THE CASE FOR MARRIAGE

In 1976 the Episcopal Church promised "full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance and pastoral concern and care of the Church" to its gay and lesbian members. In the intervening years, we have seen many milestones along the way in the journey toward making that resolution a reality. But we are not there yet.

Full and equal claim means full and equal claim — and it is time to end the exclusion of a percentage of the baptized from a percentage of the sacraments by adopting the canonical and liturgical changes necessary to end discrimination against the marriages of same-sex couples in the Episcopal Church.

At its 77th General Convention the Episcopal Church spoke unequivocally on civil marriage equality by adopting GC2012-D018: "End Discrimination Against Same-Sex Marriages." It is time to "Let our yes be yes" [Matthew 5:37] and call the 78th General Convention to do the same for sacramental marriage.

Claiming the Blessing [CTB] was convened in 2002 as an intentional collaborative of organizations and individuals within the Episcopal Church advocating for full inclusion of all the baptized in all sacraments of the church. Since 2002, our advocacy has included liturgies for the blessing of same-sex relationships, equal access to all orders of ministry by qualified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender candidates and supporting civil and sacramental marriage equality.
The Task Force for the Study of Marriage was called for by the 77th General Convention at the request of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM).

It was the experience of the SCLM’s Blessings Task Force that while it worked to respond to the Episcopal Church’s call to develop liturgical resources for blessing same-gender relationships (2009–2012) it faced repeated questions about marriage.

Because the questions were much larger than the blessing of same-gender relationships, responding to them was beyond the scope of the work of the Blessings Task Force. So in 2012 the church adopted resolution (A050) calling for a task force to identify and explore biblical, theological, historical, liturgical, and canonical dimensions of marriage.

To do that work, the task force divided into three working group asking the same overall question: “What might the Episcopal Church have to say to today’s world as to what makes a marriage Christian and holy?”

In addition to seven essays and a study guide, the Report of the Task Force for the Study of Marriage to the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church also includes two resolutions.

One calls for canonical changes that would make marriage equally available to same and opposite-sex couples and the other for the work of the Task Force to continue for another three years. The report begins with an Introduction which also serves as a summary of their work and is reprinted here for your reading. We commend to you the report in its entirety.
One of the defining characteristics of our Anglican tradition is how we approach significant matters that require faithful discernment. We rely upon three interrelated resources that provide a holistic and balanced method of consideration: Scripture, tradition, and reason.

The resolution that defined the work for the Task Force on the Study of Marriage (2012–A050) was broad, to say the least. It asked us to consider the historic, theological, biblical, canonical, legal, liturgical, and social dimensions of marriage. The advantage of having such a broad charge was to ensure that we would approach this important subject holistically, from all three of the traditionally Anglican viewpoints. In some of the seven essays that follow, one viewpoint may be more evident than another, but throughout them all, we have attempted to engage deeply with Scripture, tradition, and reason.

This introduction summarizes a few of the highlights of each essay, in order that the reader might see where we are headed. Those who take the time to read the essays themselves, however, will find a much richer and more nuanced treatment than what this introduction provides. We begin with a biblical and theological foundation in the first two essays, examine our history in the following three, and conclude with two on contemporary issues: whether clergy should act as agents of the state in performing marriages; and some data and reflections on the current state of marriage in our society and Church.

Please keep in mind that these seven essays, however holistic, are not an attempt to be comprehensive, and we do not consider them to be the final word. They are simply our present, admittedly limited contribution to a process of study and discernment that has gone on, and will continue to go on, for a long time. It is our hope that these essays will provide something more than interesting reading for those who take the time. Given the changing norms and practices around marriage, blessing, singlehood, and other forms of what people consider to be “family,” the subject bears close and faithful consideration by our Church on a broad basis.

As we begin our first essay, “A Biblical and Theological Framework for Thinking about Marriage,” we make it clear that we approach the subject of marriage — as has the Church for centuries — not as a matter of dogma or core doctrine, but as a concern of pastoral or moral theology. While the former is considered to be unchanging, the latter can, and does, evolve considerably over time.

Our lead–up to the subject also includes an overview of the wide range of values and regulations for marital relations that are found in biblical texts. This overview shows just how complex, evolving, and contradictory our Scriptures are on the subject, and therefore how tricky it is to speak of “the biblical view of marriage.” We demonstrate how different biblical views and practices of marriage have variously formed and influenced different parts of the faith community through history, even into our own day.

The paper then moves to the heart of the matter: a theological framework that we offer for thinking about marriage. This framework includes several powerful biblical models that serve as analogies for the relationship of marriage: God’s unconditional faithfulness and forgiveness; the paradox of union and difference in Christ; and Christ’s self–offering in love that is at the heart of the Paschal Mystery.
Finally, the essay concludes with a discussion about the marriage of same-sex couples, making four points.

- The first is that when our criteria for a holy marriage are based upon the moral values of self-offering love, our conclusion is that same-sex couples are as capable of a holy marriage as are different-sex couples.
- Second, the essential quality of marital unity in difference outlined previously can be present for same-sex couples in ways other than the often-cited “complementarity” of different-sex couples.
- Third, “it is not in the sex difference, or in sex itself (whether understood as the sex of the bodies involved or the sexual act) that moral value lies,” since moral value is determined by “the context and relationship of the actors,” rather than by actions alone.
- And last, the clear expectations that General Convention resolution 2000-D039 set forth for any committed lifelong relationship, including same-sex couples, are seen as central to our understanding of the very nature of marriage and its vows.

In our second essay, “Christian Marriage as Vocation,” we consider marriage itself as “a calling, a spiritual practice, a particular, vowed manner of life ..., a way of being in and engaging the world, of ordering our life in ways that facilitate our participation in the wider purposes for which God created us, redeemed us, and brings us into newness of life.”

This vocation is not for everyone, for Scripture itself reminds us that not all are called to marriage. However, it is set within, and as a part of, the more fundamental, universal vocation of love.

A section follows that more fully examines the notion of union-in-difference and “complementarity” that the previous essay introduced. Relying upon Paul’s understanding of the “new creation” that is made in Christ, where traditional binary distinctions of male/female, slave/free, Jew/Gentile are broken down, we can then see the gift of marital difference in terms much broader and more complex than those of sex. It is the mystery of union and difference that matters in marriage, rather than the sex of the partners.

Gospel and Pauline themes provide depth to our understanding of the vocation of marriage, as they show how “particular graces or charisms gifted to each of us from God can come to their fullest fruition through the relationships and commitments we form,” including marriage. The theme of “abiding” in John 15 helps us see marriage as a form of avowed stability, a vessel that God uses to help us to bear the fruit of love.

Paul emphasizes the transformational quality of life in Christ in which we are made anew, and in marriage we can see the possibility of gradual, lifelong metamorphosis. As such, the vocation of marriage can be “a way of participating in the ongoing renewal of creation.”

The next three essays are historical. The first of these, “A History of Christian Marriage,” demonstrates, as do our sections on Scripture, just how complex and diverse the beliefs and practices about marriage have been within the faith community.
The various practices of early Jewish and Roman Hellenistic marriage are discussed, with themes that range from marriage as a partnership within a social context, procreation, belovedness, divorce, polygamy, patriarchy, and power.

In the early Church, we see a countercultural shift that “invites Christians to imagine a different kind of family from the paternalistic families of either Judaism or Rome,” as family was now found through spiritual identification rather than through blood lines and social status. In the late New Testament era and beyond, the Church began, on the one hand, to commend abstinence and singleness over marriage, and on the other, to align more closely with the values of the empire.

In medieval times, familial and tribal partnerships are paramount; and in the High Middle Ages, an emphasis on chivalric romance — along with its objectification of women as noble, chaste, and pure beings — becomes a part of the backdrop for marriage. The Reformation rejected the primacy of the celibate life and emphasized companionship and the family as the central building blocks of the Christian life.

In the New World, there were “numerous ways in which marriage law was used to oppress, and ... numerous ways in which subjugated people continued to find means to establish intimate bonds of familial relationship despite the impediments to volitional marriage.”

The modern age brought a new call for rights and freedoms for women, and this, in turn, led to dramatic changes in the nature of marriage and family life, including a more peer-based relational model. At the same time, “the imperative to develop a theologically sound and culturally sensitive response to the question of the sanctity of a same-sex marriage has heightened.”

A part of this complex history of marriage is the closer focus of “Marriage as a Rite of Passage,” our next essay. Beginning with a model introduced by 20th-century anthropological studies, we see how marriage, like other rites of passage, consists of a formal ritual action designed “to help individuals or communities transition from one life state to a new one.”

This time of transition serves as a “liminal state,” wherein the participants are separated from their old way of life and yet are not fully incorporated into their new one. This liminal space can provide an experiential context, allowing for greater freedom, intimacy, and reinvention.

In the past, this liminal space between singleness and marriage was marked by rites of betrothal. As these practices have gone out of use, new ones have somewhat replaced them: the publishing of banns, pre-marital counseling, and, increasingly in our day, cohabitation as a stepping-stone to marriage.

From an anthropological point of view, one could see this latter development as “a potential correction” to the loss of liminal space prior to marriage, recapturing something of the sense that marriage is something “that can and should be eased into rather than jumped into.”
The essay concludes with the assertion that marriage can, at times, be a rite that subverts the status quo, a prophetic act. Examples given are interfaith and interracial marriages and new familial bonds that are created across class lines, political affiliations, and ethnicities. As younger generations cross these boundaries more easily than those before them, we now have greater potential to incarnate a Gospel vision of the world as it can be — a world marked by more equality, richness, and diversity.

The third in our series of historical essays is “The Marriage Canon: History and Critique,” which shows that discussions in The Episcopal Church about marriage have largely been about remarriage after divorce. As is often the case, changes in canon law have followed changes in practice. And so the essay traces some of these changes in society that forced issues resulting in canonical responses.

At first, remarriage after divorce was prohibited entirely, then only in the case of adultery, and then finally in other cases, but by petition to the bishop. In addition, other regulations were introduced after society experienced a significant rise in the divorce rate: requirements for pastoral preparation and instruction, verification that the couple had a legal right to be married, the presence of witnesses, the entry of information into the parish register, and so on.

The essay concludes with a series of questions that offer a critique of the current marriage canon. Included in this critique are explanations for each of the changes to the marriage canon that this Task Force proposes in resolution form.

Our essays now shift to two contemporary subjects. The first of these is “Agents of the State: A Question for Discernment,” which directly addresses the question that many today are asking: “Should the Church be in the marriage business at all?” — that is, as agents of the state. Without drawing a firm conclusion, we note that whatever the Church may decide on this matter, our discernment must include practical and ethical considerations about whether our participation in civil marriage enables us to be better agents of social transformation, makes us complicit in furthering injustice, or potentially does both.

Our final essay is “Changing Trends and Norms in Marriages.” As required by our enabling resolution 2012-A050, we consulted broadly with individuals, couples, scholars, and ecclesial partners; and we considered current social research and data on marriage. These consultations provided extremely helpful information toward a clearer picture of the state of marriage today.

The main issue that we identified for our reflection as a church has to do with the current drop in marriage rates, and for those who do marry, a delay until a later age than ever before. Cohabitation, as a temporary option or alternative to marriage, is significantly on the rise. Possible historical causes, as well as costs and benefits of these trends, are outlined, including possible impacts that the Church may consider in its mission and pastoral ministry.

The essay concludes with a section on differences in marriage trends among groups identified by race and ethnicity: African Americans, Hispanics and Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Finally, we included some statistics regarding same-sex marriage that were current as of the time that this document was submitted. #
Q&A ON THE STUDY OF MARRIAGE TASK FORCE REPORT
by The Reverend Susan Russell, Diocese of Los Angeles

It was a tremendous honor to be a member of the Task Force on the Study of Marriage and to participate in such a wide consultation with constituents and experts within and beyond the Episcopal Church. Our three years of work has now been compiled in our report and commended to the Legislative Committee on Marriage and the 78th General Convention in Salt Lake City June 25–July 3. Here is my overview of the report – in Q&A form.

Q. Why did the Episcopal Church need a task force to study marriage?
A. The Task Force for the Study of Marriage was called for by the 77th General Convention at the request of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM). It was the experience of the SCLM’s Blessings Task Force that while it worked to respond to the church’s call to develop liturgical resources for blessing same–gender relationships (2009–2012) it faced repeated questions about marriage. Because the questions were much larger than the blessing of same–relationships, they were beyond the scope of the work of the Blessings Task Force.

Q. What kind of questions were they being asked?
A. Questions like: What makes a marriage Christian? What is the relationship between the Church’s blessing of a relationship, whether different–gender or same–gender, and a union, “marriage” or otherwise, created by civil law? Is the blessing of a same–gender relationship equivalent to the marriage of a different–gender couple, and if so, should this liturgy be called marriage?

Q. What exactly did the Task Force on Marriage study?
A. The enabling resolution (A050) called for the task force to identify and explore biblical, theological, historical, liturgical, and canonical dimensions of marriage. To do that work, the Task Force divided various tasks into three working group asking the same overall question: “What might the Episcopal Church have to say to today’s world as to what makes a marriage Christian and holy?”

Q. What does the report contain?
A. The Blue Book report to the 78th General Convention consists of seven essays, a study guide and two resolutions.
Q. What do the resolutions call for?
A. One (A036) calls for changes to Canon I.18 (Of the Solemnization of Holy Matrimony) and the other (A037) to continue the work of the task force for another three years.

Resolution A036 – The suggested canonical changes would make the Canon I:18 [a] ordered more practically in terms of pastoral practice; [b] focused on the actual vows made in The Book of Common Prayer marriage rite; [c] reflective of the theology expressed in the Task Force’s study and essays; and [d] inclusive of both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

Resolution A037 – Continuing the work of the Task Force would provide an opportunity for the church to study -- and possibly respond to -- the changing realities of marriage in our culture and in our congregations beyond the scope of what the wide-ranging A050 study allowed for.

Q. Does these proposed canonical revisions change the church’s teaching on marriage?
A. No. The proposed revision does nothing to alter the BCP or the "theology of marriage." All it does is respond to the charge to remove what some perceive as a canonical bar to solemnizing same-sex marriages in states where the law permits and the bishop allows the use of the provisional liturgies.

Q. Does making the marriage canons inclusive of same-sex couples “redefine marriage?”
A. Only if our definition of marriage starts and ends with the gender of the couple promising to love and to cherish each other until death do they part. As the “Christian Marriage as a Vocation” essay argues, the vocation of Christian marriage is catalyzed by a love that unites two consenting adults in a holy bond -- a sacred vessel in and through which they may grow throughout the course of their lives; a bond that transcends the binary sexual difference of male and female.

Q. Will making these changes create greater challenges for our relationships within the Anglican Communion?
A. There are those in our wider Anglican family who will be unhappy with any changes we make to be more inclusive and there will be those in our wider Anglican family who are watching us for leadership to help them move forward. While there continue to be tensions and challenges around a variety of issues -- including gender equality and human sexuality -- the climate in the Anglican Communion has improved dramatically in recent years. One indication of that shift is the refusal of Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, to allow himself to be leveraged into polarizing differences into divisions.
Q. Was changing the canons to include marriage between same-sex couples a foregone conclusion when the Task Force began its work?
A. No. It was a foregone conclusion that the 78th General Convention would be called to consider resolutions calling for canonical changes, but not that those resolutions would come from the Task Force. For example, Resolution 2012-D091 — which would simply have made the marriage canons gender neutral — was referred by the 77th General Convention to the Task Force for the Study of Marriage to consider.

However, the recommended canonical changes — as detailed in the “Marriage Canon: History and Critique” essay — emerged from a holistic canonical study including — but not limited to — the question of same-sex marriage. And the unanimous decision to include the call for these canonical changes came late in the process, after much study, prayer, reflection and consultation.

Q. But what about the gender-specific language about marriage in the Prayer Book? How would that be reconciled with these canonical changes?
A. It would not be the first time the canons have been amended to interpret language in the Prayer Book that has become outdated. One leading example is the 1976 decision on the ordination of women. The prayer book still uses only male pronouns in the ordination service, but the Canons interpreted that language as descriptive rather than prescriptive — ending discrimination against the ordination of women by stating “words of male gender shall also imply the female gender.” [Canon 2. Sec 1.] A similar solution can be considered by the 78th General Convention to reconcile the current description of marriage in the Prayer Book with the canonical changes recommended by the Task Force on the Study of Marriage.

Q. What is the significance of changing the name from "Holy Matrimony" to "Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage"?
A. The former title of the canon dates from the earlier editions of the BCP which titled the rite itself "The Solemnization of Holy Matrimony." The 1976–79 revision of the BCP changed the title of the rite to "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage" and the change to the title of the canon reflects this change. In the present canon the terms "marriage" and "matrimony" are used inconsistently and interchangeably, and we thought it best to stick with the term that is most easily recognizable. The amended canon also for the first time takes note of the "Blessing" as applicable to civil marriages as well.
Q. Aren’t we abandoning thousands of years of history and tradition?
A. No. We are taking our place in the arc of thousands of years of history and tradition. As the “History of Christian Marriage” essay illustrates, marriage is an institution that has evolved in manifold ways over the centuries — and continues to evolve in our own day. And as the history of the Episcopal Church demonstrates, it is our tradition to challenge the practices of our past in order to live into the promises of God’s future. Ending discrimination against women in ordained ministry in 1976 is one example of claiming that tradition. Ending discrimination against same sex couples in marriage in 2015 will be another.

Q. What does the report tell us about what the Bible says about marriage?
A. It demonstrates how different biblical views and practices of marriage have variously formed and influenced different parts of the faith community through history, even into our own day. It illustrates just how complex, evolving, and contradictory our Scriptures are on the subject and therefore how tricky it is to speak of “the biblical view of marriage.” And it offers several powerful biblical models as analogies for the relationship of marriage: God’s unconditional faithfulness and forgiveness; the paradox of union and difference in Christ; and Christ’s self-offering in love that is at the heart of the Paschal Mystery.

Q. Why do we need to do this now? Couldn’t we study it a little longer?
A. The Episcopal Church has arguably been studying the full inclusion of all the baptized in all the sacraments for decades. Currently 75% of Episcopalians live in jurisdictions where civil marriage equality is a reality. In some dioceses clergy are blessing civil marriages between same-sex couples and in others the 2012-A049 blessing resources have been adapted for clergy to bless them on behalf of the Episcopal Church and to solemnize them as agents of their state.

It is time for the Episcopal Church to act consistently with its words and witness in support of marriage equality. Just as we continue to call the state to equally protect all marriages in the civic arena, it is time to call the church to recognize the equal claim of same-sex couples on the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Q. So what does the Episcopal Church have to say to today’s world as to “what makes a marriage Christian and holy”?
A. The Episcopal Church has the opportunity to lift up “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” as the values that make a marriage holy. It has the chance to talk about marriage as vocation of holy love, grounded in biblical values of faithfulness and forgiveness. And it has the opportunity to say we are a community of faith focused on supporting all who are called into the vocation of marriage — not discriminating against some who are called into the vocation of marriage.

The Report of the Task Force on the Study of Marriage can be found in its entirety at:
www.generalconvention.org/home/bluebook
In June 2014, The SCLM (Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music) hosted an international, ecumenical, indaba-style consultation on same-sex marriage at Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, Kansas City, Missouri, inviting participation from every diocese of The Episcopal Church and every province of the Anglican Communion where civil marriage is legal for same-sex couples and from ecumenical partner churches in the United States.

Fifty-seven people, representing 24 dioceses of The Episcopal Church, 6 other churches of the Anglican Communion, and 5 ecumenical partners, along with the President of the House of Deputies, Presiding Bishop, and Secretary of General Convention participated.

Feedback from the survey and at the consultation indicated a strong desire on the part of some same-sex couples to use a liturgy similar to the marriage rite in the Book of Common Prayer and a desire on the part of some different-sex couples to use the alternative liturgy in Liturgical Resources.

The SCLM has therefore included in its Report to the 78th General Convention four four liturgies for authorization by in 2015:

1) A revision of “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant,” taking into account specific feedback received from those who have used the text;
2) “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage,” an adaptation of the revised rite for use by any couple who can be married according to civil law;
3) A gender-neutral adaptation of “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” from the 1979 Book of Common Prayer; and
4) “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony,” a gender-neutral adaptation of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, providing same-sex couples with an option similar to that available to different-sex couples who use the 1928 BCP marriage rite by following “An Order for Marriage” (BCP 1979, pp. 435–36).

The entire SCLM Blue Book Report is available online at: www.generalconvention.org/home/bluebook
The Episcopal Church has been officially debating the issue of human sexuality, particularly as it applies to gay and lesbian people, since the General Convention of 1976 when resolutions passed by the Bishops and Deputies began to frame the parameters of the debate.

In the intervening years resolutions have been passed and then amended as the Episcopal Church’s position has evolved in response to the dialogue. In 1976, the General Convention asserted in a resolution (A069) 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.”

Here are some of the other key resolutions that have brought us closer to making that “full and equal claim” a reality, not just a resolution:

1997–D011: Apologized on behalf of the Episcopal Church to its members who are gay and lesbian and to the lesbians and gay men outside the Church for years of rejection and maltreatment by the Church and affirm that this Church seeks amendment of our life together as we ask God’s help in sharing the Good News with all people.

2000–D039: Acknowledged “other life-long committed relationships” and 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.”

2003–C051: Reaffirmed language of D039 and 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.”

2009–C056: Called for a Blessings Task Force to collect and develop theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same-gender relationships.

2012 –D018: "End Discrimination Against Same-Sex Marriages" calling for civil marriage equality was adopted by an overwhelming majority in both houses.

2012–A049 & A050: Authorized liturgical resources for blessing same-gender relationships and called for a Task Force on the Study of Marriage.

For a more complete summary of legislative history visit: http://tinyurl.com/CTBhistory
Recognizable Holiness
ONE PART HISTORY, TWO PARTS THEOLOGY

by The Reverend Michael Hopkins, Diocese of Rochester

The Claiming the Blessing Collaborative held its first conference in November 2002 in St. Louis, Missouri in preparation for the 2003 General Convention. A major purpose of that conference was to roll out a “Theology Statement” on the blessing of same-sex unions.

As President of Integrity at the time, I gave the opening remarks, which included these words:

"We are quite deliberately advocating for a rite whose use would be optional for the sake of the unity of the church we love. We believe in our heart of hearts that our relationships are equal to heterosexual relationships, whether or not the term “marriage” is appropriate for them, and so, in our heart of hearts we believe the rite to publicly celebrate them should be equal. But that is not what we are asking for. We are compromising, moderating our position, for the sake of the church."

Our “Theology Statement” went a bit further, in this answer to the question, "Is blessing a relationship the same as the Sacrament of Marriage?"  

"Christian marriage is the loving, committed relationship between two people reflecting the love Christ has for the church. The love between these partners serves as an icon or a reminder to the Christian community that the love of God comes to us in the love of another person."
"While the term marriage has historically referred to the union of a man and a woman, other forms of family may also reflect God’s love in the community of faith. We do not propose to change that definition. We do propose to raise other forms of relationship as signs of God’s love in the world and we believe this does nothing to diminish marriage."

A scant four General Conventions later these words may sound to some to have been disingenuous. As the writer of them, I can tell you they were not. At the time none of us believed we were anywhere near any alteration of either society’s or the church’s understanding of marriage, even if we also believed that ultimately that alteration would happen. I, for one, did not expect such a change in my lifetime.

That all changed on May 17, 2004, when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (following three Canadian Provinces) began issuing marriage licenses to couples of the same sex. Even then it was not clear whether or not this was an aberration.

Nevertheless, for the next two General Conventions (2006 and 2009) blessings remained the issue: not marriage. By the time liturgies for blessings were approved by General Convention 2012 it was clear that the issue was, in fact, marriage. And so the Task Force on the Study of Marriage -- whose report was outlined earlier -- was appointed as a result of this realization.

Let us be very clear: advocates for equality in the Episcopal Church are not simply riding a secular wave into the 2015 General Convention asking for change in the marriage canons on a whim.

It is important to recognize that as advocates for LGBT equality we always knew equal marriage was the right thing to do, not only as a matter of justice, but also as a matter of theology.

In the decades since the Episcopal Church promised "full and equal claim" to its gay and lesbian members, more and more Episcopalians have come to experience the lives of LGBT Christians -- many of them in committed relationships that were marriages in all but name. And it has been the incarnational experience of these fellow Christians and Episcopalians -- faithful people in faithful relationships -- that has worked to change the mind of the church. It has been the witness of the LGBT faithful who striving to live the Baptismal Covenant in lives and relationships that are recognizably holy.

As the church, we are always in process of both theological reflection on our experience and the living out in experience our theology. It is a process that does not end. This is the twofold process modelled in our Baptismal Covenant. The Task Force on the Study of Marriage asked the question, “What might the Episcopal Church have to say to today’s world as to what makes a marriage Christian and holy?”

One of the most important things we have to say is that theology is not frozen in time. The revelation of God continues and will continue. Sometimes it will call us back. Other times it will call us forward. Paradoxically, it never calls back without taking real experience with it, nor does it call forward without maintaining connection to the narrative that is at the theological core of our faith.
Because of this reality we also have a chance to say something significant about holiness. Holy is one of those words used with such frequency in the church that its meaning has become obscured.

When we say that covenant relationships — whether between people of the same or opposite sex couples are recognizably holy, we do not mean that they pass some kind of litmus test.

Holiness is not manufactured by human beings showing off their goodness. Holiness is a gift from God and is not a state of being, but the journey to being in relationship with God that does not end this side of heaven. It has at its heart the struggle to be loved by the [only] Holy One and to love in return, to know in truth the Faithful One, and to strive to keep faith in return.

Marriage is therefore a theologically critical institution. For for those not called to celibacy, it is the closest, sustained, direct experience one can have of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God.

Human relationships are recognizably holy when they reflect this struggle for love and desire for faithfulness. Marriage happens when two people sign on to this struggle together, “for better for worse … forsaking all others … until we are parted by death.”

Finally, holiness is recognizable by service. After the vows, the most important words of our current Marriage rite are found in the prayers:

“Give them such fulfillment of their mutual love and affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others” (p. 429).

Ultimately holiness is about how our glimpses of the loving and faithful God inspire us, even compel us, to serve the world in God’s Name.

And one of the “proof texts” for equal marriage is found in this exchange in the seventh Chapter of Mark:

Then [Jesus] called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

This is the synoptic version of John’s use of the metaphor of fruit.

"Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) Holiness is the result of abiding, which is a gift.

“You did not choose me but I chose you.” (John 15:16)

When two people — two men or two women or a woman and a man — covenant together in steadfast love and faithfulness (in essence, to abide in one another) their relationship will bear fruit: glimpses of the Holy God who is present with them as grace and gift.

That fruitful abiding is what we call Marriage — and it is long past time for the Episcopal Church to let our “yes be yes” and to recognize the equal holiness of marriages between same-sex couples: blessed by God in order to be a blessing to both the Church and to the world.

Michael Hopkins is a founding member of Claiming the Blessing, a past-president of Integrity (2000–2006) and a priest in the Diocese of Rochester.
THE TIME HAS COME FOR FULL INCLUSION!

At its 78th General Convention The Episcopal Church has the opportunity to lift up “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” as the values that make a marriage holy.

It has the opportunity to talk about marriage as vocation of holy love, grounded in biblical values of faithfulness and forgiveness.

And we believe it has the responsibility to say that we are a community of faith focused on supporting all who are called into the vocation of marriage — not discriminating against some who are called into the vocation of marriage. We believe that the time is now to Reimagine the Episcopal Church — with Marriage Equality. Join us!