



the episcopal diocese of rhode island  
office of the bishop

April 17, 2013

Dear Friends,

As you know, the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church engaged deeply with questions related to the blessing of same-sex couples. In resolutions A049 and A050 the General Convention provided for a rite of blessing for same-sex couples and invited the church to study canonical and liturgical limitations related to marriage equality. Resolution A049 states in part:

Resolved, That the 77th General Convention authorize for provisional use "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant" from "Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing" (Church Publishing Company, 2012) beginning the First Sunday of Advent 2012, under the direction and subject to the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority; and be it further

Resolved, That bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church; and be it further

Resolved, That bishops may authorize adaptation of these materials to meet the needs of members of this Church ...

Last year at Diocesan Convention, I reiterated my support for the implementation of such same-sex blessing liturgies in the Diocese of Rhode Island. In my address, I called for the creation of a special "Same-Sex Blessings Task Force" to assist me in creating guidelines for use by congregations seeking to offer blessing liturgies for same-sex couples entering into civil partnerships here in Rhode Island or a civil marriage in another state.

Under the provisions of **A049**, Rhode Island State Law, and now with my authorization, clergy may preside over a same-sex civil union using the *adaptation* of *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* and sign the license. I approve the blessing of same-sex couples only in congregations where both the clergy and vestry agree to provide this generous pastoral response to same-sex couples.

To assist you and your congregation as you begin offering same-sex blessings, I commend to you the "Guidelines for Addressing Same-Sex Blessings in the Diocese of Rhode Island." Additionally, there will be a workshop for clergy to ensure that you and your congregations are aware of the possibilities and limitations surrounding same-sex blessings here in Rhode Island.

I am aware of the ongoing struggle for civil marriage equality taking place in the Rhode Island General Assembly. Indeed, I have expressed my hope and desire that the State of Rhode Island will extend marriage equality to all of its citizens in the near future. When such legislation does occur, I will revisit the rites for same-sex blessings as well as the guidelines in light of the new legal realities. As necessary we will revise and republish the rite and the enclosed guidelines.

I give thanks for the diligent work of the *Same-Sex Blessings Task Force*: The Ven. Janice Grinnell (Chairperson), the Rev. David Dobbins, the Rev. Edmund Harris, Ms. Susan Hurn, the Rev. John Pallard, the Rev. Joyce Penfield, the Rev. Tim Rich and Dr. Karen Whelan-Berry.

This comes with my deep gratitude for our new shared ministry in Christ and my prayers for you and your congregations during this holy season of Lent.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. N. Knisely". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "W" and a stylized "N".

The Rt. Rev. W. Nicholas Knisely  
Bishop of Rhode Island

# **The Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island**

## **Guidelines for Marriages of Same-Sex\* Couples in the Diocese of Rhode Island**

from The Rt. Rev. W. Nicholas Knisely, Bishop of Rhode Island

*\*(The word "sex" is used here in compliance with Resolution A049 of the 2012 General Convention. Thanks to The Rt. Rev. Stephen Lane from the Diocese of Maine for permission to use their guidelines as a basis for this document.)*

### **Preface**

The following guidelines are offered to provide clergy and congregations who are considering the blessing of a marriage between same sex couples a sense of the possibilities and limitations created by The Episcopal Church. Questions or concerns that are not addressed here should be forwarded to the Bishop's Office for consideration. My thanks to the diocesan *Same Sex Blessing Task Force* for their help in preparing these guidelines.

### **The Framework Provided by A049 (General Convention 2012)**

The decisions of the 2012 General Convention create a framework for the possibility of blessing a same sex union in the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island. According to Resolution **A049**, a "generous pastoral response" is available to meet the needs of Episcopalians who live in states where civil marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal for same sex couples. That same resolution also sets limits within which the generous response must be exercised.

A049 stated that beginning the First Sunday of Advent 2012, the bishop may authorize the use of the service titled *The Witnessing and Blessing 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 work in Rhode Island exercising a generous pastoral response is part of an ongoing

conversation within The Episcopal Church about the nature of blessing and of marriage. The covenant service is authorized for provisional use in the current triennium. We are accountable for our work, and we will report it to the church. Our contribution to the ongoing conversation will be our experience with real couples and real families who seek to establish lifelong and faithful relationships.

*Within this framework, I authorize the blessing of same sex marriages by clergy and congregations who choose to do so. This authorization extends to signing of marriage licenses for same sex couples in the State of Rhode Island.*

### **Some Background**

Recent changes in the United States regarding civil unions and marriages have created a challenge for the church. There are now different definitions of marriage. While the majority of states still describe marriage as a commitment between a man and a woman, several states now recognize a marriage between two men or two women, including Rhode Island. In some states, there are other “equivalent” relationships (unions, partnerships, etc.). This dilemma extends to the mutual recognition of marriages performed in different states. Many states only recognize marriages that fit their definition. Others recognize marriage as it is defined by any state. Rhode Island also recognizes marriage as it is defined by any state.

The rubrics of *The Book of Common Prayer* make it clear that a marriage must conform both to the laws of the state and canons of the church (BCP, 422). In states where marriage and civil unions are legal for same sex couples, faithful gay and lesbian Episcopalians are asking the church to bless them. Clergy must now sort through the pastoral and canonical dilemma of deciding whether or not to preside at marriages or civil unions of same sex couples.

The General Convention (2012) adopted Resolution **A049** which authorized “Liturgical Resources: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing” for use in The Episcopal Church. These resources include a service for *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, theological and liturgical resources for education in a congregation, and materials to assist in preparing same sex couples for life together.

The General Convention extended the generous pastoral discretion first authorized in Resolution **C056** (2009). In states where marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal for same sex couples, **A049** permits bishops to provide “generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this church.” It further provides “that bishops may authorize adaptation of these materials to meet the needs

of members of this church." I understand that to mean that, under my supervision as bishop, clergy may work with same sex couples in preparation for marriage and may preside at the blessing of a marriage using the authorized rite.

A049 helps us address the needs of our gay and lesbian households, but we continue to confront the challenge created by differing definitions of marriage. The General Convention did not believe that the canonical definition of marriage should be amended by means of a resolution, but through the normal process of prayer book revision. Therefore, the General Convention asked the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to undertake a study of marriage. This may one day result in revising the BCP marriage rite.

### **Some Reflections on the Episcopal Church and Marriage**

The Episcopal Church has historically understood marriage between a man and a woman to be a reflection both of God's intentions in creation and of Christ's relationship with the church, and has recently agreed to provide a pastoral response to same sex couples effecting a life long covenant.

The Episcopal Church has understood marriage to be an expression of the body of Christ, a relationship of mutual self-offering on behalf of the Other, and a bond and a covenant established by God in creation. Marriage is one expression of the smallest Christian community (...two or three are gathered in my name...), and its purpose is to help the participants grow up into Christ. That growth, that self-transcendence, is described in the BCP marriage service in three ways: mutual joy, help and comfort, and, if it is God's will, the creation of families.

Although the Book of Common Prayer presently restricts marriage to heterosexual couples, the Episcopal Church has now recognized in A049 that the marriage described above can be experienced and expressed in same sex couples.

Theological reflections, discussion guides and other resources in support of A049 have been included in "I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing" distributed by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music at the 2012 General Convention. You will find this document as a link on the Diocesan website.

### **Bishop Knisely's Statement in support of A049**

Episcopalians are not unanimous in our views, but in the Episcopal Church we find our unity in common prayer, not in common opinion. Even so, through many years of

prayerful discussion, the majority of Christians in the Episcopal Church have come to believe that it is possible, and even common, for two people of the same-sex to live covenanted, faithful lives together in service to God, just as people in heterosexual marriages do. We have also learned that it is possible to protect the consciences of those who disagree within our church and still live together in community.

Part of what informs my opinion is that before I became a priest and then a bishop, I was a scientist. So I know the importance of trusting evidence that we see with our own eyes. I have seen what St. Paul describes as the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) in the married lives of two men and of two women. I have seen relationships that are loving, mutual, and monogamous and that have lasted a lifetime. Jesus tells us that we must test each tree by looking at the goodness of its fruit (Luke 6:43-45). Across our congregations and communities, I can see the goodness of gay and lesbian couples and their families. The Episcopal Church has been blessed for many years by the life and ministry of gay and lesbian couples, both lay and ordained. I have seen how they contribute to the common good of a congregation and a community by creating stable, loving homes.

With the forgoing in mind, I authorize the following as guidelines for work with same sex couples. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is authorized for immediate use in the following circumstances:

- Effecting and/or blessing the marriage of a same-sex couple in Rhode Island
- Blessing a same sex couple already united legally in another jurisdiction (marriage, civil union or domestic partnership)

I further authorize clergy of the diocese to preside at such services and to sign the marriage license.

### **Guidelines for the witnessing and blessing of a marriage in Rhode Island**

- i. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is to be used for same sex couples **only**. Heterosexual couples seeking a blessing liturgy are to use the Liturgy for Blessing of a Civil Marriage in the Book of Common Prayer.
- ii. Under the provisions of **A049**, Rhode Island State Law, and now with my authorization, clergy may preside over the marriage of a same-sex couple using the *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* and sign the license.
- iii. Given that this service is authorized for provisional use, I approve the blessing of same sex couples only in congregations where both the clergy and vestry agree and document this agreement by passing a resolution to provide this generous pastoral

response to same sex couples.

- iv. Our primary work will be with faithful members of our own congregations. (A set of recommendations for working with out-of-state couples is listed below.)
- v. There is no expectation that a member of the clergy should or must preside at any service for same sex couples or for any couple, for that matter. As is the case with every marriage or service of blessing, the decision to preside is the sole discretion of the priest or deacon who has been asked to preside. No reason need be given for refusing to preside (Canon I.18.4), and there is no associated penalty.
- vi. One member of the couple must be a baptized Christian.
- vii. Same sex couples must undergo the same regimen of “pre-marital preparation” currently required of heterosexual couples. Pre-marital issues for same sex couples are much like those of heterosexual couples. These issues should be handled with great pastoral care, and referrals made to professionals for assistance when needed. In addition to the materials authorized by the General Convention, Province I has produced an excellent guide to assist clergy in preparing same sex couples. That guide is available through my office and Province I.
- viii. If either member of the couple has been married or part of a legal union and has divorced or had the union legally dissolved, the scrutiny called for in Canon I.19.3 is required. I will in those cases require the priest to submit a *Request for Permission to Solemnize a Marriage* (enclosed). For persons who have lived in civil unions or covenanted relationships, but for whom legal dissolution or divorce is not an option, I ask you to pursue a similar discipline, especially in regard to minor children. You need to bring your best judgment to bear, and I will be available for consultation.
- ix. A Declaration of Intention should be signed as part of “pre-marital preparation” (enclosed).
- x. I expect you to uniformly apply your standards and policies regarding fees and facility use.
- xi. *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is the authorized rite for same sex couples seeking to effect and/or bless a legal union. “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” or “The Blessing of a Civil Marriage” from *The Book of Common Prayer* may **not** be used for the union of same sex couples. *The Book of Common Prayer* and *Enriching our Worship* may be used for the celebration of Holy Eucharist. Many congregations have local marriage customs, such as the

lighting of candles. These may be included in the service.

- xii. The authorized text of *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* is available from Church Publishing, Inc. (<http://tinyurl.com/bvc7jnm>). The rite is free as a downloadable pdf. Please destroy any other copies you may have. A comprehensive resource guide, *Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You And You Will Be A Blessing*, is available from Church Publishing.
- xiii. Same sex couples that have been legally united civilly in Rhode Island or elsewhere may wish to have their unions blessed. Before blessing any couple who have been civilly united "pre-marital preparation" is required. We would ask the couple to "reaffirm" their vows.
- xiv. All services of marriage should be recorded in the Marriage Register and in the register of church services. Blessings of civil marriages should be recorded only in the register of church services. A separate form for use in reporting our experience with the blessing of same sex unions to the General Convention, *Form of Report: Witness and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, is enclosed. The completed form is to be returned to my office.

### **Providing a Generous Pastoral Response for Clergy and Couples from Out-of-State**

All couples who have connections with your congregation or with The Episcopal Church in Rhode Island or who come to Rhode Island for a blessing of their union, should be treated in the same manner. Clergy are free to make appropriate arrangements, but must assure that "pre-marital preparation" is completed and that permission has been received for presiding at the marriage and/or blessing of a couple where one or both of the parties have been previously married, or been in a legal or covenanted relationship that has been dissolved.

Episcopal clergy canonically resident in another Diocese, whether or not they are licensed to officiate in this Diocese, will need the consent of their bishop to preside at a blessing of a same sex union in this Diocese. You and I cannot grant permission for clergy to do things their own bishops will not authorize. I will be available for consultation for issues beyond these guidelines.

### **Transparency and Accountability**

My commitment to The Episcopal Church is to be part of the ongoing conversation about same sex marriage and to report to the House of Bishops and the General



Convention. I do require you to submit the *Form of Report: Witness and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant* to record pertinent information about such services. This form is attached. Please do not include the names of the couple. I will compile your reports into a diocesan report to submit to the people responsible for the conversation in our communion.

### **A Few Closing Thoughts**

The Episcopal Church will continue to discuss marriage equality for some years to come. It is important that we honor that process and exercise our pastoral care with integrity. Our work may provide the church with helpful experience and insight, but only as we are careful, thoughtful, compassionate and mutually supportive of one another.

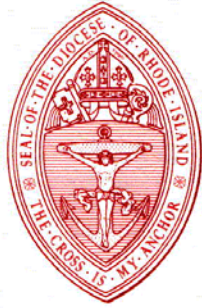
I acknowledge and celebrate the progress made towards marriage equality by the 77<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Church. The inability to use *The Book of Common Prayer* has created in the minds of some a concern that we are creating two classes of covenants between couples. I understand that concern. However, I think the issues of the status of same sex marriage will have to be worked out in a wider forum both in church and state. We are clearly in an interim period, and we will need to live with a certain ambiguity for some time. I suggest we leave the question of what might happen if and when there is a new BCP rite until we have such a rite.

You will undoubtedly have many questions. I am open to specific and private conversations about all these matters. I may not have a certain response to every question, but I'm confident that, with God's help, we can work it out together.

Please keep the whole church in your prayers as we together seek to be faithful to God's call in this work.

Faithfully,

The Rt. Rev. Nicholas Knisely  
Bishop of Rhode Island



# Declaration of Intention

We,

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and

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desiring to receive the Blessing of our Marriage in the Church, do solemnly declare that we hold this covenant to be a Lifelong Covenant.

We believe that this union, in heart, body, and mind, is intended by God for our mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the inclusion of children in this family and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.

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

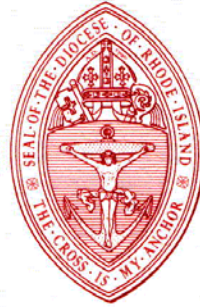
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*Signature of spouse*

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*Signature of spouse*

*Dated* \_\_\_\_\_ *A.D.* \_\_\_\_\_



## Form of Report ✕ Witness and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant

*Please Print*

Type of Service – Marriage

Date and Place of Ceremony

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Recorded at (church) \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_

Sex of Couple *(Circle One)*

Male

Female

Is at least one member of the couple a baptized Christian? \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Pre-Marital Preparation Sessions Completed \_\_\_\_\_

Has a "Declaration of Intention" been signed? \_\_\_\_\_

Is this a first legal union? \_\_\_\_\_ are there minor children? \_\_\_\_\_

*(If this is a union after divorce, please complete the form:*

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO SOLEMNIZE A MARRIAGE)

Comments

Clergy Name \_\_\_\_\_ Preferred Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Clergy Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO SOLEMNIZE A MARRIAGE**

*Return Original, Retain Copy*

**NOTE:** This form is completed when either or both party have been married or in a civil union that has ben legally dissolved. Applications must be filed at least thirty (30) days prior to the intended date of marriage. "Cover letters" from clergy are necessary only in extraordinary circumstances.

Date of Application \_\_\_\_\_

Proposed date of Marriage \_\_\_\_\_

**TO: The Bishop of Rhode Island**

I hereby request your permission to solemnize the marriage of

(A) \_\_\_\_\_ ( ) who has not been previously married or in a civil union  
( ) whose previous marriage or civil union was dissolved by final decree dated \_\_\_\_\_ and

(B) \_\_\_\_\_ ( ) who has not been previously married or in a civil union  
( ) whose previous marriage or civil union was dissolved by final decree dated \_\_\_\_\_

(A) \_\_\_\_\_ ( ) is baptized ( ) is not baptized  
( ) is a communicant of the Episcopal Church  
( ) is not a communicant of the Episcopal Church

(B) \_\_\_\_\_ ( ) is baptized ( ) is not baptized  
( ) is a communicant of the Episcopal Church  
( ) is not a communicant of the Episcopal Church

I have met with this couple \_\_\_\_\_ times to discuss the nature of Christian Marriage, and am convinced that they truly intend such. Should permission be granted, I am willing to solemnize this marriage. I have personally seen a copy of the final decree(s).  
(signed) \_\_\_\_\_, Priest

Parish: \_\_\_\_\_ City/Town: \_\_\_\_\_

**CONSENT FOR THE SOLEMNIZATION OF A MARRIAGE**

Pursuant to the above application, and it appearing to my satisfaction that all canonical requirements have been met, and that the parties intend a true Christian marriage, permission is hereby given to the above named priest to solemnize this marriage in this church.

This judgment is given pursuant to Title I, Canon 19, Section 3, of the Canons of General Convention, 1997.

Dated \_\_\_\_\_, 20 \_\_\_\_

(signed) \_\_\_\_\_  
Bishop of Rhode Island

**REPORT OF A MARRIAGE**

I hereby report the solemnization of the above marriage on \_\_\_\_\_, 20 \_\_\_\_

(signed) \_\_\_\_\_, Priest

## The Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island

### **Guidelines for Addressing Same-Sex\* Blessings in the Diocese of Rhode Island** *\*(The word “sex” here is used in compliance with Resolution A049 of the 2012 General Convention.)*

#### **Appendix of Resources**

Premarital and marital issues of same-sex couples are much like those of heterosexual couples. In addition to the pastoral care given to the spiritual, psychological, and emotional issues, the legalities are frequently more complex and may be less automatic in the legal union – whether domestic partnership, civil union, or marriage - of a same-sex couple.

Because the laws governing the legal union of same-sex couples still vary widely state-to-state, same-sex couple should carefully follow-up on legal issues, to ensure they understand and have any related needed documents related to such rights, for example, related to parenting and children, caring for each other when hospitalized, or survivorship. Clergy should suggest that and same-sex couples should seek legal advice regarding these issues. Giving advice or a set of recommendations here would not be appropriate because the issues can vary so significantly.

Several resources exist which can help, and we provide the reference for a few key resources here.

*Liturgical Resources: I Will Bless You and You Will Be A Blessing*, 2012, authored by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, Church Publishing Corp. This comprehensive resource was developed as part of the 2012 General Convention vote. (As noted in the guidelines the liturgy is a free download; this resource must be purchased.)

*Pastoral Resources for Province One Episcopal Clergy Ministering to Same-Gender Couples*. 2008, authored by The Task Force on Counseling of Same Gender Couples, Province of New England. Available from [www.episcopalarchives.org](http://www.episcopalarchives.org), accessed 2/25/12. While this resource was published prior to the 2012 General Convention vote, it includes several helpful resources.

GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders), *Marriage and Civil Union Guide for Rhode Island Same Sex Couples*, available on the GLAD webpage, accessed 2/25/12, <https://www.glad.org/rights/rhodeisland>. This PDF and others are available on the GLAD webpage, with a primary focus on legal issues.

The Human Rights Campaign webpage, [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org), has a variety of resources related to marriage, parenting, health and aging, and religion and faith, along with other topics.