

VI. DISCUSSION GUIDE

to

“I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing”: Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships (revised and expanded edition)

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Introduction to the Discussion Guide

This discussion guide invites the people of the Episcopal Church into a process of thoughtful consideration of the liturgical and theological resources for blessing same-sex relationships. Each of the five modules contains introductory teaching material and questions for group discussion; the first three also have handouts. The questions are shaped to equip individuals and groups to explore the materials in this collection in a reflective Christian manner.

These materials encourage participants to approach the discussion of resources for blessing same-sex relationships with respect for one another and for the various perspectives that individuals will bring to the conversation.

Because the same ideas will not inspire or challenge all groups, each area of study is wide-ranging and could span more than one session. Many congregations currently gather for Bible study and adult formation or education, and leaders can adapt these materials for such forums. Congregations may choose to engage in this process over an extended period of time or plan a one- to two-day retreat in order to enter more deeply into conversation and study. The amount of time suggested for particular discussions may be adjusted to meet the needs of a group. We strongly encourage that each session include time for Bible study related to the topic.

Encouraging time for participants to speak from their own experiences is essential when people engage in theological reflection on any topic. Significant factors in the conversation will include the cultural context of individuals and the makeup of the community. Each session's opening gives participants an opportunity to introduce themselves.

Ideally, the facilitator of these conversations will be someone who is respected by the community and who is respectful of, and familiar with, the group. Facilitators should read the entire resource "I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing" in preparation for leading discussion; they should also be familiar with local civil law and diocesan policies.

Establishing Group Norms for Conversations

Prayers and practices that make for good conversations

Parishioners enter the conversation about blessing same-sex relationships from many different starting points. Some congregations and individuals do not understand why any Episcopal church would bless same-sex relationships; others do not understand why the blessing of same-sex relationships continues to be controversial. Recognizing these differences, facilitators should begin these conversations with agreement for respectful conversation; a *Covenant for Discussion* is included among the handouts found at the end of this discussion guide. Beginning and ending each session with prayers of thanksgiving for the opportunity for dialogue can underscore the value of respectful discussion.

The idea that the Church is a safe place to disagree is attractive, but living it out is difficult. Doing so requires that we expand our boundaries to accept those we do not understand or with whom we do not agree on matters of great importance. We do this because, more than anything, Christians do agree on matters of the greatest importance — the love and salvation offered by Jesus Christ. While we may disagree over the definition of marriage and how we understand biblical texts about divorce and sexuality, we can agree on our shared participation in Christ's mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

The goal of dialogue is not to win the day for one's own point of view, but for all participants to grow in understanding of both themselves and others. If participants come to this conversation with open hearts and minds, it is possible to honor both the integrity and holiness of gay and lesbian couples and their families, and the deep traditions of the Church.

Recommended Background Materials

*To Set Our Hope on Christ*¹ was prepared as a response to the request by the *Windsor Report* that The Episcopal Church explain how “a person living in a same gender union may be considered eligible to lead the flock of Christ.” This document provides an overview as to how and why The Episcopal Church has moved toward the fuller inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church. The appendix is composed of a historical summary of beliefs and policies concerning sexuality in The Episcopal Church.

The June 2009 *Report of the Task Force on Holiness in Relationships and the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships*, from the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego,² presents different points of view in an even-handed manner. The report considers the interpretation of Holy Scripture; marriage and holiness in Scripture; biblical texts that may condemn same-sex relationships and those that may portray positive roles of gays and lesbians; Church history and tradition; practical, pastoral and sacramental theology; and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

1. Study Area One: History

History: *Reviewing the history of The Episcopal Church’s decisions regarding same-sex relationships and reflecting on the current context*

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handouts ready (included at the end of this Discussion Guide, unless otherwise noted):

- A. *Covenant for Discussion*
- B. *Understanding the History*
- C. *An Introduction to General Convention*
- *A Review of General Convention Legislation (Appendix 2)*
- D. *Relationships and Blessing: Reflection Questions*

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Go around the room to have each person introduce herself or himself and share what he/she is most looking forward to in these conversations.
- Establish group norms for engaging in respectful conversation. Facilitators may distribute and review the *Covenant for Discussion* provided in the handouts, or choose a set of norms from their own resources.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

¹ *To Set Our Hope in Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report ¶135* is available on the website of The Episcopal Church: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/ToSetOurHope_eng.pdf.

² *Report of the Task Force on Holiness in Relationships and the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships* is available on the website of the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego: <http://www.edsd.org/mediafiles/holiness-in-relationships-task-force-report.pdf>.

C. Introducing the Topic

Distribute the worksheet *Understanding the History* and give participants about 10 minutes to complete it.

After everyone has had time to write something, ask everyone to share their answers to “A” (how long The Episcopal Church has been talking about same-sex relationships and its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members). Continue by inviting deputies to share whatever is comfortable from “B” for each decade. Listen to see whether there is a thread or theme that runs through the memories.

D. General Convention Legislation

Give a very brief description of what General Convention is, who attends, and what it does, using the handout *An Introduction to General Convention*.

Distribute *A Review of General Convention Legislation*, and discuss it in light of responses to the worksheet. Here — and throughout the balance of the sessions — clearly distinguish when you are expressing an idea or opinion based on your own experience and when you are communicating official church stances.

E. The Blessings of Relationships

Ask the group to call to mind at least three committed relationships they are familiar with: for example, relationships of family members, friends at work or school, or couples in your congregation; or their own committed relationship. Remind them that they may know people in committed relationships who are not married for one reason or another.

Divide into groups of threes, and distribute the handout *Relationships and Blessing: Reflection Questions*. Instruct the group to reflect for 15 or 20 minutes on the questions in the handout, which explore the nature of committed relationships. Afterward, have them reflect back to the larger group by asking these questions:

- What was especially illuminating or challenging in your conversations?
- Regarding the complexities of the relationships you discussed, were there any surprises?
- Based on your conversations, why do you think the Church blesses any committed relationships at all?

F. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

2. Study Area Two: Theology and the Bible

Theology and the Bible: *Examining our understanding of God’s blessing through the lens of theology and Scripture*

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handouts ready (included at the end of this discussion guide):

- A. *Covenant for Discussion* (or other norm for discussion)
- E. *Theological Reflection on Same-Sex Relationships: A Summary of “Faith, Hope, and Love”*

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the *Covenant for Discussion* or other set of norms established in the first session.
- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that occurred to them regarding the history of The Episcopal Church, rites of blessing same-sex relationships, and their own experience of blessings revealed in committed relationships.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce the theological principles with these or similar words:

In The Episcopal Church, we develop our theology, or the way we think about God, through Scripture, tradition, and reason. Consider, for example, the concept of “hospitality.” Numerous examples in Scripture tell of God’s hospitality toward God’s people and of the people of God issuing or withholding God’s hospitality from others. Although some of the stories seem to show behavior that conflicts with the ways God might have us respond to outsiders today, these biblical stories still help guide us. Other theological principles, like eschatology (beliefs about final events in the history of the world) and the triune nature of God, take a little more exploration from Scripture to interpret in light of Christian experience and understanding over the millennia since biblical times. We believe that God continues to reveal God’s self to the world. We experience this revelation in many ways, including faithful, lifelong, committed relationships.

Distribute *Theological Reflection on Same-Sex Relationships* and ask participants to read and reflect on this summary of the essay, “Faith, Hope, and Love.” Describing relationships as “covenantal,” this document identifies four themes for theological reflection: vocation, households, fruitfulness, and mutual blessing. Invite the group to discuss some or all of these principles, using the introductions and discussion questions that follow.

D. Covenant

Introduce the concept of “covenant” with these or similar words:

Covenants are made and held in relationships not only between the individual and God but within a community, which is also held accountable. The Baptismal Covenant is an example that will be familiar to Episcopalians, where commitments are made by (or for) the individual being baptized as well as by the sponsors and the gathered community.

Covenants take many forms in Scripture. They typically, but not always, contain a solemn agreement in which all parties pledge themselves to the others, outlining mutual obligations and responsibilities. Scripture tells about covenants concerning marriage, water rights, tribal relationships, protection, and faithfulness; the covenants include rituals involving animals, exchanges, and other gestures of the now-sealed relationship. The book of Genesis contains a series of covenants God made. For example, after making a covenant with Noah (Genesis 6:18) to protect his family from the impending flood, God makes a covenant with creation: “I

establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11).

Relational commitment can lead a couple to enter into a lifelong covenant in which their love and faithfulness participate in and reflect God’s own gracious covenant with us in Christ.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- One description of the difference between a contract and a covenant reads: “A contract is an agreement made in suspicion. A covenant is an agreement made in trust.” What are some examples of contracts and covenants in your own life?
- Where have you seen God’s graciousness evidenced in committed relationships of couples you have known?

E. Vocation

Introduce the theme of “vocation” with these or similar words:

Some people are called into long-term committed relationships as a vocation, defined here as a responsibility or way of life to which one is called by God. In Scripture, we find an example of this kind of relationship in Abraham and Sarah, who are vocationally linked to God and to one another. They are sent on a journey together that changes not just their names but the world (Genesis 11:27–25:11). Many other examples of committed relationships in the Bible — for example, Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1), Eli and Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Jesus and his disciples — might be considered vocational, that is, carrying a function called by God. These partnerships defined not only the individuals but also the work they had to do together as a function of God’s life in the world.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- Have you been in, witnessed, or read about relationships you could consider “vocational”? If so, what makes them so?
- In the Bible we are told that Paul, when counseling early Christians about the complexities and persecutions Christians were facing at the time, suggested that remaining single is a way to serve God, a vocation to “promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:35). Not everyone is called into long-term committed relationships; being single may be a vocation for some. Have you experienced, or do you know other people who have experienced, singleness as a vocation?

F. Households

Introduce the theme of “households” with these or similar words:

Households take many different forms. Consider the story of the prodigal son, in which obligations of loyalty and love were made, broken, and reconciled. Families of origin come with implicit household covenants. When individuals join together to create new households, they have the opportunity to bind themselves to one another in new ways. In these newly created households, the covenanted relationships within allow for holy love, care, risk-taking, and sacrifice on behalf of the other. People have reflected that, in such relationships, they begin to understand God’s unconditional love of, and faithfulness to, us. They experience many of the gifts that such a household can bring, including mutual joy, companionship, faithfulness, compromise, charity, grace, and forgiveness.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- The *Theological Reflection on Same-Sex Relationships* handout states: “While households take many different forms, they create a space of mutual trust and accountability” where we can “learn the spiritual disciplines of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation.” Have you known or experienced households that provide that “sacred space”? How does thinking about households as a theological concept resonate with your experience?
- In the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), the household celebrates when the father welcomes the younger son with compassion, despite the son’s disregard for their family agreements. What similar responses have you seen in households you have known, and what do such responses reveal about the nature of households?
- In the same story, the elder brother resents the prodigal. What do you think gets in the way of healing the break in mutual trust and accountability between these two members of the same household?

G. Mutual Blessing and Fruitfulness

Introduce the themes of “mutual blessing” and “fruitfulness” with these or similar words:

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan summed up the essence of the apostle Paul’s message to the world in three words: grace, love, and fellowship: “These are the key words of what has become the second-best-known prayer in the Christian Church: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.’”³ Grace. Love. Fellowship. These blessings are abundant in Christian relationships and in Christian communities.

The apostle Paul tells us, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22). Just as Abraham was blessed by God in order to be a blessing (Genesis 12:2), the commitment exhibited in covenantal relationships becomes a source of blessing for the whole Church. When divine grace sustains a covenantal relationship it bears fruit in countless ways, not only for the couple but for the wider community as well.

When we are present in any public naming of graces or gifts, be it baptism or graduation or the giving of an award, we are often reminded that the individual or group upon which the recognition is bestowed is expected to return that value back to society. At a liturgy of blessing, we are reminded of the value of the individuals entering into a covenant with one another — of their love, faith, loyalty, and devotion to each other and to God. As we bless their relationship we expect in return that this naming and strengthening of the couple will bless the congregation.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- In your experience, how have you seen covenantal relationships that are blessed in the Church become in turn a blessing for the Church?
- In your experience, how have you seen covenantal relationships bear fruit?
- How can the blessing of a same-sex relationship sustain and enable a couple to embody service, generosity, and hospitality beyond their household?

³ Donald Coggan, *Meet Paul: An Encounter with the Apostle* (London: SPCK, 1998), 73–75.

H. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

3. Study Area Three: Liturgy

Liturgy: *Discussing liturgy in general and the liturgical resources developed for the blessing of same-sex relationships*

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handouts ready (included at the end of this discussion guide, unless otherwise noted):

- A. *Covenant for Discussion* (or other norm for discussion)
- F. *Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials*
- Liturgy: “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” or “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage”
- Liturgy: “The Celebration of a Marriage (2)” or “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” (optional)

Prior to the session, solicit volunteers to walk through the liturgy (ending with the greeting of the Peace) during the session. Ask them to be respectful of the process and to recognize that even when role-playing the words and actions in a liturgy can have an impact on the people saying and doing them.

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the *Covenant for Discussion* or other set of norms established in the first session.
- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that have occurred to them regarding the interaction of the Bible and theology with the blessing of same-sex relationships.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce a discussion of the meaning and purpose of liturgy with these or similar words:

Christians over the centuries have found ways to ritualize our story as a people of God, our place in God’s life today, and our hope for an eternity with Christ. Liturgy, as an event, retells salvation history in word and sacrament: by the proclamation of Scripture, through preaching and prayer, and in the liturgy of the table. Each time we celebrate liturgy, we become active participants in re-presenting this history — life with God, from creation and fall through covenant, redemption, and fulfillment — and in bringing it into the present. When we

consecrate water during baptism, we go back to the waters of creation at the beginning of our story. We are buried with Christ in this water and brought forth into a new life in Christ, a new future. Scripture calls us to keep rituals when we are told to “make this day holy” or to “remember this place” or to “do this” from this day forward in order to keep our inherited faith as present as it ever was.

Liturgy can be understood as an exchange between heaven and earth. All that we have comes from God, and that is what we return. In our prayers, we as a community breathe in and out our petitions, thanksgivings, sorrows, hopes, and praises.

Celebrating important moments in the lives of individual Christians and in the community often happens in the context of liturgy. In the liturgies of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and ordination, we join together to enact and celebrate our commitment to a vocation with Christ and with one another.

D. Qualities of Anglican Liturgy

Distribute the handout *Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials*, and introduce the principles with these or similar words:

In Resolution 2009-C056, the General Convention directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological and liturgical resources” for the blessing of same-sex relationships. The Commission discovered a vast array of unofficial liturgies, some dating back to the 1970s, and, more recently, rites of blessing commended for use in dioceses in The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. These liturgies were created in response to the pastoral needs of same-sex couples in various local jurisdictions. The Commission found strong similarities in the rites; many used *The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage* from the Book of Common Prayer as a template.

This research led the Commission to develop liturgical principles to assess the resources it had collected and as the basis for creating a new liturgical resource to present to General Convention in 2012. Consistency with Anglican theological tradition and the liturgical style of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer was essential in developing these materials. Keeping proposed rites as an expression of the whole Church, not only the two people seeking a blessing, was also important. A full list of those qualities is in the handout.

These qualities can be gathered into two general categories: words and actions. In liturgy, words and actions together express and shape what we believe. In “*The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*,” this combination of words and actions expresses what we understand and hope about blessing, households, and the revelation of God’s love in the world through these committed relationships.

E. Exploring the Liturgy for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships

Distribute copies of the liturgy or liturgies you have decided to use (“*The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*” or “*The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage*”; “*The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage* [2]” or “*The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony*”) and invite participants to keep in mind the principles outlined in the handout for evaluating liturgical materials as they role-play the liturgy.

Before reading through the liturgy with the volunteers selected in advance of the session, explain that it is not the intention of this “couple” to receive this blessing. Acknowledge that there may be anxiety when role-playing the rite, and invite participants to engage the experience prayerfully. When finished, remind the “couple,” the “presider,” and the “assembly” that the role-play is not binding, and thank the volunteers for their help.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- What did you hear?
- What did you see?
- What did you feel?
- How does this liturgy hold to the liturgical principles set forth in the handout?
- What words, symbols, and actions in this liturgy stand out for you and draw you into reflection on your own experience of covenantal relationship?
- What do the words, symbols, and actions call forth, challenge, or offer to the couple who experience them in the context of a blessing of their relationship?
- In your experience, which elements seem to have the most meaning when a community gathers to receive God’s blessing?

F. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

4. Study Area Four: Civil and Canon Law

Civil and Canon Law: *Exploring legal, canonical, and spiritual issues that arise as the Church considers blessing same-sex couples*

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handout ready:

- A. *Covenant for Discussion* (or other norm for discussion)

Set up two pages of newsprint, each with two columns:

One page of newsprint:

<u>Secular Benefits / Obligations</u>	<u>MARRIAGE</u>	<u>Sacred Benefits / Obligations</u>
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The other page of newsprint:

<u>Secular Benefits / Obligations</u>	<u>BLESSING</u>	<u>Sacred Benefits / Obligations</u>
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Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the *Covenant for Discussion* or other set of norms established in the first session.

- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that have occurred to them regarding the liturgy for the blessing of same-sex relationships.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce the discussion of civil and canon law with these or similar words:

Resolution 2009-C056 directed the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to develop resources for blessing same-gender relationships. As the Commission went about its work, Episcopalians asked about the relationship between these blessings and marriage. Following the direction of General Convention, the Commission developed a resource for blessing relationships, not marriage, while also recognizing the complexity of civil and canon (that is, Church) law.

Some states allow same-sex couples to marry; others permit civil unions or provide other legal status for these couples. Other states forbid (or do not recognize) same-sex marriage or unions; some of these states also do not recognize any legal status for same-sex couples who have a civil marriage or civil union from another state where that status is legal.

The Book of Common Prayer (p. 422) and Canon I.18.1 require Episcopal clergy to conform to the laws of their state governing the creation of a civil marriage.

D. Exploring the Benefits and Obligations of Marriage and Blessing

Invite people to brainstorm about the secular benefits and obligations of marriage, and note their answers in that column of the newsprint page headed “Marriage.” Then ask about the sacred benefits and obligations of marriage and note their answers. Now, do the same on the page with the heading “Blessing” (that is, blessing a lifelong, committed relationship) — secular benefits and obligations first, then sacred benefits and obligations. Step back and ask people what they notice about the four lists. Have a conversation.

The following is a list of responses people might give:

Marriage: Secular Benefits / Obligations

- Legal status given by the state: global for different-sex couple; local/state for same-sex couple
- Defined by some states as only between a man and a woman — supporting the traditional view of marriage
- Part of the institution of marriage and its social benefits
- Potential financial benefits — joint tax returns, automatic joint ownership, etc. — global for different-sex couple; local/state for same-sex couple
- Clarity about the relationship — fits a known model, people know what you are talking about if you say you are married; clarity about monogamy and faithfulness
- Legal responsibilities shared by the couple
- Social status
- Usually, acceptance of parents, family, and friends of the relationship

Marriage: Sacred Benefits / Obligations

- God’s blessing proclaimed by the Church
- Recognition of spiritual nature of relationship
- Public religious and spiritual commitment of love

- Call to constant reconciliation and assurance of forgiveness
- Spiritual preparation and counseling prior to ceremony
- “Church wedding” and social recognition and support of religious community
- Exchange and blessing of symbols of relationship — ring(s)
- Done as part of the Prayer Book and Episcopal Church norms — not true for same-sex couples

Blessing: Secular Benefits / Obligations

- Possible gained clarity about the relationship; commitment statements made to one another
- Possible social status
- Possible acceptance/recognition of parents, family, and friends

Blessing: Sacred Benefits / Obligations

- God’s blessing proclaimed by the Church
- Recognition of spiritual nature of relationship; clarity about monogamy and faithfulness
- Public religious and spiritual commitment of love
- Call to constant reconciliation and assurance of forgiveness
- Spiritual preparation and counseling prior to ceremony
- “Church wedding” and social recognition and support of religious community
- Exchange and blessing of symbols of relationship — ring(s)
- Falls within Episcopal Church norms, if permitted by bishop as pastoral response

Invite the group to draw conclusions from the lists and their discussion of them. They might discover that when the Church blesses same-sex couples such blessings seem to carry most but not all of the “sacred benefit” that one finds in marriage, and when the Church blesses same-sex couples such blessings seem to carry much less of the “secular benefit” that one finds in marriage.

E. Conclusion

Thank the participants for coming, remind them of the next meeting date and time, and close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

5. Study Area Five: Mission

Mission: *Exploring the blessing of same-sex relationships as part of the Church’s mission and God’s reconciling work in the world*

A. Preparing for the Session

Have the following handout ready:

- A. *Covenant for Discussion* (or other norm for discussion)

Prepare for the Bible study to be offered in this session by choosing the passage to be read and deciding on the method of study.

B. Gathering

- Welcome participants and make any announcements necessary regarding hospitality (restrooms, coffee) and scheduling.
- Continue with a prayer of thanksgiving for the opportunity to have this conversation.
- Review group norms for engaging in respectful conversation, using the *Covenant for Discussion* or other set of norms established in the first session.
- Invite participants who attended the previous session to share illuminations and challenges that have occurred to them regarding the comparison of marriage and blessings.
- Introduce the Bible study prepared for this session.

C. Introducing the Topic

Introduce this final session by reminding participants that we are a part of a larger story, using these or similar words:

Using the “three-legged stool” of Anglicanism, we have explored Scripture, tradition, and reason relating to the development of rites for blessing same-sex relationships in The Episcopal Church. We have explored God’s call to us to live in relationship to God and to one another. We may have disagreed, misunderstood, or challenged one another, but we have been reminded at each turn that our life together, centered in baptism and the eucharist, is central to being people of faith in this time and in this Church.

The essay “Faith, Hope, and Love” has this to say about the significance for mission of blessing same-sex relationships:

This missional character of covenantal blessing, reflected in both Scripture and the historical traditions of the Church, deserves renewed attention today. The 2000 General Convention contributed to this renewal when it passed Resolution D039, which identified monogamy, fidelity, holy love, and other characteristics of lifelong, committed relationships. Significantly, that resolution was framed as a way to enable the Church to engage more effectively in its mission. Many in The Episcopal Church have witnessed these characteristics in the committed relationships of same-sex couples. That recognition can, and in many places already has, broadened the understanding of the Church’s mission of participating in God’s reconciling work in the world.

Our willingness to continue to receive a new thing while remaining in communion and in love with one other models a gift we have to offer the world.

We began our study by exploring The Episcopal Church’s recent history regarding same-sex couples seeking acceptance and blessing of their relationships in the Church, and by reflecting on our own experiences of lifelong, committed relationships. We continued with a study of the theological and liturgical resources that the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music developed. Finally, we compared the benefits and obligations of marriage and blessing same-sex relationships.

Discussion Questions to Further Reflection and Understanding

- Over the past few weeks, how have our conversations emerged in the course of your daily lives? Have you found yourselves talking (or emailing or Facebooking) with colleagues, friends, or family regarding the willingness of The Episcopal Church to provide these blessings?

- This discussion guide was designed to equip participants to understand the presence of rites of blessing same-sex relationships in our common life in The Episcopal Church. Did it fulfill that purpose for you? Why or why not?
- If your community is not considering offering these rites to same-sex couples seeking a blessing of their relationship, are you able to explain why other parishes or dioceses in The Episcopal Church are? If yes, where would you begin that explanation? If no, what more information or background would be helpful?

D. Conclusion

Thank everyone for participating, for their hard work and dedication, and for loving the Church and those who come through the doors enough to have these conversations together.

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Handout A

Covenant for Discussion

As we gather in the name of Christ to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, we accept this covenant to guide our conversation along God's path of love.

- I recognize that everyone comes to this experience with very different backgrounds, experiences, and views. I will respectfully seek clarification of other perspectives to add to my understanding.
- If I choose to disagree with a perspective different from mine, I will do this in a loving and respectful way.

I will:

- Speak only for myself (using “I” statements).
- Take responsibility for my own thoughts and feelings.
- Remember my baptismal promise to “respect the dignity of every human being.”
- Seek and acknowledge common ground.
- Honor confidentiality unless permission to share is explicitly given.
- Practice “sacred listening” by:
 - Listening for God in the experiences of others.
 - Accepting those experiences as valid for the speakers.
 - Searching for strengths in the other's position.
 - Avoiding interruptions and argument.
 - Avoiding applause or other reactions to speakers.
 - Allowing each person to speak before I speak again.

If a particular group or person is going to be discussed, some of them should be present.

Adapted from *Our Covenant for Conversation*, the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont; *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*, by the Right Reverend Steven Charleston (2003); and *Intimate Human Relationships: Resources for Conversation in the Congregations and Deaneries of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont*, edited by Anne Clarke Brown (2004).

Handout B

Understanding the History

Please use this worksheet to record your memories and thoughts about discussion of same-sex relationships over the past few decades.

- A. The Episcopal Church has formally been talking about same-sex relationships and its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members for how many years? _____
- B. Under each decade list briefly — using just key words—what you remember about:
1. What was going on in your own life.
 2. What was going on in the world and/or the Church.
 3. What was going on with issues of same-sex relationships.

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
1 What I remember in my own life					
2 What I remember happening in the world and/or the Church					
3 What I remember about issues of same-sex relationships					

Handout C

An Introduction to General Convention

With few precedents for a republican form of Church governance, the first General Convention met in 1785 in Philadelphia. That convention began work on a constitution and a revision of the Book of Common Prayer, the Church's book of worship. Within 10 years, the General Convention had agreed on its form of governance and its pattern of worship, both of which endure to the present day.

Uniquely for its time, the first General Conventions determined on a bicameral house in which elected (rather than royally appointed) bishops would make up one house, and lay and ordained deputies (equally represented) would make up the other house.

All bishops of The Episcopal Church, active and retired, are entitled to seat, voice, and vote in the House of Bishops (unless deprived of the privilege). Each of The Episcopal Church's dioceses (and the Convocation of Churches in Europe and the Navajoland Area Mission) is entitled to elect eight deputies – four laypersons and four priests and/or deacons – to the House of Deputies. (The diocesan electors of deputies are themselves elected representatives from local parishes.) Deputies are not delegates; that is, they are not elected to represent the electing dioceses.

Deputies vote their conscience for the good of the Church. They cannot be instructed to vote one way or another, for to do so would preclude godly debate and preempt the work of the Holy Spirit. Deputies are expected to serve on committees, if appointed, to attend forums and hearings, to read the reports to the Church from its commissions, committees, agencies, and boards, to listen to, and if so moved, to respond to resolutions on the floor of the house.

The House of Bishops and House of Deputies meet, deliberate, and vote separately. To be enacted, resolutions must pass both houses in the same language. Both houses have the right to amend legislation, but the amendment must be accepted by the other house. Resolutions presented to Convention come from four sources: committees, commissions, agencies, and boards of the Church; bishops; dioceses and provinces; and deputies.

The House of Bishops is chaired by the Presiding Bishop, and the House of Deputies is chaired by an elected President of the House. In the absence of the presiding officer, a Vice Chair (in the House of Bishops) or Vice President (in the House of Deputies) chairs. In each house, a secretary and parliamentarian assist the presiding officer.

General Convention meets prayerfully. Each day, bishops, deputies, registered alternates, and delegates to the ECW Triennial Meeting gather for Bible study and the Holy Eucharist. Both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops have chaplains, who lead their houses in regular prayer at the beginning and end of sessions and daily at noon. Chaplains are also asked to pray before the enactment of important legislation. Organizations within the Church sponsor additional worship services, while volunteers staff a prayer room in which there is continual intercession for the work of Convention.

Much of the work of Convention is carried out by legislative committees. The Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies determine the number of persons who serve on committees and their membership. In their appointments, the presiding officers consider previous experience, expertise, and interest, ensuring the committees represent diverse points of view, geographic, ethnic and gender diversity, and participation by younger deputies.

Resolutions proposed for discussion at Convention are referred to legislative committees, which consider, amalgamate, and perfect them before presenting them on the floor of Convention. Legislative committees

hold hearings on legislation at which the following can speak: bishop, deputy, registered alternate deputy, or registered visitor.

Debate on the floor is governed by the Constitution and Canons of the Church, Rules of Order for each house, Joint Rules of Order (that apply to both houses) and Roberts' Rules of Order. Deputies are expected to listen respectfully to the views of others and to adhere to the rules, which require, for example, that persons of different points of view alternate at microphones.

Convention is more than legislation. One of the most interesting parts of Convention is the Exhibit Hall, a marketplace of goods and ideas in which the organizations and interest groups within the Church present their wares, recruit members, and do their best to influence legislation.

Many Church-related organizations hold meetings in conjunction with Convention, and there are lunches and dinners hosted by seminaries, provinces, societies, boards and staff offices of the Church. The Episcopal Church Women (ECW) holds its triennial meeting simultaneously with the General Convention. The ECW meeting has changed over the past several decades; today it focuses on the mission and service of the Church, and many of the Church's most distinguished members are invited to address this body.

General Convention is a combination of legislative assembly, bazaar of goods and services, and family reunion. It is one of the most exciting and, truth be told, one of the most awe-inspiring gatherings in the world.

Adapted from an introduction to the 2009 General Convention prepared by the Reverend Dr. Gregory S. Straub, Executive Officer and Secretary of General Convention

Handout D

Relationships and Blessing: Reflection Questions

I invite you to reflect on the committed relationships of couples you know (friends, colleagues, family members, and so on), whether same-sex or not, including your own, if you are in such a relationship.

Consider questions such as these:

- How is each relationship named or described: marriage? covenant? union? some other way? Are those involved in the relationship considered husband and wife? partners? lovers? Does the term vary depending on circumstances? How important (or not) is the terminology used for your understanding and experience of the relationship?
- As you reflect on these relationships, what about them (their qualities, gifts, character) would make them appropriate for a liturgical blessing? Or, to put this in another way, why do we “bless” committed relationships in a Church at all?

For those who are in a committed relationship:

- Have you discerned any spiritual gifts that have emerged from your commitment that you may not have recognized apart from that commitment?
- What role does your faith community play in your ongoing commitment? Does the community offer something you find important in your relationship?
- What role (if any) did your Christian faith play in the early and now ongoing development of your relationship and in discerning your commitment to each other?
- Would you consider your committed relationship as part of your Christian calling and vocation to ministry? If so, how and in what ways?

For those who are reflecting on another couple’s relationship:

- Have you discerned any spiritual gifts emerging from their relationship that benefit the wider community or perhaps yourself?
- Have you discerned what you or your faith community contributes to their relationship?
- How would you name the primary “blessing” of that relationship in your own life and in your faith community?
- Have you learned anything or gained fresh insights about your own life from observing the relationship and interacting with the couple?

Handout E

Theological Reflection on Same-Sex Relationships: A Summary of “Faith, Hope, and Love”

Baptism, Eucharist, and the Paschal Mystery

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 can shape and be expressed in our relationships of commitment and faithfulness with others. Our committed relationships can thus reflect a *sacramental character* (making divine grace visible) and evoke *eschatological hope* (our ultimate union with God). These relationships thus invite further reflection on the mission of the Church, what it means “to bless,” and the distinguishing marks of a covenantal relationship.

Themes for Theological Reflection

A sacramental framework for covenantal relationships suggests several other key theological themes for reflection and shared discernment, including the following:

- *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 likewise 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 same-sex relationship invites covenantal couples 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 reminds us, 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 F

Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials

Materials proposed for blessing same-sex relationships must above all be consistent with the implicit theology and ecclesiology of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. This would suggest, for example, that they must reflect the Prayer Book's underlying assumption that the entire life of the Church finds its origin in baptism.

Nearly as important is that the proposed liturgical materials embody a classically Anglican liturgical ethos and style. Recognizing the varying notions of what makes public prayer recognizably Anglican, the task group identified these qualities:

- It resonates with Scripture and proclaims the gospel.
- It is rooted in Anglican theological tradition.
- It has high literary value; it is beautiful according to accepted and respected standards.
- It uses the recurring structures, linguistic patterns, and metaphors of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*.
- It is formal, not casual, conversational, or colloquial.
- It is dense enough to bear the weight of the sacred purpose for which it is intended.
- It is metaphoric without being obtuse.
- It is performative: that is, it effects what it says.

At the same time, these rites must resonate as natural speech in contemporary ears. A religious or sacred tone must be achieved without the use of arcane or antiquated words or patterns of speech.

The rites should provide explanatory notes and rubrics. The material must be considered as the script for an event, not merely a collection of texts.

Any rite of blessing must be an expression primarily of the entire Church, not of the couple seeking a blessing. These rites must allow for robust communal participation, reflecting the baptismal ecclesiology of the Prayer Book. Related to this, since the eucharist is the symbol of the unity of the Church through unity with Christ, these services of blessing should normatively take place within a celebration of the eucharist.

Such rites must enact the notion of sacramental reciprocity by suggesting that, even as the Church blesses the relationship of the couple, the relationship of the couple is a blessing to the Church.

Options for various elements of the rites, particularly Scripture and the Prayers of the People, must be provided so that this action of the entire Church — this common prayer — does not degenerate into a generic rite.

Any rite of blessing a couple must hold up the two people making the covenant as the primary ministers within this action of God and of the entire Church. Such rites should give expression to the Church's understanding that the couple is freely assuming a vocation that can be expected to yield the fruits of mutual fidelity for the couple, for the Church, and for the entire world, and that points ultimately toward the fulfillment of all human relationships and unity in the eschatological Reign of God, when God will be all-in-all.

The rites must be what they purport to be — liturgical prayer — not didactic or polemical statements in the guise of liturgy.