



Guidelines for Clergy and Congregations Regarding Marriage of Same-Sex Couples in the Diocese of Virginia

Preface

When marriage between two persons of the same-sex becomes legal in the Commonwealth of Virginia, the following guidelines will inform and guide clergy and congregations that feel called to offer a “generous pastoral response” to same-sex couples. Please direct questions that are not covered in these guidelines to the Office of the Bishop for consideration.

The Framework Provided by General Convention 2012

According to General Convention Resolution A049, the church may offer a “generous pastoral response” to Episcopalians who live in states where civil marriage, civil unions or domestic partnerships are legal for same-sex couples. The resolution also sets limits within which the generous response must be exercised.

A049 states that beginning on the First Sunday of Advent 2012, a bishop may authorize the use of the service entitled *The Witnessing and Blessings of a Lifelong Covenant*. The bishop may also adapt that service “to meet the needs of the members of this Church.” The Episcopal Church has not changed its canonical definition of marriage, which is that marriage is a “solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God” (BCP, 422) and “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” in *The Book of Common Prayer* may **not** be used for a same sex couple.

A049 also states that with the bishop’s permission, clergy may choose to host and preside at a service blessing a same-sex union. However, clergy are also free to refuse to preside at the blessing of a same-sex union, and there is no penalty for refusing to preside.

Our desire in the Diocese of Virginia to exercise a generous pastoral response is set in the context of an ongoing conversation in the Episcopal Church about the nature of blessings and of marriage. The covenant service is authorized for provisional use until General Convention 2015. We are accountable for our work, and we will report it to the wider Church. We will share experiences of work with same-sex couples who seek to establish lifelong and faithful relationships. We will also share experiences of congregations and clergy who, for reasons of faith and conscience, cannot offer rites of blessing. Our stories will help shape and inform the next steps our denomination takes.

Guidelines

1. Priests of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Virginia may officiate at the civil marriage of a same sex couple as a “generous pastoral response” to lesbian and gay couples seeking to be married, and may bless the civil marriage of the couple.

2. There is no expectation that a member of the clergy should or must preside at any service for same-sex couples. As is the case with every marriage or service of blessing, the decision to preside is the sole discretion of the priest who has been asked to preside. No reason need be given for refusing to preside (Canon I.18.4) and there is no penalty for a refusal.
3. Services for the marriage and blessing of same-sex couples will use the rite *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, as approved by Resolution A049 at the 2012 General Convention. The authorized text of the rite is available for Church Publishing, Inc. (<http://tinyurl.com/bvc7jnm>). A comprehensive resource guide called *Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You and You Will be a Blessing*, is also available from Church Publishing. The rites in *The Book of Common Prayer* may not be adapted or used for these services. The Celebration of Holy Eucharist, should it be part of the service, may be from *The Book of Common Prayer* or *Enriching our Worship*.
4. At the pronouncement, clergy are authorized to use the following words:
Inasmuch as N. and N. have exchanged vows of love and fidelity in the presence of God and the Church, I now pronounce that they are bound to one another in a holy covenant, as long as they both shall live, and united in marriage according to the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Amen.
5. Given that General Convention approved *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* for provisional use, blessings of same-sex couples may take place only in congregations where the clergy agree to offer such rites. Consultation with the vestry, although not required for any pastoral rite, is nevertheless wise.
6. Our primary work will be with faithful members of our own congregations.
7. Clergy will provide the same pastoral care and counseling to same-sex couples as they provide to heterosexual couples. If the same-sex couple has been together for several years and has already entered into a domestic partnership, civil union or marriage in another state, the clergy person may use discretion in applying the pastoral counseling requirement.
8. If either member of the couple has been married or part of a legal union that ended in divorce or legal dissolution, Canon I.19.3 is to be followed. The priest will submit to the Office of the Bishop a Request for Permission to Solemnize a Marriage. If either member had previously lived in a civil union or covenanted relationship for which legal dissolution or divorce is not an option, the clergy person is to exercise a similar discipline, particularly where minor children are involved.
9. Both members of the couple will sign the Declaration of Intention.
10. At least one member of the couple must be baptized.
11. Clergy are permitted to sign civil marriage licenses.
12. Blessings of civil marriages should be recorded in the Register of Church Services.

13. Clergy and congregations will apply the same standards and policies for fees and facilities use to same-sex couples as to heterosexual couples.
14. Couples who legally married in other states may wish to have their marriages blessed in Virginia. Pre-marital preparation is expected of these couples.