



## **Guidelines for Clergy and Congregations Regarding Marriage of Same-Sex Couples in the Diocese of Western North Carolina**

The Rt. Rev. G. Porter Taylor, *Bishop*

### **Preface**

When marriage between two persons of the same-sex becomes legal in North Carolina, the following guidelines will inform and guide clergy and congregations that feel called to offer a “generous pastoral response” to same-sex couples. Please direct questions that are not covered in these guidelines to the Office of the Bishop for consideration.

### **The Framework Provided by General Convention 2012**

According to General Convention Resolution A049, the church may offer a “generous pastoral response” to Episcopalians who live in states where civil marriage, civil unions or domestic partnerships are legal for same-sex couples. The resolution also sets limits within which the generous response must be exercised.

A049 states that beginning on the First Sunday of Advent 2012, a bishop may authorize the use of the service entitled *The Witnessing and Blessings of a Lifelong Covenant*. The bishop may also adapt that service “to meet the needs of the members of this Church.” The Episcopal Church has not changed its canonical definition of marriage, which is that marriage is a “solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God” (BCP, 422) and “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” in *The Book of Common Prayer* may **not** be used for a same sex couple.

A049 also states that with the bishop’s permission, clergy may choose to host and preside at a service blessing a same-sex union. However, clergy are also free to refuse to preside at the blessing of a same-sex union, and there is no penalty for refusing to preside.

Our desire in the Diocese of Western North Carolina to exercise a generous pastoral response is set in the context of an ongoing conversation in the Episcopal Church about the nature of blessings and of marriage. The covenant service is authorized for provisional use until General Convention 2015. We are accountable for our work, and we will report it to the wider Church. We will share experiences of work with same-sex couples who seek to establish lifelong and faithful relationships. We will also share experiences of congregations and clergy who, for reasons of faith and conscience, cannot offer rites of blessing. Our stories will help shape and inform the next steps our denomination takes.

### **Guidelines**

1. Priests of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Western North Carolina may officiate at the civil marriage of a same sex couple as a “generous pastoral response” to lesbian and gay couples seeking to be married, and may bless the civil marriage of the couple.

2. There is no expectation that a member of the clergy should or must preside at any service for same-sex couples. As is the case with every marriage or service of blessing, the decision to preside is the sole discretion of the priest who has been asked to preside. No reason need be given for refusing to preside (Canon I.18.4) and there is no penalty for a refusal.
3. Services for the marriage and blessing of same-sex couples will use the rite *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, as approved by Resolution A049 at the 2012 General Convention (see footnote 1). The authorized text of the rite is available for Church Publishing, Inc. (<http://tinyurl.com/bvc7jnm>). A comprehensive resource guide called *Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You and You Will be a Blessing*, is also available from Church Publishing. The rites in *The Book of Common Prayer* may not be adapted or used for these services. The Celebration of Holy Eucharist, should it be part of the service, may be from *The Book of Common Prayer* or *Enriching our Worship*.
4. Use of *The Witnessing and Blessing of A Lifelong Covenant* is a ministry of the larger Church that will find expression in some but not all congregations. These rites are offered as “provisional rites” in order for the wider Church to analyze their appropriateness. The General Convention 2015 will decide whether to authorize them as supplemental rites (like *Enriching Our Worship*). Hence, the decision to use them is not the same as the Rector’s right to decide other liturgical matters. The Vestry shares in this decision to participate in this exploration for the wider Church because the decision is the appropriateness of this task for this congregation. Therefore, to undertake this ministry, the Rector or Priest-in-Charge and a majority of the Vestry of a congregation must first come to agreement that undertaking this ministry is appropriate for the particular local setting.
5. An essential step in that process is for The Vestry and Rector/Priest in Charge to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the study materials in *Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You and You Will be a Blessing*.
6. Blessings are not to occur if a parish is in an interim period unless the Bishop gives permission.
7. Both members of the couple will sign the adapted Declaration of Intention (see Attachment 1).
8. The Rector is to inform the Bishop’s office by sending the appropriate form to The Bishop Henry Center (see Attachment 2).
9. The priest officiating is to complete the appropriate form concerning comments about the Rite itself and send to the Liturgy/Music Commission (see Attachment 3).
10. Before solemnizing a marriage the Member of the Clergy shall have ascertained:
  - a. That both parties have the right to contract a marriage according to the laws of the State.

- b. That both parties understand that Holy Matrimony is a physical and spiritual union, entered into within the community of faith, by mutual consent of heart, mind, and will, and with intent that it be lifelong.
- c. That both parties freely and knowingly consent to such marriage, without fraud, coercion, mistake as to identity of a partner, or mental reservation.

11. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* will be adapted in two ways:

- a. In the part titled “Gathering,” the following underlined language may be included:  
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, come what may, as long as they live.
- b. At the pronouncement, clergy are authorized to use the following words:  
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.*

The complete rite, adapted for marriage, is attached as “Attachment 3.”

- 12. Our primary work will be with faithful members of our own congregations. The rite should not be performed unless at least one member of the couple has demonstrated a commitment to the life of the congregation. “Commitment” is defined by attendance and financial contribution for at least six months.
- 13. Clergy will provide the same pastoral care and counseling to same-sex couples as they provide to heterosexual couples. Couples who legally married in other states may wish to have their marriages blessed in Western North Carolina. Pre-marital preparation is expected of these couples. If, however, the same-sex couple has been together for several years and has already entered into a domestic partnership, civil union or marriage in another state, the clergy person may use discretion in applying the pastoral counseling requirement. The intention of the parties to contract marriage shall have been signified to the Member of the Clergy at least thirty days before the service of solemnization; *Provided*, that for weighty cause, this requirement may be dispensed with if one of the parties can furnish satisfactory evidence of responsibility. In case the thirty days' notice is waived, the Member of the Clergy shall report such action in writing to the Bishop immediately.
- 14. Clergy are permitted to sign civil marriage licenses.
- 15. Blessings of civil marriages should be recorded in the Register of Church Services and in the Parish Register pursuant to Canon III.9.5.c.1.

16. Clergy and congregations will apply the same standards and policies for fees and facilities use to same-sex couples as to heterosexual couples.
17. Both parties must be at least 21 years of age.
18. If either member of the couple has been married or part of a legal union that ended in divorce or legal dissolution, Canon I.19.3 is to be followed. The priest will submit to the Office of the Bishop a Request for Permission to Solemnize a Marriage. If either member had previously lived in a civil union or covenanted relationship for which legal dissolution or divorce is not an option, the clergy person is to exercise a similar discipline, particularly where minor children are involved. The Member of the Clergy shall have instructed the parties that continuing concern must be shown for the well-being of the former spouse or partner, and of any children of the prior marriage or union.

**Attachment 1: Adapted Declaration of Intention**

**Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant and  
Marriage according to the  
Laws of the State of North Carolina**

NOTE: This template is presented for use with same-gender couples since a similar declaration is required by the Canons of the Episcopal Church (Canon I.18.3[d-g]) for different-gender couples prior to their marriage.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We, \_\_\_\_\_

and \_\_\_\_\_

desiring to receive the blessing of a Lifelong Covenant, do solemnly declare that we hold this covenant to be our lifelong commitment as provided by the Episcopal Church gathered in General Convention.

We believe that our covenant is intended by God for our mutual joy, for the encouragement and support given one another in daily life and changing circumstances, for bringing God's grace to our community, for the deepening of faith as we experience God's love in our love for one another, and (if it may be) for the physical and spiritual nurture of children. This covenant shall be upheld and characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which shall enable us to see in each other the image of God.

And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this covenant and to seek God's help hereto.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Attachment 2: Form to Submit to the Bishop**

**Notification of Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant and Marriage  
According to the Laws of the State of North Carolina**

Names of Couple \_\_\_\_\_

Previous Marriage/Partnership?

\_\_\_\_\_yes \_\_\_\_\_no

If yes, appropriate forms completed and filed? \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Blessing \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Vestry Approval \_\_\_\_\_

Send completed form to the Bishop's Office

**Attachment 3: Report to be sent to Liturgy and Music**

Date of service \_\_\_\_\_

What parts of service worked well liturgically?

What changes/modifications would you suggest?

Send completed form to Mr. Kyle Ritter—Cathedral of All Souls

**Attachment 4:**

*The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant  
Adapted for Marriage*

***Liturgical Resources for Blessing Same-Gender  
Relationships***

***Concerning the Service***

*This rite is appropriately celebrated in the context of the Holy Eucharist and may take place at the principal Sunday Liturgy. This rite then replaces the Ministry of the Word. A bishop or priest normally presides. Parallel texts from Enriching Our Worship 1 are included as options for elements of this rite.*

*Two or more presenters, at least one of whom is baptized, who may be friends, parents, family members, or drawn from the local assembly, may present the couple to the presider and the assembly.*

*To comply with the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the rite is celebrated, the priest shall consult the bishop, who may authorize modifications of the Pronouncement.*

**The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong  
Covenant and Marriage according to the  
Laws of the State of North Carolina**

***The Word of God***

**Gathering**

*The couple to be blessed joins the assembly. A hymn of praise, Psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.*

*The Presider says the following, the people standing*

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

*People* And blessed be God's kingdom, now and for ever. Amen.

*In place of the above may be said*

*Presider* Blessed be the one, holy, and living God.

*People* Glory to God for ever and ever. *From Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost*

*Presider* Alleluia. Christ is risen.

*People* The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

*In place of the above may be said Presider Alleluia. Christ is risen.*

*People Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia. Then may be said*

*Presider Beloved, let us love one another,*

*People For love is of God.*

*Presider Whoever does not love does not know God,*

*People For God is love.*

*Presider Since God so loves us,*

*People Let us love one another.*

*The Presider may address the assembly in these words*

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, come what may, as long as they live.

Ahead of them is a life of joy and sorrow, of blessing and struggle, of gain and loss, demanding of them the kind of self-giving love made manifest to us in the life of Jesus. Christ stands among us today, calling these two people always to witness in their life together to the generosity of his life for the sake of the world, a life in which Christ calls us all to share.

Let us pray, then, 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.

## **The Collect of the Day**

*Presider The Lord be with you. or God be with you. People And also with you. Presider Let us pray.*

*The Presider says one of the following Collects*

Gracious and everliving God: assist by your grace *N.* and *N.*, whose lifelong commitment of love and fidelity we witness this day. Grant them your blessing, that with firm resolve they may honor and keep the covenant they make; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

*or this*

Almighty and everliving God: look tenderly upon *N.* and *N.*, who stand before you in the company of your Church. Lift them up in joy in their life together. Grant them so to love selflessly and live humbly, that they may be to one another and to the world a witness and a sign of your never-failing care; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, to the ages of ages. **Amen.**

*or this*

O God, faithful and true, whose steadfast love endures for ever: we give you thanks for sustaining *N.* and *N.* in the life they share and for bringing them to this day. Nurture them and fill them with joy in their life together, continuing the good work you have begun in them; and grant us, with them, a dwelling place eternal in the heavens where all your people will share the joy of perfect love, and where you, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

*or this*

*For those who bring children*

Holy Trinity, one God, three Persons perfect in unity and equal in majesty: Draw together with bonds of love and affection *N.* and *N.*, who with *their families* seek to live in harmony and forbearance all their days, that their joining together will be to us a reflection of that perfect communion which is your very essence and life, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who live and reign in glory everlasting. **Amen.**

## **The Lessons**

*The people sit. Then one or more of the following passages of Scripture is read. If the Holy Communion is to be celebrated, a passage from the Gospels always concludes the Readings. When the blessing is celebrated in the context of the Sunday Eucharist, the Readings of the Sunday are used, except with the permission of the Bishop.*

Ruth 1:16-17

1 Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a; or 1 Samuel 18:1-4 Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Song of Solomon 2:10-13, 8:6-7

Micah 4:1-4

Romans 12:9-18

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 Galatians 5:14, 22-26 Ephesians 3:14-21 Colossians 3:12-17

1 John 3:18-24

1 John 4:7-16, 21

*When a biblical passage other than one from the Gospels is to be read, the Reader announces it with these words*

*Reader A Reading from \_\_\_\_\_ . After the Reading, the Reader may say*

**The Word of the Lord.**

*or*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

*or*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. *People* Thanks be to God.

*Between the Readings, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said. Appropriate Psalms are*

Psalm 65 Psalm 67 Psalm 85:7-13 Psalm 98 Psalm 100 Psalm 126 Psalm 127 Psalm 133 Psalm 148 Psalm 149:1-5

*All standing, the Deacon or Priest reads the Gospel, first saying*

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to \_\_\_\_\_.

*or*

The Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ according to \_\_\_\_\_. *People* Glory to you, Lord Christ.

*After the Gospel, the Reader says*

The Gospel of the Lord. *People* Praise to you, Lord Christ.

*Appropriate passages from the Gospels are*

Matthew 5:1-16 Mark 12:28-34 Luke 6:32-38

John 15:9-17

John 17:1-2, 18-26

## **The Sermon**

### ***The Witnessing of the Vows and the Blessing of the Covenant***

*The couple comes before the assembly. If there is to be a presentation, the presenters stand with the couple, and the Presider says to them*

*Presider* Who presents *N.* and *N.*, who seek the blessing of God and the Church on their love and life together?

*Presenters* We do.

*Presider* Do you promise to love, respect, and pray for *N.* and *N.*, and to do all in your power to stand with them in the life they will share?

*Presenters* We do.

*The Presider then addresses the couple, saying*

*Presider* *N.* and *N.*, you have come before God and the Church to make public your commitment to one another and to ask God's blessing.

*The Presider addresses one member of the couple*

*Presider* *N.*, do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to *N.*?

*Answer* I do.

*Presider* Will you live together in faithfulness and holiness of life as long as you both shall live?

*Answer* I will.

*The Presider addresses the other member of the couple*

*Presider N., do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to N.?*

*Answer I do.*

*Presider Will you live together in faithfulness and holiness of life as long as you both shall live?*

*Answer I will.*

*The assembly stands, the couple faces the people, and the Presider addresses them, saying*

*Presider Will all of you here gathered uphold and honor this couple and respect the covenant they make?*

*People We will.*

*Presider Will you pray for them in times of trouble and celebrate with them in times of joy?*

*People We will.*

## **The Prayers**

*Presider Then let us pray for N. and N. in their life together and for the concerns of this community.*

*A Deacon or another leader bids prayers for the couple.*

*Prayers for the Church and for the world, for the concerns of the local community, for those who suffer or face trouble, and for the departed are also appropriate. If the rite takes place in the principal Sunday worship of the congregation, the rubric concerning the Prayers of the People on page 359 of the Book of Common Prayer is followed.*

*Adaptations or insertions may be made to the form that follows.*

*Leader For N. and N., seeking your blessing and the blessing of your holy people; Lord, in your mercy (or Lord, in your goodness)*

*People Hear our prayer.*

*Leader For a spirit of loving-kindness to shelter them all their days; Lord, in your mercy (or Lord, in your goodness)*

*People Hear our prayer.*

*Leader For friends to support them and communities to enfold them; Lord, in your mercy (or Lord, in your goodness)*

*People Hear our prayer.*

*Leader For peace in their home and love in their family; Lord, in your mercy (or Lord, in your goodness)*

*People Hear our prayer.*

*Leader* For the outpouring of your love through their work and witness; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For the wisdom to care for the children you may entrust (*have entrusted*) to them; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For the growth of their children from strength to strength; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For the strength to keep our vows and commitments; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness) *People* Hear our prayer.

*After a time of silence, during which the assembly voices its petitions, the leader may add the following biddings*

*Leader* For all who have been reborn and made new in the waters of Baptism; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For those who lead and serve in communities of faith; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For those who seek justice, peace, and concord among nations; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For those who are sick and suffering, homeless and poor; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For victims of violence and those who inflict it; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*Leader* For communion with all who have died in the hope of rising again [especially \_\_\_\_]; Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)  
*People* Hear our prayer.

*The Presider concludes the Prayers with the following or another appropriate Collect*

Giver of every gift, source of all goodness, hear the prayers we bring before you for *N.* and *N.*, who seek your blessing this day. Give them a share in the saving work of Jesus, who gave

himself for us, and bring about the fullness of life he promised, who now lives and reigns for ever and ever. **Amen.**

*If the Eucharist is to follow, the Lord's Prayer is omitted here.*

*Leader*

As our Savior Christ has taught us, we now pray,

*People and Leader*

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

*Leader*

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,

*People and Leader*

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

## ***Commitment***

*The people sit. The couple stands, facing the Presider.*

*Presider N. and N., I invite you now, illumined by the Word of God and strengthened by the prayer of this community, to make your covenant before God and the Church.*

*Each member of the couple, in turn, takes the hand of the other and says*

In the name of God, I, *N.*, give myself to you, *N.* I will support and care for you by the grace of God: enduring all things, bearing all things. I will hold and cherish you in the love of Christ: in times of plenty, in times of want. I will honor and keep you with the Spirit's help: forsaking all others, as long as we both shall live. This is my solemn vow.

*or this*

In the name of God, I, *N.*, give myself to you, *N.* I will support and care for you: enduring all things, bearing all things. I will hold and cherish you: in times of plenty, in times of want. I will honor and keep you: forsaking all others, as long as we both shall live. This is my solemn vow.

*If rings are to be exchanged, they are brought before the Presider, who prays using the following words*

Let us pray.

Bless, O God, these rings as enduring signs of the covenant *N.* and *N.* have made with each other, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*The two people place the rings on the fingers of one another, first the one, then the other, saying*

*N.*, receive this ring as a symbol of my abiding love.

*If the two have previously given and worn rings as a symbol of their commitment, the rings may be blessed on the hands of the couple, the Presider saying*

Let us pray.

By these rings *N.* and *N.* have shown to one another and the world their love and faithfulness. Bless these rings, Holy God, that they may now be signs of the covenant *N.* and *N.* have made this day, through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

### ***Pronouncement***

*The Presider says*

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.*

### ***Blessing of the Couple***

*As the couple stands or kneels, the Presider invokes God's blessing upon them, saying*

Let us pray.

Most gracious God, we praise you for the tender mercy and unending care revealed to us in Jesus the Christ and for the great joy and comfort bestowed upon us in the gift of human love. We give you thanks for *N.* and *N.*, and the covenant of faithfulness they have made. Pour out the abundance of your Holy Spirit upon them. Keep them in your steadfast love; protect them from all danger; fill them with your wisdom and peace; lead them in holy service to each other and the world.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve, and keep you, and mercifully grant you rich and boundless grace, that you may please God in body and soul. God make you a sign of the loving-kindness and steadfast fidelity manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of

our Savior, and bring you at last to the delight of the heavenly banquet, where he lives and reigns for ever and ever. **Amen.**

## ***The Peace***

*The Presider bids the Peace.*

*Presider* The peace of the Lord be always with you.

*People* And also with you.

*In place of the above may be said*

*Presider* The peace of Christ be always with you.

*People* And also with you.

*The liturgy continues with the Holy Communion. When the Eucharist is not celebrated, the Presider blesses the people. The Deacon, or in the absence of a Deacon, the Priest, dismisses them.*

## ***At the Eucharist***

*The liturgy continues with the Offertory, at which the couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.*

*The following proper preface may be used.*

Because in the giving of two people to each other in faithful love you reveal the joy and abundant life you share with your Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

*The following postcommunion prayer may be used.*

God our strength and joy,  
we thank you for the communion of our life together,  
for the example of holy love that you give us in *N.* and *N.*, and for the Sacrament  
of the Body and Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ.  
Grant that it may renew our hope  
and nourish us for the work you set before us,  
to witness to the presence of Christ in the world,  
through the power of your Spirit,  
to the glory of your Name. Amen.