

IV. Hearing, Seeing, and Declaring New Things

Pastoral Resources for Preparing Couples for a Liturgy of Blessing or Marriage

Overview: Pastoral Care for Gender and Sexual Minority Couples

You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known.
—Isaiah 48:6

I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.
—Isaiah 49:6

The pastoral resources in this essay are provided to assist clergy and trained lay people who are preparing gender and sexual minority¹ couples for a blessing of their relationship, using one of the liturgies authorized by The Episcopal Church. The expectation of such preparation is equivalent to the canonical requirement that couples preparing for marriage receive instruction “as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of Holy Matrimony” (Canon I.18.2[e]).

Preparation is similar for all couples, whether gender and sexual minority or different-sex/gender. Most clergy and lay people who currently offer premarital preparation to different-sex couples are more than capable of working with gender and sexual minority couples. However, understanding the differences is necessary — and helpful.

The pastoral resources described in this essay address differences in the preparation of gender and sexual minority couples and different-sex couples and include some of the available resources for preparing gender and sexual minority couples for the blessing of their relationships.

Commonly Used Terms for Gender and/or Sexual Minorities

Because human sexuality exists on a spectrum, because the number of possible identities that communities or individuals may craft (consciously and unconsciously) defies limitation, and because language constantly evolves, terminology for gender and sexual minorities (GSM) sometimes proves elusive. As a general consideration, it is always best to refer to someone by name, not a category, and to ask people how they

¹ The term “gender and sexual minorities” (GSM) is increasingly used in academic study of gender/sexual identity and/or orientation, recognizing the complexity of both human biology and the social construction of gender and sexuality. This term is used in this pastoral resource except when referring to marriage, since “same-sex marriage” is commonly used in civil law.

identify themselves or prefer to be called. It is not as important that the preparer fully understand the complexities of identity and/or orientation as that the couple themselves do; however, clergy and lay preparers are encouraged to read some of the excellent resources available about GSM experiences or to consult with a professional.

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) — an organization that advises media and other organizations concerning the language and images they use to represent GSM people and issues — provides extensive, widely used, and highly readable reference guides for commonly used terminology. Some common terms are described below with reference to the glossary available at glaad.org. For a more comprehensive consideration, you may also wish to consult *An Ally's Guide to Terminology: Talking About LGBT People & Equality*, published by GLAAD.

Sex: The biological condition of being male or female is typically identified visually at birth based on visible anatomy of the newborn. However, for a variety of reasons the sex of a person cannot always be definitively determined from visual assessment. While sex differences are biological, biology is flexible, dynamic, and not unaffected by environment and culture. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that biology does not determine identity.

Gender Identity and Expression: Individuals usually have a stable, deep, and strongly felt sense of their own gender that manifests very early in childhood; that gender identity, however, may not always correspond to the person's sex. A person whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex assigned at birth may be called a transgender person (though individuals sometimes use or prefer other language). The GLAAD "Media Reference Guide — Transgender Issues" describes transgender as "an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth."² Transgender people who, through surgery and/or hormone treatment, alter their biological sex to align with their gender identity are sometimes called transsexual, though the term is not preferred by all. It should be noted, however, that not all transgender people are able or wish to medically alter their biological sex.

A person's internal gender identity may or may not be expressed to society. Gender expression refers to how an individual manifests gender to society, including "one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics."³ Societies typically associate these characteristics with masculinity and femininity; however, the associations vary from culture to culture. Transgender people often express the gender with which they internally identify in ways that their society will recognize; others, though, both transgender and cisgender (a term used to describe non-transgender people), develop expressions that are intentionally gender non-conforming.

While many people understand themselves as being a man or a woman, others identify themselves in ways that are not limited by this traditional binary. Sometimes those who resist or reject the traditional gender categories identify themselves as "genderqueer" (though this term is not universal).⁴

Sexual Orientation: Although they are often associated with each other, gender identity and sexual orientation do not have a direct correspondence. For instance, a transgender man⁵ (someone who was assigned the female sex at birth, but identifies as a man) who is sexually drawn to women is considered "straight."

² <http://glaad.org/reference/transgender>.

³ <http://glaad.org/reference/transgender>.

⁴ For stories of transgender Episcopalians, see "Voices of Witness: Out of the Box," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzCANWGsEdc>.

⁵ While some transgender people do describe themselves as a "transgender man/woman" others prefer the language man/woman without the modifier. Still others resist the gender binary altogether. Because individual perceptions and preferences vary, it is best not to assign a category (or a pronoun) to someone without asking how they understand and prefer to talk about their own gender identity.

Rather than “homosexual,” which carries offensive, negative connotations for many, the preferred term for someone “whose enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex”⁶ is “gay” or “gay person.” Some women prefer to use the term “lesbian” while others prefer “gay woman.” A person whose sexual orientation encompasses people of both the same and different sex are generally called “bisexual” or “bi.” Despite common assumptions to the contrary, “[b]isexual people need not have had specific sexual experiences to be bisexual; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all to identify as bisexual.”⁷ A significant number of gay, lesbian, and bi people have adopted the formerly offensive term “queer” to describe themselves or GSM people more generally; however, the term continues to be offensive to others and should not be used to describe someone unless they express an explicit preference for it.

Contextual Competence

Clergy and qualified lay people preparing couples for blessings need to be *contextually competent*, a concept derived from *cultural competence*. In fields such as health care, social work, and education, culturally competent professionals embody awareness, a positive attitude, knowledge, and skills that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Consider the different situations that one might encounter when preparing a couple for a blessing or marriage:

- Preparing a couple in their 70s for a blessing of their relationship is very different from preparing a couple in their 20s.
- Preparing a couple entering a new relationship is different from preparing two people who have been living in a committed relationship for a long time.
- Preparing an interracial couple differs in some aspects from preparing a couple of the same race.
- Preparing a couple without children differs from preparing parents.

Being “contextually competent” means understanding and appreciating these, and many more, differing situations. Clergy and trained lay preparers need to examine their own contextual competence as they consider working with GSM couples. If they cannot work with a GSM couple with appreciation and awareness, then the best practice is to refer the couple to another clergy person or trained lay preparer, and seek further training for themselves.

The materials below will help clergy and trained lay preparers adapt their skills to work with GSM couples in a contextually competent manner.

1. Available Resources: Materials for Pastoral Preparation

In a 2010 church-wide survey regarding pastoral and teaching materials, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music found that the following resources are among those commonly used to prepare GSM couples for a blessing.

Prepare/Enrich (Life Innovations, Inc.)
<https://www.prepare-enrich.com>

- A relationship inventory that assesses couples’ strengths and growth areas on topics such as finances, communication, conflict resolution, and sexuality. This assessment tool is by far the one

⁶ <http://www.glaad.org/reference/lgb>

⁷ <http://www.glaad.org/reference/lgb>

used most frequently among respondents to the Commission’s survey. “Facilitators” (the term that Prepare/Enrich employs) must be trained in its use; see website for cost of materials.

- *Positives:* recently revised (2008), customized version easily used with GSM couples; uses the language of “partner”; most comprehensive tool to address personality, conflict resolution, family, health, and financial and spiritual issues; assesses goals, strengths, and growth areas; large, national norm base (more than 500,000 couples).
- *Negatives:* currently, research results are standardized only for different-sex/gender couples, so there is no “norm” against which to compare a GSM couple’s data.

Premarriage Awareness Inventory (Logos Productions)

<http://www3.logosproductions.com>

- Preferred by those not trained in Prepare/Enrich.
- *Positives:* three customized formats, including inventories for those living together or previously married; thorough personality assessment; coverage of major areas, such as faith, finances, family of origin, children, power issues, life goals.
- *Negatives:* standardized for different-sex/gender couples only, but author indicates that he will be implementing a GSM version (no target date given).

The Marriage Journey: Preparation and Provisions for Life Together,
by Linda Grenz and Delbert Glover (Church Publishing, 2003)

- Recommended by those who find online inventories impersonal.
- *Positives:* uses “partner” instead of specifying gender; includes material for couples living together and those with children; clear, direct language; ideal for the technologically challenged couple.
- *Negatives:* no personality assessment included.

The following books were published too recently to be cited by respondents to the 2010 survey. Because they specifically address pastoral needs of same-gender couples, we include them among available resources.

- *All Whom God Has Joined: Resources for Clergy and Same-Gender Loving Couples* by Leanne McCall Tigert and Maren C. Tirabassi (Pilgrim Press, 2010).
- *Premarital Counseling for Gays and Lesbians: Case Studies and Helpful Questions* by Pamela Milam (ASD Publishing, 2012).

2. Particular Issues Affecting Gender and Sexual Minority Couples

Issues or differences that are particular to gender and sexual minority (GSM) couples are not necessarily challenges in blessing preparation. They are more often gifts, especially if the clergy person or lay person preparing a couple understands variation as part of God’s plan for the world and a sign of God’s blessing. Contextual competence is important here, especially in a preparer’s awareness of places where skills for preparing different-sex/gender couples do not transfer to GSM couples. In addition, preparers need to examine their own understanding of blessing a GSM couple, as well as the assumptions of the couple’s faith and civil communities, including diocesan authority and various state laws.

GSM couples come to ask for a blessing with a variety of life backgrounds; thus provision for some variations and differences appear, for example, in the prayer choices in the liturgy. Other variations that clergy or lay preparers will meet in their work with GSM couples follow below.⁸

Legal Civil Unions / Same-Sex Marriages and Diocesan Policies

Currently the civil law regarding same-sex unions or marriages is very much in flux throughout the United States and other countries where The Episcopal Church is located. As a result, tracking these laws can be confusing. Some legal jurisdictions recognize civil unions while others recognize marriages. A marriage or civil union in one jurisdiction may not be recognized in another. Some jurisdictions may have residency requirements for civil unions or marriages, or for the dissolution of those unions. Likewise, diocesan bishops have differing guidelines as to how clergy should respond pastorally to couples seeking a blessing for their union.

Therefore, clergy and couples seeking blessing must be familiar with the laws of their jurisdiction and with the policies or guidelines of their diocese. Because some dioceses require professional counseling for a couple if one member of the couple (or both) has been divorced more than once or has had more than one previous long-term relationship, clergy should check with the diocesan office for guidance on what is expected in such situations.

For clergy who feel they cannot confer a liturgical blessing, the best practice is to refer the couple to another clergyperson. Some of these clergy may also wish to provide an additional pastoral response to those couples, thereby affirming and supporting their desire for God's blessing upon their relationship.

Currently, very few denominations authorize their clergy to conduct same-sex blessings or marriages, so an Episcopal clergyperson may be approached by a couple seeking a blessing of their union simply because it is not an option for them within their own denomination. Episcopal clergy may expect that some of these couples from other denominations feel tender and vulnerable in their relationship to the wider Church and so may need particular nurture and support.

Possible Issues Arising from Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity

This section addresses some of the more common issues that may arise in the process of preparing a GSM couple for a blessing of their lifelong covenant.

“Late bloomers” who “come out” later in life: Some GSM people recognize their sexual orientation or gender identity from a very young age. Others may have a growing realization that does not become fully clear until much later in life; some may have understood their sexual orientation or gender identity for some time but are only recently “coming out” publicly. A “late bloomer” may need some time to begin to live into his/her truest life or explore with a counselor this core change in self-perception before entering into a lifelong commitment.

Previous relationships: Some individuals may have lived a heterosexual life to a point, perhaps inwardly questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, before deciding that they felt more strongly toward people of the same sex or gender; others may have simply fallen in love with someone of the same sex or gender, perhaps by surprise. Still others may have accepted their own bisexuality and at one point decided to make a commitment to a person of a different sex/gender. These earlier relationships may have been more or less satisfactory depending on the extent to which familial, societal, and/or religious expectations played a part, and the compatibility between the partners. There are likely to be many important relationships from these earlier partnerships which will need to be honored and successfully incorporated into the life of the new couple.

⁸ This material is adapted from “Pastoral Resources for Province One Episcopal Clergy Ministering to Same-Gender Couples.”

Internalized homophobia: One or both members of a GSM couple may have been subjected to a continual societal onslaught of negative or stereotypical messages. These messages may have been internalized, possibly resulting in a person growing severely uncomfortable with his/her sexual orientation or gender identity. A clergyperson or trained lay preparer who perceives that a person has significant negative feelings or stigma about his/her orientation may appropriately refer the person for counseling with a therapist trained to handle this issue.

Biphobia: Bisexuality is sometimes unfairly and inaccurately associated with promiscuity and infidelity. This prejudice is found among people of varying sexual orientations, including other GSM people. Bi people are not more or less inclined to sexual license than any other people; clergy and lay preparers should guard against making assumptions about bisexuals.

Long-Term Relationships

Preparers may be working with people who have been together for many years or have previously had long-term, monogamous relationships. This means that preparers must be open to learning and benefiting from the wisdom generated by a couple's long years together.

Particular Hurt

One or both members of a GSM couple may have been wounded by exclusion or marginalization, that is, experiences and feelings of being "other" or "less than." Certainly, GSM people are at risk of being victims of abuse or exploitation, as well as self-hatred and fear of rejection. Clergy and laypeople preparing couples for blessings need to be sensitive to these issues.

Very often, due to prior experiences with organized religions that reject and do not approve of GSM people or relationships, these individuals do not feel welcome in a house of worship. In addition, one or both members of the couple may have a history of being excluded from benefits that heterosexuals receive from the State. For the couple, a clergyperson or layperson providing blessing preparation represents the Church, so a preparer will need to build a trusting relationship with the couple in order to support them in dealing with the anger, hurt, or confusion that erupts from rejection.

In or Out?

Although a couple is seeking a public union, one or even both members of the couple may need to remain "closeted" in some aspects of their individual lives. For instance, one person may be employed in a workplace or profession where being "out" could jeopardize the ability to function there at top form or even to continue to work there. Unfortunately, a prime example is the Church. For GSM clergy in many denominations, "coming out," especially when in a relationship, can result in being stripped of the ability to function as ordained clergy or to hold any position of leadership in the Church. In secular places of employment, where GSM people might be protected by law, their sexual orientation or gender identity could affect their ability to be hired or result in a tense and unfriendly work environment. Being "out" could have a negative impact on seeking or maintaining a position in public office. Lesbians and gays serving in the military no longer need to remain closeted, but many who were in the military previous to this change might need to talk about their pasts as closeted members of the armed services.

GSM couples take risks, even to their lives, when they display affection in public; when they cannot hold hands, they hold secrets. Because of this, there can be tension in a relationship when one person is fully "out" and comfortable with some public, visible displays of affection while the other is not. In some work situations, one person in the relationship may need to be careful when calling a partner at the workplace or taking messages at home.

Couples need to discuss when, where, and with whom it is safe to be open about their relationship in general. Specifically, as part of their preparation, they need to discuss each other's comfort levels and needs regarding making their relationship known in a public ceremony.

Relational History and Resolution of Previous Relationships

All couples have to deal with what went before. GSM couples may not be going through legal divorces, but as with any relationship, they will still likely need to process issues related to their previous relationships on an emotional and practical level. Couples will be freer to proceed into a new lifelong committed relationship when they have processed what one or the other has learned from earlier relationships and when they have resolved matters of finance, property, child custody, and responsibility to former spouses or partners.

Families of Origin

Most clergy and trained laypersons inquire about each individual's family of origin when preparing different-sex/gender couples for marriage. The answers can give the couple insights regarding a number of issues, including their understanding of what a healthy or unhealthy relationship looks like and their attitudes toward finances and parenting practices; the responses may also enable couples to identify unresolved issues that could affect the relationship.

One area which may be unique to GSM couples is their families' responses to their orientation, their public lives as GSM people, and their life together as a couple. Couples will benefit from exploring questions such as: Have the individuals "come out" to their own families? If so, what was the response? Has either member of a couple told his/her family about the intended blessing liturgy? Is the family supportive, hostile, or grieving, or simply absent? How will each family respond to the individual's partner: will the family define a partner as a spouse and therefore part of the family, or will they treat one's partner as a friend or roommate? In other words, has the couple discussed what they anticipate their relationship with the in-laws will be as they enter into a lifelong, committed relationship? Likewise, is the couple able to engage a network of support, individually and as a couple, and do they perceive how it will become a part of their new life together?

Legal Matters

For different-sex/gender couples, marriage automatically comes with legal protections and obligations (above and beyond the legality of the union itself). In states where no civil union or same-sex marriage is allowed, and even in states which make legal provision for same-sex couples, it is critical that GSM couples pursue private legal protections that substitute for some of the legal protections flowing from civil marriage (though private measures cannot cover all of the legal attributes of civil marriage). The couple should consider arranging for medical and financial durable powers-of-attorney, wills, and living wills, and may need to seek professional advice regarding financial and property matters. In addition, couples should consider soliciting legal advice on their rights and risks, especially regarding issues of tax, Social Security, or other state and federal legal matters.

Children

As with any different-sex/gender, childless couple preparing for marriage, GSM couples should also discuss with each other whether one or the other wants children. This discussion might include topics such as when and how to have children, the impact of children on finances and employment, and matters of parenting, such as childcare and discipline. Couples entering the relationship with children should discuss how to help the children adjust and integrate into the new family constellation. GSM couples, especially those blessed with children from a previous relationship, also need to support their children through various stages of development, particularly as the children relate to their peers, who may have no understanding of, or

possibly even a hostile reaction to, a friend with GSM parents. For example, if a parent becomes involved with a GSM partner, it may be controversial and require some adjustment in their child's social circle.

GSM couples should be aware of the legal ambiguity pertaining to custodial cases and may want to seek counsel to protect themselves and their children. This applies whether or not the couple resides in a state that provides civil unions or marriage for same-sex couples.

3. Presenters

Presenters are people chosen by the couple to support and present them to the presider and the assembly during the blessing liturgy. The liturgies include the option of presenters, just as some congregations offer to different-sex/gender couples. This option gives a voice to important people in the life of the couple during the liturgy and enriches the experience for all present. Presenters can also serve an important role in supporting the couple before and after the blessing liturgy. The selection of a couple mature in their relationship can be particularly helpful to a couple starting life together. The couple, together with the clergy or lay preparer, should talk as soon as possible about selecting presenters, so that the prayerful work of the presenters can begin early on.

Two short handouts provided in this pastoral resource (one for the couple and one for presenters) detail the role of presenters and are intended for use at the conclusion of the initial pre-blessing preparation session.

4. Outline of Pre-Blessing / Marriage Preparation for Gender and Sexual Minority Couples

Below is a guideline for a five-session, pre-blessing/marriage preparation that may be used along with the materials described above. In a 2010 church-wide survey regarding pastoral and teaching materials, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music found that a large number of trained lay preparers and clergy want a very specific template; however, those with experience preparing couples may choose to adapt, combine, or reorder this outline. Ideally, sessions last 60 to 90 minutes each, and both partners should be present for all sessions (although the preparer may decide to meet with one of the individuals to address specific issues).

Goal

Pre-blessing preparation sets as its goal the strengthening of a lifelong, monogamous partnership rooted in Christ. General Convention Resolution 2000-Do39 addresses the hope — the Church's and the couple's — for an enduring relationship:

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.

Expectations

Realities:

- Clergy and lay people are trained in many different ways to conduct premarital preparation.
- Clergy and trained lay people apply a wide variety of methods for pre-blessing/marriage preparation.

Assumptions:

- The priest or bishop is prepared to preside at the blessing/marriage.
- The clergyperson or trained lay preparer is experienced in preparing couples before marriages or blessings.
- The clergyperson or trained lay preparer is willing to refer the couple to a professional therapist should circumstances warrant.

Truth:

- Each couple is unique, requiring adaptations as appropriate.

Preparing Gender and Sexual Minority Couples in Long-term Relationships

When preparing people who have been together for many years, the session structure may need to be changed, and fewer sessions may be needed. One suggestion is to adapt the first session to get to know the couple, introduce the liturgy, and so on. The second session could employ the following questions or discussion topics, which respect the length of the couple's relationship and invite them to discuss their understanding of the Church.

- What does it mean to you to have your relationship blessed by the Church after all these years?
- How will having the Church's blessing and making a commitment in public, even if you have done so privately or in a non-church setting, affect you or your relationship?
- What can your relationship teach the Church?

Finally, the third session could be adapted from the current fifth session: wrapping up, clarifying the liturgy, and fielding any other questions that may have arisen.

Session One: Getting To Know You and an Overview

This session focuses on getting to know one another. It also starts to address the details of the rite, offering the couple and the clergyperson an opportunity to study the rites together, looking at their meaning and choices and affirming that the blessing, grounded in God, is given through the Church. Some clergy, however, may prefer to do a very general overview of the rites in this session, then study them more intensely later in the process.

Addressing the practical issues of the blessing or marriage at the outset helps to build trust and allows the couple to open themselves to the substance of the next four sessions. By providing even a general overview of the rites, the preparer can address questions and alleviate anxieties about the actual day. For a marriage, the couple and clergyperson officiating will need to decide, either in this session or later in the preparation, which rite to use.

Session One includes a great deal of material, some of which may be moved to another session. Handouts for this session include:

- The liturgy "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant"; for a marriage, the preparer may have all of the rites available to review with the couple.
- 1. *Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Gender and Sexual Minority Couples* (found at the end of this outline).

- 2. *Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant* (found at the end of this outline).
- 3. *About Presenters — For the Couple* (found at the end of this outline).
- 4. *Information for Presenters* (found at the end of this outline).

Outline of Session One

- Pray together.
- Get to know one another (varies as to how well the preparer knows the couple).
- Explore the couples' religious backgrounds, their experiences with the church(es), and their reasons for being in this congregation.
- Reflect on the theological significance of the couple's relationship. The handout *Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Gender and Sexual Minority Couples* may be useful in this discussion. (This reflection might be moved to a later session.)
- Review and ask the couple to sign the *Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant*.
- Walk through the blessing rite or marriage rites, raising theological issues and naming liturgical choices:
 - Discuss the eucharist as normative in the service. However, including a celebration of the eucharist may not be appropriate if only one member of the couple is Christian.
 - Emphasize the difference between a civil service and an ecclesial blessing.
 - Answer general questions regarding details of the service and the Church's practice.
 - Introduce the possibility of presenters.

At the end of the session, provide written handouts and suggest “homework” topics for the couple to think about for Sessions Two and Three:

- Families of origin and growing up in them:
 - What worked and didn't work so well in their families of origin (this topic may also influence work in Session Four).
 - Family Church/religious history as well as each individual's history — positive and negative — with the Church/religion.
- Marriages of family members, particularly parents:
 - Parents' ways of dealing with conflict.
 - Parents' styles of child-rearing.
 - Family tolerance of children's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Session Two: Learning from the Past, Part 1

This session provides a time for one member of the couple to speak and for the other to listen. Session Two opens with prayer, then looks back to focus upon the relationship of one partner with his/her family of origin, including exploring the marriage(s) of his/her parents and siblings and, if possible, grandparents and close friends. This discussion includes what the individual would or would not replicate from the past in his/her own ongoing and future relationships, particularly the relationship that is to be blessed. In addition, the individual can look at levels of acceptance of his/her relationship by his/her family and at other issues from family of origin and childhood.

The guiding assumption underlying this analysis is that certain issues are replicated from generation to generation, and that, once the issues are identified, individuals can choose to continue those patterns or deliberately alter them. This session works most effectively if the conversation flows naturally, rather than following a rigid interview, and if it includes the following important areas:

- Family: number and birth order of siblings.
- Money: its role and influence in the family.
- Sex: attitudes in family of origin about monogamy, fidelity, and the role of sex in relationship.
- Alcohol and drugs: their places within the family as children grew.
- In-laws: relationship with in-laws and greater family.
- Children:
 - agreement or disagreement between parents about child-rearing.
 - the individual's feelings about being a child in his/her family.
- Conflict: parents' methods of arguing and disagreeing.

As the conversation concludes, the preparer invites the individual to identify what he/she would or would not replicate in his/her own adult relationship with the life partner. Following that, the silent partner is given the floor to comment on what he/she has heard and learned, especially any surprises.

Session Three: Learning from the Past, Part 2

This session continues the look back by extending the chance for the other member of the couple to speak about his/her family of origin. Both members of the couple need the opportunity to explore the topics and to hear each other's stories so that each can learn and appreciate more deeply what the other brings to their relationship.

Session Three, which also begins with prayer, duplicates with the second person the process with the first from Session Two. If time permits at the end, the couple might discuss the impact of family history on their own relationship.

Session Four: Looking to the Future

This session, an opportunity to look at the relationship today and into the future, invites the couple to name areas in the relationship that appear strong and supportive while also opening a space to identify and address areas that may be problematic. Thoughts, questions, and new information from previous sessions may help determine where the couple is today and where their relationship and household may need attention in the future.

After opening with prayer, this session should include discussion of:

- The couple's relationship in general: in-depth exploration of where they have been and where they are now.
- The role of sex and intimacy in the relationship (for example, potential changes of sexual behavior as a result of committing to a monogamous relationship).
- The role of alcohol and drugs in the relationship.
- Money (for example, household finances and financial planning).
- Legal protections (for example, medical and financial durable powers-of-attorney, wills, living wills, and insurance).
- Household roles (for example, who takes out the trash, who keeps the social calendar).
- Communication:
 - How the couple talks things through.
 - What happens when they disagree.
- Concerns for the future.
- Decision-making as a couple.

- Dealing with families as individuals (one’s own as well as one’s partner’s) and as a couple.
- Support networks, now and in the future.

Session Four concludes with a discussion of the need for boundaries between generations so that the couples’ life as a unit may be seen as distinct from older and younger generations.

Session Five: Liturgical Decisions and Wrap-up

Session Five, focused on the blessing service itself, is an opportunity to make choices for the liturgy, based on the *Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship* handed out (and discussed) at the first session. The depth of this discussion will be determined by what was or was not addressed in Session One. In addition, as the final session, Session Five serves as a time to consider questions that may have arisen from previous sessions.

Outline of Session Five

- Pray together.
- Address questions and concerns regarding previous sessions and other issues that have arisen.
- Review theological reflections in light of previous sessions and what is to come. The preparer can help the couple connect the spiritual practices of their life as a couple and the “staging” of the service. For example, will they process into the service together or separately, or will they be already in the worship space as the liturgy begins? Will they sit together during the Ministry of the Word or across the aisle from one another?
- Discuss details of the service itself:
 - Scripture (which passages speak particularly to the couple’s life together) and whether non-biblical readings may be included.
 - Will the liturgy take place at the congregation’s principal weekly celebration? Is celebration of the eucharist to be omitted for pastoral reasons?
 - Other liturgical choices, especially:
 - Which collect will be used?
 - Which of the two vows will be used?
 - Will rings be exchanged, or, if rings have already been worn, are they to be blessed?
 - What music, if any, will be included? (The couple should consult with the congregation’s musician.)
- Discuss presenters and their roles in supporting the couple in the service and in their ongoing life.

In closing, the preparer can assure the couple that they have done hard and important work together, work that is a gift both to the preparer and to the couple. The preparer can express his or her eager anticipation of the couple’s blessing and of meeting their close and extended families, seeing them with their friends, and celebrating their relationship in the sight of God.

Handouts for “Hearing, Seeing, and Declaring New Things”

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The *Declaration of Intention* requires the replacement of *N.N.* and *N. N.* in the first sentence with the couple’s names.

Handouts 3 and 4 are designed for use with the liturgies “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” and “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage.” The preparer should insert the correct title of the rite. These handouts may be modified if one of the other marriage liturgies is to be used.

Handouts 3 through 5 are samples that may be adapted for the use of a specific congregation. In these, “*N. Episcopal Church*” should be replaced with the congregation’s name, and a similar change made for “*Episcopal Diocese of X.*”

Handout 1

Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Gender and Sexual Minority Couples

Christian Life and Covenants

All Christians are called to bear witness to the good news of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered for such witness by our covenantal relationship with God.

Baptism initiates us into that covenant, making us Christ's own forever and members of Christ's Body, the Church. The eucharist sustains us in that covenantal life and strengthens us to be Christ's witnesses in the world.

Our covenantal life with God is expressed in relationships of commitment and faithfulness, including those of gender and sexual minority couples. It is the Church's joy to celebrate these relationships as signs of God's love, to pray for God's grace to support couples in their life together, and to join with these couples in our shared witness to the gospel in the world.

Themes for Theological Reflection and Spiritual Practice

A sacramental framework for covenantal relationships offers a way to reflect on the grace of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of faithful, committed couples. Several theological themes can assist couples as they consider their covenantal vows as a form of spiritual practice:

- *Vocation*: God calls people into various kinds of relationship, whether as single people, in monastic communities, or as intimate couples. These vocational callings can empower our witness to the gospel. The decision to enter into a covenantal union is a vocation marked by these characteristics: "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."
- *Households*: Covenantal relationships are often lived in households in which we practice daily the giving of ourselves for the good of another. While households take many different forms, they create a space of mutual trust and accountability. The joy, intimacy, and shared vulnerability of households can thus help us learn the spiritual disciplines of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation in lives of committed monogamy and fidelity.
- *Fruitfulness*: The divine grace that sustains a covenantal relationship bears fruit in countless ways, not only for the couple but for the wider community as well. Covenanted couples manifest this grace in their shared gifts for ministry and in lives of service, generosity, and hospitality.
- *Mutual Blessing*: A blessed relationship is set apart for a divine purpose: to bear witness to the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying love of God in the world. As the Spirit empowers the couple for this witness, the Church is likewise blessed and strengthened for its mission and ministry.

In all of these ways and more, the blessing of a relationship invites the couple and the whole Church to renew our commitment to the Baptismal Covenant. That commitment is expressed by *faith* in the good news of Jesus Christ, in the *hope* for union with God that Christ promised, and with the *love* that knits us together as the Body of Christ. As the apostle Paul says, we live our life together as God's people with faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Handout 2

Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant

NOTE: This template is presented for use with gender and sexual minority couples since a similar declaration is required by the Canons of the Episcopal Church (Canon 1.18.3[d-g]) for different-sex/gender couples prior to their marriage.

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

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

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

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

Signature

Signature

Date

Sample Handout 3

About Presenters—For the Couple

At N. Episcopal Church, we consider “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” [“The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage”] to be a celebration supported by the congregation, much as candidates for baptism are supported by all the members of the Church. Just as those who are baptized are initiated into the full life of the Church, those who receive the Church’s blessing upon their relationship are embraced in a new way in the faith community.

The Blessing Liturgy

The presentation takes place immediately after the sermon, as follows:

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

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

Presenters We do.

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

Presenters We will.

Choosing Presenters

There are a variety of possibilities for choosing presenters who will stand with you and present you at the liturgy. It can be helpful to choose at least one member of this faith community to walk with you through this process. If you are new to the congregation, the priest (or other person designated) can help you discern whom you might consider. The selection of a couple mature in their relationship can be particularly helpful if you are just beginning your life together. Often, couples will choose their own parents, children, or other supportive family members to be their presenters.

Presenters can pray for you during the period of preparation before your blessing, keep you connected to the congregation, and continue to support you in your ongoing covenanted life together.

Finally, in choosing, remember that these people will stand with you during the liturgy and present you at this rite. Also remember that, immediately after you are presented, the entire congregation will vow to support you as you, in turn, become a blessing and bear grace to the entire congregation.

Because presenters serve an important role before and after the blessing, you and your clergy person should talk early about selecting presenters, so that your prayerful partnership may begin as soon as possible.

Sample Handout 4

Information for Presenters

At N. Episcopal Church, we consider the “Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” to be a celebration supported by the congregation, much as candidates for baptism are supported by all the members of the Church. Just as those who are baptized are initiated into the full life of the Church, those who receive the Church’s blessing upon their relationship are embraced in a new way in the faith community.

At the blessing service, you present the couple to the presider and to the assembly, as follows:

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

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

Presenters We do.

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

Presenters We will.

As a presenter, your role begins even before the blessing. We encourage you to pray for the couple both privately and in the Prayers of the People at Sunday services during their period of preparation. You can continue to support their ongoing life by acknowledging the anniversary of their blessing [marriage] and offering your presence whenever their household experiences times of difficulty or celebrates occasions of joy. If you are a member of the congregation, you also have a role in keeping them connected to others in the congregation.

As a presenter, you promise to support the couple as they become a blessing and bear grace to their families and friends, the Church, and the world. In this role, then, you are a witness to the blessing given and received in the liturgy and carried forth by the couple into the world.

Sample Handout 5

Model Congregational Guidelines

NOTE: Most congregations adopt some form of marriage policy expressing norms and guidelines for different-sex/gender couples preparing for marriage. All congregations may engage in a helpful and fruitful exercise to develop guidelines that reflect the Christian community in which they worship; the guidelines that are developed should apply to both different-sex/gender couples and gender and sexual minority couples. Obviously, such a policy is optional at the discretion of the clergy in consultation with the vestry or bishop's committee. As always with liturgical matters, final decisions are the responsibility of the clergy. Following is a model of a guideline that applies for all couples preparing for marriage or a blessing. It may be modified to meet specific situations and needs.

Information for All Couples Seeking the Church's Blessing at N. Episcopal Church*A. Introduction*

The Christian community at N. Episcopal Church understands that relationships are complex and that making a lifelong commitment to a relationship through a marriage or blessing is a significant, exciting, and wonder-filled event in people's lives. We also believe that a Christian community that agrees to bless such a relationship needs to be intentional about supporting the couple as they prepare for the blessing and as they live out their lives.

We understand that committed, lifelong relationships, whether for gender and sexual minority couples or different-sex/gender couples, are to be outward and visible signs of an inward, spiritual, and God-given love. In this context, N. Episcopal Church seeks to support all couples in their commitment to one another and to help make the love of God more visible for the whole community.

B. Guidelines

The following guidelines have been adopted by the lay and ordained leaders of N. Episcopal Church:

1. As required for different-sex/gender couples seeking marriage according to the Book of Common Prayer, at least one member of a gender and sexual minority couple must be baptized.
2. It is desirable that at least one member of the couple be an active member of this, or some other, Christian community. We hope this membership might include giving serious, prayerful consideration to supporting the congregation through time, talent, and/or treasure.
3. Approximately six months' notice should be given to allow for planning and pastoral preparation.
4. If the couple has no connection with N. Episcopal Church but wishes to have the blessing at N. Episcopal Church or to use the services of N. Episcopal Church's priest:
 - They should be able to show that at least one of the couple has active membership in another Episcopal or Christian congregation.
 - They need to complete marriage or blessing preparation with their own or other clergy person or a qualified lay preparer.

- They might consider making a financial contribution to N. Episcopal Church in thanksgiving for their marriage or blessing and for the ongoing support of the Church, its ministry and mission. A creative formula to calculate this contribution might be to consider a tithe (10 percent) of the budget for the entire celebration. (Clergy have discretion here, as resources vary greatly from couple to couple. Also, if a couple is returning to Church for the first time, an unconditional welcome may be the best pastoral response.)

In all cases, it is important that all concerned comply with the laws of the State, the Canons of the Episcopal Church, and the canons and policies of the Episcopal Diocese of X, as well as the directives of the diocesan bishop, including compliance with diocesan policies for cases in which the relationship is not the first marriage or committed relationship for one or both people.