, dissolution of marriage and remarriage as found in Title I, Canons 18 and 19 heretofore shall guide the clergy of this Diocese as they prepare couples and perform blessings of same-sex covenants. For same-sex couples, a similar form of the declaration concerning marriage required by canon (I.18.3.e-g) to be signed by all couples before marriage shall be used as follows and shall be required of all same-sex couples desiring the blessing of their covenant in this diocese:
 - a. “We, A.B and C.D., desiring to receive the sacramental blessing of our covenant in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold this covenant to be a lifelong union between two people.
 - b. “We believe that the union of two people in heart, body and mind, is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and when it is God’s will, for the nurture of children in the knowledge and love of the Lord.
 - c. “And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this relationship and to seek God’s help thereto.”

- 2) As provided in the Canons of this church, it is within the discretion of any member of the clergy to decline to solemnize any marriage (I.18.4). Any member of the clergy may therefore refer any same-sex couples to the Office of the Ordinary or to some other congregation in this Diocese if they are not willing to bless these covenants themselves because of their own reservations in conscience, and insofar as there is no other impediment or reason not to bless the covenant.
- 3) The policies with respect to marriage, dissolution of marriage and remarriage currently in place in the Diocese of Los Angeles as found in the *Policies, Procedures and Protocols* manual for this diocese shall guide clergy in preparing all couples for the blessing of covenants (see sections A/R 1-3).
- 4) The Rite for The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage in the Book of Common Prayer is the standard Rite of this Church for the sacramental blessing of life-long covenants. The Prayer Book also provides an option for an alternative Rite. We recommend the supplemental Rite attached to this policy to be used for the blessing of all covenants whether between men and women or same-sex couples as a means of demonstrating our solidarity with our brothers and sisters currently denied the right of civil marriage, and as a means of having one Rite appropriate to all such Blessings. While the Prayer Book provides for still other possibilities, all such rites as shall be used in this diocese must follow the rubrics for “An Order for Marriage” on pages 435-6 of the Book of Common Prayer.
- 5) All policies developed by individual congregations with respect to marriage should apply equally to all couples seeking the sacramental blessing of a life-long covenant.
- 6) Parochial clergy shall provide education, information, pastoral care and discussion within their congregations before solemnizing marriages of same-sex couples especially if such marriages would be the occasion for confusion, misunderstanding or any other spiritual crisis for members of the congregation. Educational materials have been developed by the Bishop’s Task Force on Marriage for use in congregations. At the same time, congregations are encouraged to move forward in prophetic witness and in justice towards same-sex couples who have been denied both the church’s blessing and the state’s benefits of marriage for so long.