

**Guidelines for the Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage of Same-Sex Couples
in the Diocese of Alabama**
Effective the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2015

In the act of blessing, the Church is giving thanks "for God's goodness and favor; seeking God's continued favor and grace so that we may manifest more fully that gratitude in our lives; and receiving power from the Holy Spirit to bear witness to that grace in the world."¹

In 2015, the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved Resolution A036, which amended Canon I.18 concerning Marriage, and substituted "two persons" for "husband" and "wife." The amended Canon requires that the couple "understand the teaching of the church that God's purpose for [their] marriage is for [their] mutual joy, for the help and comfort [they] will give to each other in prosperity and adversity, and when it is God's will, for the gift and heritage of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of God. [They] also understand that [their] marriage is to be unconditional, mutual, exclusive, faithful, and lifelong, and that [they] engage to make the utmost effort to accept these gifts and fulfill these duties, with the help of God and the support of [their] community."²

The 78th General Convention also approved Resolution A054, which authorized the continued use of "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant" from "Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You will Be a Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015"³ for use in jurisdictions where civil marriage equality is not the law, i.e., dioceses outside of the United States. This resolution also authorized for trial use "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage," and "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2" from "Liturgical Resources I."

After consultation with the Bishops' Commission on Generous Pastoral Response, and in consideration of the actions of the 78th General Convention and the changes in the civil law, the following guidelines have been established to enable the use of the rites approved by the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church for the witnessing and blessing of marriages of same-sex couples.

No parish or member of the clergy will be compelled or required to solemnize or bless any marriage.

Section 1. Definitions

For the purposes of these guidelines, the following definitions shall apply:

1. "Parish" shall mean any congregation, parish, worshipping community, or chaplaincy in the Diocese of Alabama, including Camp McDowell.

¹ *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing* (2012), p. 200

² Canon I.18 as amended and effective November 29, 2015.

³ Available online at <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/13068.pdf>, on pages 2-151 (retrieved July 30, 2015).

2. “Vestry” shall mean the vestry of a parish and shall also include the advisory council, board, or other committee charged with decision making for worshipping communities or chaplaincies, including the Department of Camp McDowell.
3. “Rector” shall mean the ecclesiastical authority for the parish and shall include the rector, priest-in-charge, interim rector, vicar, or chaplain. In the event that a parish is without a rector, priest-in-charge, interim rector, vicar, or chaplain, the senior warden may, in consultation with the diocesan bishop, initiate the process and submit the required information to the diocesan bishop.
4. “Member of the clergy” shall mean the priest or bishop of this Diocese that is presiding at the celebration of the rite. When a deacon is present for the celebration of the rite, the deacon shall perform according to the rubrics of the rite and in accordance with the “Norms of Service for the Diaconate in the Diocese of Alabama.”

Section 2. Guidelines for receiving permission to be a parish that celebrates the rites

1. The witnessing and blessing of marriages, including the blessing of a civil marriage, of same-sex couples may be celebrated in the Diocese of Alabama beginning the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2015, and only after permission has been obtained from the diocesan bishop.
2. Permission for the use of the approved rites will be granted by the diocesan bishop on a parish-by-parish basis.
 - (a) The rector may request permission of the bishop for the parish to celebrate the rites only after having obtained an affirmative agreement of the vestry. Such request shall be in writing and shall confirm that the process in 2(b) has been used.
 - (b) The required agreement should be the result of informed deliberation and prayerful discernment on the part of the members of the vestry. The rector and vestry shall study and discuss *Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You will Be a Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015*, the document approved by the 78th General Convention.
 - (c) A parish may undertake this study and discussion at any time and shall not be required to wait for a couple to request the rite.
 - (d) If the rector and the vestry are unable to reach an agreement, the bishop’s permission will not be given for the member of the clergy or the parish to use the rites until agreement has been reached and a request for permission made as in (a) above.
3. If a parish received permission to Bless Same-Sex Relationships under the policy dated January 29, 2015, the rector shall consult the vestry of the parish to determine if there is agreement to witness and bless same-sex marriages. If there is such agreement, the bishop shall be notified in writing. If there is no such agreement, then no member of the

clergy of that parish shall witness or bless same-sex marriages until such agreement exists.

4. *Only* the rites approved by the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church shall be used.

Section 3. Guidelines for the celebration of the rite in parishes that have received permission

1. After permission is given to a parish to witness and bless marriages of same-sex couples, the member of the clergy shall obtain permission from the bishop for each couple. The member of the clergy shall have ascertained:
 - (a) That all Canons and diocesan policies related to marriage (as they may be amended) including those Canons that govern remarriage, have been followed.⁴
 - (b) That the intention of the parties to enter into this marriage has been signified to the member of the clergy at least sixty days before the ceremony.
 - (c) Both parties have been instructed as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of a marriage by the member of the clergy, or they have both received such instruction from persons known by the member of the clergy to be competent and responsible. Such instruction shall include the Church's expectation of all Christian marriages that such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection, and respect; careful and honest communication; and the holy love, which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God,⁵ trusting in the mercy of Christ. Resources for counseling such couples can be found in *Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You will Be a Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015*.
2. Prior to performing the rite, the member of the clergy shall:
 - (a) require that the parties sign the Declaration of Intent as amended in *Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You will Be a Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015*.
 - (b) make a written request to the bishop to perform the rite providing the information in Section 3.1 and including the Declaration of Intent. Absent an extreme or unusual circumstance, allow the bishop thirty days to respond.
3. For any retired or non-parochial member of the clergy to celebrate the rites, they shall first request the diocesan bishop's permission in each case.

⁴ See, Canon I.18, Canon I.19, and Diocese of Alabama policy on marriage found at http://s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/3208378/marriage_20canon_20updated_202015.pdf

⁵ Resolution D039, 2000 General Convention

4. When one or both people seeking the witnessing and blessing of a same-sex marriage are members of a parish within this Diocese that has chosen not to perform these rites, the couple may approach a member of the clergy outside of their parish, provided:
 - (a) the couple has informed the rector of the parish where one or both are members;
 - (b) the couple has granted permission to the rector of the parish of which one or both are members to have conversations with the member of the clergy to whom they intend to apply for the rite about their request, and
 - (c) the couple has agreed to abide by the instructions, decisions and counsel of the member of the clergy who has received permission to officiate.
5. Celebrations of “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage” and “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2” shall be recorded in the marriage register in the parish in which the rite takes place.

Section 4. Conclusion

As in all things, all parties involved are to be treated with the Godly respect called for when Christ commanded us to love one another as he has loved us. No person should be denigrated or held in less esteem for holding conscientious convictions that differ on this matter from others in their parish or in this diocese.