

The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship

Introduction

Background

The Diocese of Washington has encouraged the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the life of the church for some years. We believe that the development of a diocesan rite for the blessing of same sex relationships is a provisional and appropriate step at this time in our common life. Such rites have been celebrated in some of the congregations of this diocese for the past twenty years or so.

Our intent is to provide faithful same sex couples and families in our congregations with the same affirmation and blessing we offer to opposite sex couples and their families. We hope this rite will strengthen the faithful, uphold the couples who come to us seeking God's blessing, promote the stability of couples and families, and confirm in us the traditional values of fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, open communication and steadfast love. This rite is a covenant marked by sacred trust and commitment, witnessed and blessed in the presence of God by the community of the faithful.

Any member of the clergy may decline to preside at the Celebration of a Covenant Relationship. At the same time, it is our hope that congregations and clergy that have not already done so will engage in prayerful conversation about the place of such relationships in the life of the church while making use of the resources available in this document.

Formulation of the Rite

We examined numerous resources prior to the drafting of this rite, and owe a debt of gratitude to the many couples, congregations and clergy who have undertaken this work over the years across the country and, indeed, throughout the world. We are the beneficiaries of their labors. We are especially grateful for the work done previously in the Diocese by many clergy and people.

Three principles guided our work.

1. We believe that the normative context of the rite is the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in which this rite serves as the Liturgy of the Word, and from which it takes its form.
2. We believe that the Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship is rooted in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and is a means by which the faithful respond to those holy relationships that are both God's gift and call. We pray that this rite, celebrated within the household of God, will strengthen all of the baptized as we confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share in his eternal priesthood.
3. Along these lines, we found the outline provided for the "Setting Apart of a Special Vocation" in *The Book of Occasional Services* instructive, and this rite follows this pattern.

Guidelines for the Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant Relationship

These guidelines, and the accompanying rite, are authorized for a trial period of five months, through November 1, 2004.

1. The intent of this policy is that it be used with persons for whom the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage in *the Book of Common Prayer* is not appropriate or not available for optional use.
2. It is required that at least one member of the couple be a baptized member of a congregation of the Diocese of Washington.
3. Preparation and instruction prior to the ceremony is required.
4. These guidelines are applicable to all Episcopal clergy officiating in the Diocese of Washington.
 - a. Clergy who are not licensed in the Diocese of Washington shall obtain permission from the Bishop of Washington and their own bishop.
 - b. Matters pertaining to the use of facilities, ceremonial planning and local arrangements will be made with the approval of the rector of the parish in which the Celebration is to take place.
5. A member of the clergy asked to officiate is to seek the advice and counsel of the Vestry before offering this rite.