

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 (J.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.

Service for the Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant *Approved for use in the Diocese of Los Angeles*

This service may be used to bless the covenant of a man and woman, two women or two men.

Introduction

The priest may greet the people.

The priest says to the congregation.

We have gathered to celebrate the joining of *N* and *N* in a covenant of love. This covenant is the promise of hope between two people who love each other, who understand their love as a gift of God, who trust that love, and who wish to share the future together.

It enables two separate people to share their desires, longings, dreams and memories, and to help each other through their uncertainties. It provides the encouragement to risk more and thus to gain more. In this covenant, these two people belong together, providing mutual support and stability, and if it be God's will, a place in which their children may grow.

Here in the presence of God we recognize and bless their relationship as they begin their married life together in the community.

Declaration of Intent

The Celebrant asks each partner

N., will you have this man/woman to be your spouse; to live together in this covenant of love? Will you love him/her, comfort him/her, honor and keep him/her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him/her as long as you both shall live?

Answer.

I will.

Collect of the Day

Celebrant Let us pray

O gracious and everliving God, look joyfully upon *N.* and *N.*, who come before this assembled community to make a covenant of love, fidelity and life-long commitment. Grant them your blessing and assist them with your grace, that, with true fidelity and steadfast love, 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, forever and ever.

People Amen

Liturgy of the Word

Appropriate lessons from Scripture and a Psalm are read. One reading is always from the Gospels if there is a Eucharist.

The Homily

A Homily may follow the readings

Affirmation of the Community

The Celebrant asks the Couple:

What do you seek?

The Couple responds in unison:

We ask a blessing from this community on our covenant.

The Celebrant asks the Couple:

Who supports you in this commitment?

The People stand and respond in unison:

We do in the belief that God has blessed *N.* and *N.* by calling them into their covenant with each other.

The Celebrant then addresses the People, saying:

Will you, brothers and sisters in Christ, give your pledge to honor and uphold *N.* and *N.*; to recognize them as a family in this community, to guide and pray for them in times of trouble; to celebrate with them in times of joy, to respect the bonds of their covenant, and to seek to discern the continuing presence of Christ within them?

The People respond

We will.

Each partner of the Couple vows:

In the name of God, I, *N.*, take you, *N.*, to be my friend, my lover, my spouse, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

Blessing and Giving of Rings

The man/woman face each other and join hands.

N. I take you to be my spouse. All that I have I offer you; what you have to give I gladly receive; wherever you go I will go. You are my love. God keep me true to you always and you to me.

The priest receives the ring(s) and prays.

Christ our light, encircle these rings with your blessing to show the love of *N.* and *N.* Blend them together and keep them in your love eternally.

The giver places the ring on the other's finger and says

N., this ring I give to you, with my body I honor you. God make me your true servant in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

The priest joins their right hands together and says

God so join you together that nothing shall ever part you.

The Prayers of the People

Celebrant Loving Spirit, grant to *N.* and *N.* that in giving and forgiving they may receive from each other lasting joy.

People Bind them together with cords that cannot be broken. Bind them together with love.

Celebrant Grant that they may always take delight in each other, and each remain the other's heart's desire.

People Bind them together with cords that cannot be broken. Bind them together with love.

Celebrant May they reach such trust and confidence in each other as shall keep them from unnecessary distress. May they find courage to meet the heartaches, disappointments and agonies life can bring.

People Be their rock, their fortress, for they put their trust in you.

Celebrant Help them to look beyond their own family and their own concerns to see the world, suffering and struggling, the world you have given us to share with one another.

People Open their eyes and their hearts.

Celebrant Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others.

People Open their hands with your love.

Celebrant Give them grace to accept that they are mortal, to face the possibility of death and the separation it must bring.

People Jesus, you are resurrection, you are life.

Celebrant Grant that all persons who have witnessed these vows may find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed.

People Fill our heart with your steadfast love.

Or other prayers as appropriate to the community may be offered

If there is no Eucharist, the Lord's Prayer precedes the Prayers of the people. The Blessing of the Covenant and the dismissal follows.

The Holy Eucharist

If the Eucharist follows, the prayers are followed by the peace. The service continues according to the norms of the local congregation.

The Preface for Baptism may be used.

Post Communion Prayer

Celebrant O God, the giver of all that is true and lovely and gracious: We give you thanks for binding us together in these holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that by your Holy Spirit, *N.* and *N.*, now joined in this holy covenant, may become one in heart and soul, live in fidelity and peace, and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love you; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

People Amen.

The Blessing

Before receiving the Church's Blessing, the couple kneels and prays the following God of tenderness and strength, you have brought our paths together and led us to this day; go with us now as we travel through good times, through trouble, or through change. Bless our home, our partings and our meetings. Make us worthy of each other's best, and tender with each other's dreams, trusting in your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Blessing follows using the form below or one of the forms from the BCP pp 430-431 with appropriate gender language changed. The blessing always concludes with the ending on page 431 of the BCP

Celebrant

Most gracious God, we give you thanks or your tender⁴ love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, pour out your abundant blessing upon *NN* and *NN*. Defend them from every enemy. Lead them into all peace. Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle upon their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads. Bless them in their work and in their companionship; in their sleeping and in their waking, in their joys and in their sorrows, in their life and in their death. Finally in your mercy, bring them to that table where your saints feast forever in your banquet; through Jesus Christ our Lord who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns one God, now and forever.

People Amen

Celebrant

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve and keep you; may God mercifully look with favor upon you, and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that you may faithfully live together in this life, and in the age to come have life everlasting.

People Amen

**Some Questions and Answers:
The Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant**

Prepared by the Bishop's Task Force on Marriage
The Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Los Angeles

December 2008

An Introduction

The Bishop of Los Angeles is authorizing the use of a rite for the "Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant." This sacramental rite may be used to bless the union of a man and a woman or it may be used to sacramentally unite persons of the same gender.

As this document is being written, the state of California has voted to ban same-sex marriage. While this ban may be reversed, we are writing this paper with the assumption that same-sex "marriage" is not legal in this state, and we do not intend to violate the current marriage laws. We present this document, not as a comprehensive theological treatise, nor as an official position paper of the Episcopal Church. It is written to provide some distinctions between marriage as a legal contract and the sacramental blessing of life-long covenants. It is also written in order to provide a biblical, historical and theological basis for this sacramental blessing especially as applied to a same-sex life-long covenant.

The document is presented in a question-answer format in which we attempt to use some everyday language that may be able to help with the everyday questions that people who are sitting in our pews may be asking (or may have asked of them by friends from other faith traditions).

We also realize that this document may raise a host of questions with regard to the more encompassing issue of our position on "homosexuality" and how this phenomenon is understood within the biblical and historic tradition of our church. While some of the questions and answers we offer here may indirectly address issues of homosexuality, our purview here is limited to questions about the sacramental blessing of a life-long covenant which (as we have mentioned) may be applied to persons of the same gender.

Throughout this document we proceed from a fundamental reliance upon our core baptismal covenant: we are people committed to bringing about a just society and to respecting the dignity of every human being.

Question 1. What is the difference between "marriage" as recognized by the state and Holy Matrimony or a Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant?

Answer. Actually, there is a lot of cloudiness about the relationship between church and state when it comes to marriage. If these matters are confusing to you, you are certainly not alone.

In the first instance, marriage is a civil or legal contract. In most states (including California), in order to get married a couple must first obtain an official marriage license from the state. This document testifies that you are legally able to contract a marriage under the rules of the state, and it gives you permission to legally enter into marriage. All couples, regardless of what kind of marriage ceremony they will have, must first obtain this marriage license.

The ceremony for officially legalizing the marriage can then be conducted by any number of persons with any number of wedding ceremonies. It can be conducted by a judge or other person recognized by the state in a garden, a home, a judge's chambers. After some sort of public exchange of marriage vows, the officially designated officer of the state signs the license and testifies that the two are now legally married. With the signing of the license, the couple is legally married in the eyes of the state of California.

Now, here is where the church gets into it. In our country (which is not the case in many European countries), it is the custom that church weddings can also be *one of the ways in which a marriage can be legalized*. Thus at the end of the church ceremony, the clergy person (who is, in essence, an agent of the state here) signs the license testifying that vows were exchanged and with the signing of the license the couple is legally wed in the eyes of the state of California.

Now that California has banned persons of the same gender from being legally married, clergy of the church (as agents of the state) will no longer be able to perform a "legal" marriage for persons of the same sex.

However, when we get involved as a church, some additional content, far beyond the legal recognition of the union, gets put on the table. While it is true that the priest is acting as an agent of the state in performing a marriage, a priest is also an agent of the church, and a marriage ceremony in the church makes a theological statement and has spiritual significance.

Every time a priest officiates at a wedding he/she engages in a sacramental act. In essence every church marriage is a sacramental blessing of a life-long covenant. Thus, while persons of the same gender may not be "legally married" in the State of California, the church can (and in this instance "will") offer the sacramental and spiritual blessing to couples of the same gender.

Question 2. Can you explain what makes the "blessing of a life-long covenant" a sacrament?

Answer. Sacraments provide a doorway for helping us enter into the experience of God's holy presence. They provide us with a place where the divine and the human can intersect. In a sacrament we enter into an encounter with the living God. At a deep spiritual level, we meet the living resurrected Christ.

In the case of the sacramental blessing of life-long covenants, two people who have developed a committed relationship with one another come before God and the community of faith. They publicly vow and express their intention to live together in a lifelong covenantal relationship. This relationship is covenantal insofar as the two persons make promises to one another that they will support and nurture one another without condition.

When the two persons exchange their vows with one another, a sacrament is constituted, i.e. the two people exchanging vows are the ministers of the sacrament. The priest/officiant hears these vows and blesses the union in the name of God and on behalf of the church.

The kind of love which is celebrated in the blessing of this life-long committed covenantal relationship is God-like love: unconditional and persevering. When we witness the exchange of vows at such a blessing, we are invited into a glimpse of the circle of love of the couple being married. As we do so, we get a glimpse into the circle of God's own love. Our humanity meets divinity. In this way, the blessing of this covenant is indeed sacramental.

Question 3. How do the other sacraments fit into this picture??

Answer. Holy Baptism and the Eucharist are the *primary* sacraments of the church from which all the other sacramental rites flow, such as the Healing of the Sick, Confirmation, Ordination, Reconciliation, and Holy Matrimony/The Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant.

Question 4. Since Baptism is one of the primary sacraments, are there qualifications for someone to be baptized? And how does this relate to who may receive the other sacraments including the sacramental blessing of a life-long covenant?

Answer. There are no qualifications for Baptism. In fact, we make a rather bold statement about the amazing grace of Baptism when we baptize infants. Doing so demonstrates the fact that Baptism is primarily an unearned gift given to us by God. Baptism, first and foremost, is God's invitation into participation in God's life. God's invitation is extended to any who wish to accept.

While a period of preparation may sometimes be required before people are baptized (to help persons understand the nature of the sacrament and the promises involved) there are never any objective barriers which would prohibit someone from being baptized.

So, for example, we would not even think of denying baptism to a person on the basis of gender or sexual orientation, physical attributes, race, ethnic heritage, age, socio-economic status, intelligence level, or any other "label." In this sense, there are no built-in qualifications or disqualifications for baptism. Any human being who desires to be baptized and is willing to enter into the covenant (either of his/her own accord or through the pledge of parents/sponsor) is welcome to be baptized.

Question 6. Traditionally, only a man and a woman could receive the church's sacramental blessing for their union. Why is it possible for persons of the same gender to receive the same sacramental blessing?

Answer. Some of the previous conversation about Baptism and Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant helps us to formulate the first portion of this answer.

Since Baptism is the primary sacrament from which all other sacraments flow, it is logical

to assume that the standards for admission to the sacrament of Baptism (the primary sacrament) should likewise apply to all other sacraments. With this in mind, no person should be disqualified from receiving any sacrament of the church on the basis of who they are or how they are created. As we mentioned above, If persons are not disqualified from baptism because of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, and so on, neither should they be denied the other sacraments of the church.

Having said this, we also recognize that some sacraments, like ordination, might not be made *available* to some persons under particular circumstances. For example, after a period of discernment, a bishop or Commission on Ministry may refuse to ordain or recommend a person seeking the Sacrament of Holy Orders because it is believed that the person seeking ordination is doing so for personal gain (e.g. career advancement).

When it comes to the Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant/Holy Matrimony, a priest may also refuse to offer this sacrament to a couple because it is believed that the couple is incapable of entering into a relationship of lasting commitment as understood by our church.

However, these sacraments are never withheld because something basic to the very nature of the person has disqualified them, e.g., being a man, a woman, a gay person, a white person, a black person.

The second part of this answer with regard to same-sex couples being able to receive the sacramental blessing of the church focuses back upon our earlier definition about the nature of sacraments.

As noted earlier, the Sacramental Blessing of a Life-Long Covenant involves the exchange of vows between two people who make a public declaration of unconditional, covenantal love. This God-type love draws us all into the experience of God.

It seems obvious that two men or two women are just as capable of making such a covenantal commitment of lifelong, God-like love as are a man and a woman. Hence, persons of the same gender are obviously able to engage in this sacramental action.

Question 7. Isn't the promise to have children necessary before a union may be sacramentally blessed by the church?

Answer. One can turn to page 423 in the prayer book and read the beginning of the traditional marriage ceremony where the purposes of Christian marriage are carefully articulated.

The notion that "bearing children" is a pre-requisite to the church's blessing will be quickly dispelled. The prayer book suggests that a holy union has three purposes: first, the mutual joy that a couple can provide for one another; secondly, so that the couple might help and comfort one another in prosperity and adversity; and finally, for "the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord *when it is God's will*" (italics added).

The church has traditionally offered the sacrament of Holy Matrimony to couples for whom the procreation of children was not even an option: for example, couples past child-bearing age, or couples in which one of the partners has a physical disability that precludes conceiving or bearing children. Moreover, couples may choose not to have children for a multitude of reasons.

Question 8. How can "procreation" be understood for same-sex couples?

Answer. If one looks at the tradition of the church over time, a widely accepted definition of "procreation" is cooperation with God in the creation of a new human person whose destiny is to share God's life forever. This definition of procreation is far broader than the actual physical conception and bearing of a child.

For example, a man and woman who adopt a child are certainly bringing the child into a new life in this world. As this man and woman raise this child in the knowledge and love of the Lord (as the prayer book directs) they nurture the child to share God's life forever. Although the child is not a physical product of their bodies, they are certainly *procreators* in every way in which procreation is understood.

If all of the above can be said of a man and woman who do not naturally conceive and bear a child from their own bodies, why cannot the exact same reasoning be applied to same-sex couples? Two men or two women might likewise adopt a child, nurture and guide the child in "the knowledge and love of the Lord" and nurture the child to share in "God's life forever." As such, they are procreating.

Question 9. If we offer the sacramental blessing for persons of the same gender, will we be abandoning our heritage and changing our biblical tradition?

Answer. We have to remember that, through the years, almost everything we understand about the marriage has changed and evolved. In fact, if we were to base our current understanding and practice of marriage upon Old Testament principles and practice, every man in the church would have a whole house full of wives to help carry on the family line.

Gradually, the custom of marriage between one man and one woman evolved and became prevalent in most of the Christian West. However, even in the context of monogamous marriage, the understanding of the purpose of marriage back in the time of our ancestors was certainly different from our current understanding.

Throughout antiquity, including Christian antiquity, marriage was primarily viewed as a social vehicle for uniting families for various political and social gains, from increasing the size of a farm or business to uniting nations. Women were basically commodities, who along with their dowry, were sold into a marital union, not only to assure for the passing on of lineage, but also to protect the woman from harm lest she be left to fend for herself in a society that demanded and expected the protection of a husband.

Furthermore, our ancestors placed great stock in the necessity of physically consummating a marriage. A couple was not "wed" until the marriage was physically consummated. Thus, the conception and bearing of children enjoyed primary significance and was an absolute necessity for Christian marriage in the past, again, to shore up the lineage and insure the continuation of the family.

The idea of marrying for love or the notion that marriage was a way for couples to express mutual joy was essentially a foreign concept in antiquity and not part of our Christian heritage. For *The Book of Common Prayer* to suggest that the primary purposes of marriage are "mutual joy" and "the help and comfort given to one another in prosperity and adversity" represents a serious and significant evolution from the ancient heritage and from the biblical tradition, and a relatively modern idea.

More recently, our views on divorce have changed dramatically. As recently as fifty years ago, divorce was reckoned to be a greater sin than, for example, staying in a violent marriage that exposed a spouse and children to a great risk of harm at the hands of the other spouse. Most Christians no longer believe that. Divorced persons are permitted remarriage in most churches.

So here is the point: as humanity and divinity have danced together over the ages, we have evolved in our experience of God and have come to newer understanding as to how best be faithful people and committed followers of Jesus. The biblical tradition from the Old Testament through the Christian era to our very own time is marked by evolution and emergence. Throughout our evolution, we do not change for the sake of change, but rather we change in order to be more faithful people and followers of Jesus.

When we are caught up in the "flow of God" we will always be moving in the direction of love. As such, our evolutions over time may be judged according to whether or not they have led us to greater and greater love – to the love of God and the love of one's neighbor as one's self.

Certainly, the notion of sacramentally blessing the covenant of persons of the same gender is a change from our historic heritage, and change is never easy. However, this is not an abandonment of our tradition, but rather an evolution and emergence from it.

Question 10. But even if we should and can sacramentally bless the covenant of persons of the same sex, shouldn't we wait for someone in the "official church" to develop such a service?

Answer. We would certainly never advocate abandonment of *The Book of Common Prayer*. However, it is vital to regard it not as static and unmoving, but as a living document whose forms follow the prophetic movements of the church. For example, when women were first ordained, the words of the ordination rite were adapted to fit the needs of the occasion, and we did not say, "We need to wait until a new prayer book is printed!" At some point we decided that women were not, after all, unclean after giving birth and hence we no longer needed the service for the "Churching of Women after Childbirth." We did not wait for a new prayer book before we abandoned that particular service. Trial liturgies have given us opportunities over the years to see whether we can find better ways of expressing through worship our relationship with God.

In the same way, we have developed a rite for sacramental blessings of life-long covenants. While not supplanting the prayer book liturgy of Holy Matrimony, it can be used for the blessing of same-sex couples or it could be used as an alternative to the traditional marriage rite found in the Book of Common Prayer.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this document, we mentioned that we had no intention of answering every possible question that may arise regarding the subject of the sacramental blessing of unions, especially as applied to the union of persons of the same sex. In fact, even our "answers" to these questions are not so much definitive answers as they are guidelines to help formulate ideas leading to further dialogue.

Perhaps, though, the best and most convincing way for individuals to move forward in their understanding about whether they can embrace same-gender sacramental blessings within the Christian tradition and in our own Episcopal Church is one which is far more "incarnational" and far less theological or rational.

So here is a final thought: if you want to discover whether or not the love of God can be experienced and expressed in a life long God-centered committed relationship between couples of the same-sex, have some conversation with people of the same gender who have been in lifelong committed relationships with each other.

Interact with these folks. Look at the fruit of their life together. Many of our churches are graced and gifted with the presence and ministry of such couples. Spend some time together. Share your stories with one another: go have dinner, get a cup of coffee or have a glass of wine together.

When we are able to see and interact with real loving people who share the same joys and the same struggles and are on the same journey of faith, theological questions and position-taking about the nature of "orthodox" faith often become irrelevant.

When we encounter the living God and meet the risen Christ in fellow human beings, we need no argument that they belong to Christ and that we all belong to God. And, when we know that we all belong to God, we have no longer need to debate over who deserves more or who deserves less because, belonging to God, everyone has been given everything. That is the nature of amazing grace.

Writing Group

(The Rev.) Paul J. Kowalewski, Ph.D.

(Ms.) Serena Beeks

(The Very Rev.) Judith Heffron

Task Force Members

(The Rev.) Dan Ade, St. John's, Los Angeles

(The Very Rev.) Mark Asman, Trinity, Santa Barbara

(The Rev. Canon) Ed Bacon, All Saints, Pasadena

(The Rev. Canon) Michael Bamberger, Ascension, Sierra Madre

(Ms.) Serena Beeks, St. Mark's, Upland

(The Rev. Canon) Diane Jardine Bruce, St. Clement's, San Clemente

(The Rt. Rev.) J. Jon Bruno, Diocese of Los Angeles

(The Rev.) Gabriel Ferrer, All Saints, Beverly Hills

(The Very Rev. Canon) Peter D. Haynes, Saint Michael and All Angels, Corona del Mar

(The Very Rev.) Judith Heffron, Holy Trinity, Covina

(Ms.) Jan Jones, St. Francis, Simi Valley

(The Rev.) Paul J. Kowalewski, Ph.D., St. James, Los Angeles

(The Very Rev.) Mark Kowalewski, Ph.D., St. John's ProCathedral, Los Angeles

(The Rev. Canon) Lynn Jay, St. Stephen's, Santa Clarita

(The Rev.) Susan Russell, All Saints, Pasadena

(The Rev. Canon) Ed Sniecienski, Diocese of Los Angeles

(The Rev. Canon) John Taylor, St. John Chrysostom, Rancho Santa Margarita

(The Rev. Canon) Warner Traynham, retired

(Canon) James White, All Saints, Pasadena

(Mr.) Richard Zevnik, St. Michael and All Angels, Corona del Mar

Suggested Readings for the Blessing of a Marital Covenant

One or more of the following passages from Holy Scripture is read. If there is to be a Communion, a passage from the Gospel always concludes the Readings. The length of any Reading may be adapted at the discretion of the Celebrant.

Genesis 1:26-28 (Male and female he created them)
Genesis 2:4-9, 15-24 (A man cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh)
Genesis 12:1-3a,c (I will bless you so that you will be a blessing)
1 Samuel 18:1-5 (David and Jonathan)
Ruth 1:16-17 (Where you go I will go)
Song of Solomon 2:1-13 (My beloved is like...)
Song of Solomon 2:10-13; 8:6-7 (My beloved speaks; many waters cannot quench love)
Ecclesiastes 4:9-11 (Two are better than one)
Tobit 8:5b-8 (That she and I may grow old together)
Romans 12:9-21 (Love one another with mutual affection)
1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (Love is patient and kind)
2 Corinthians 5:16-20 (In Christ there is a new creation)
Galatians 5:13-14, 22-26 (Called to freedom; fruit of the Spirit)
Ephesians 3:14-19 (The Father from whom every family is named; rooted and grounded in love)
Ephesians 4:25-27; 29-32 (Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving)
Ephesians 5:1-2 (Walk in love, as Christ loved us)
Philippians 2:1-4 (Be of the same mind, having the same love)
Colossians 3:12-17 (Love which binds everything together in harmony)
1 John 3:18-24 (Love in truth and action)
1 John 4:7-16 (17-21) (Let us love one another for love is of God)
Revelation 19:6-9 (The Lamb's marriage supper)

Between the Readings, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said. Appropriate Psalms are 23; 67; 100:1-5; 107:1-9; 108:1-5; 111; 112; 121; 126:1-3; 127; 128; 133; 139:1-18, 23-24; 145, and 146.

Matthew 5:1-12 (The Beatitudes)
Matthew 5:13-16 (You are the light . . . Let your light so shine)
Matthew 7:24-29 (Like a wise man who built his house upon the rock)
Mark 10:6-9, 13-16 (They are no longer two but one)
Luke 6:35-38 (Love and do good)
John 2:1-11 (The wedding in Cana of Galilee)
John 15:9-12 (Love one another as I have loved you)
John 17:1, 18-26 (That they may all be one)