

Protocol for the Pastoral Practice of Blessing Same-sex Unions in the Diocese of Rupert's Land

Revised March, 2013.

Introduction

The text of the (final) resolution B - 3 of the 2012 Diocesan Synod after it amended Resolution B - 9 of the 2008 Diocesan Synod:

Resolved that this Synod request the Bishop to allow clergy, whose conscience permits, to bless the relationship between same-sex couples whose union has been duly solemnized and civilly registered, where at least one party is baptized, in parish churches whose members have, by resolution, authorized such ceremonies to take place; and to authorize rites for such blessings.

For more than a generation our Anglican Church of Canada has been considering the theological and pastoral implications of the request to include gay and lesbian members more fully in the life of our Church. Bishops, clergy and laity and theological and scientific experts have participated in the discussion and we have listened to the lived experience of gay and lesbian people. It is clear that some diversity continues to exist in Canada and within our own congregations as to the appropriate response at this time. In the discussions there has been patience exhibited and pain experienced by faithful gay and lesbian members of our Church and their families.

The following guidelines are presented in order to offer a generous pastoral response to same-sex couples in our diocesan family seeking a blessing of their civilly registered union. There is still some diversity of conviction on the faithful response to these relationships both between and within the parishes in our Diocese. The diversity of our diocesan community demonstrates that we are called to witness to the faith in a variety of ways, and though such witness is rooted in differing interpretations and understanding of Holy Scripture and the tradition, they are recognizably Anglican.

Theological Foundation

At the heart of these guidelines is the call of the baptismal covenant on all Christians. We live within our covenant with God, embodied in the tenets of our faith outlined in the Creed and in the daily practice of our lives. We seek to grow in integrity and sanctity as we reflect the life of Christ in ourselves and in our relationships, through worship, reconciliation, proclamation, witness and action. We understand blessing of same-sex couples in light of their intention to grow into the fullness of Christ, individually and in their relationship, through faithful reflection of the gifts of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Process for Clergy obtaining permission, and parishes being authorized to bless same-sex relationships

1. No Parish is required to discuss, nor make a decision on providing, the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions within their parish unless they choose to do so. (Also see # 4 below.)
2. Parish Incumbents and Corporations are asked to consult the Bishop before entering into a process of making a decision on providing the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions.
3. At a general meeting of the members, parishes must determine *how* their parish will make a decision about providing the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions. This may involve a formal resolution on the issue, or

a resolution to adopt a different process by which the discernment of the parish on this issue will be determined.

Criteria for granting of permission to clergy and authorization to parishes

1. Parishes must have determined, in accordance with #3. above, the desire of the parish to have such blessings take place in the parish. A parish will have demonstrated a process of prayer, education, consultation, discernment and consensus-development that widely engages the parish community. Consensus is not total agreement; however, every effort should be made to reach a decision where everyone feels heard and is willing to live with the wider body's decision. The way forward should not be achieved or prevented by a few taking an opposing view to the vast majority. It is requested that work be done to achieve a reasonable consensus before voting on a formal resolution at a parish meeting.
2. When the Priest, Churchwardens, and Vestry/Parish Council are satisfied that the desire of the parish has been discerned, the Churchwardens must write a letter to the Diocesan Bishop outlining the process and decision reached and request permission be granted to the incumbent priest.
3. The incumbent priest must separately communicate to the bishop his/her support of such a decision and whether, in good conscience, s/he is prepared to offer blessings of same-sex unions and can concur that the parish is ready at this time to participate in accordance with these guidelines. With the concurrence of the Incumbent, an Honourary Assistant may also indicate to the bishop whether, in good conscience, s/he is prepared to offer blessings of same-sex unions in accordance with these guidelines.
4. The Diocesan Bishop, at his/her discretion, may grant, in writing, permission to the Incumbent and authorization to the parish to offer the pastoral practice of Same-Sex Blessings.
5. Permission is granted for the clergy/parish relationship at that time. When a cleric leaves a designated parish the designation will be reviewed with the Diocesan Bishop upon the appointment of a new cleric.

Diocesan Diversity

The Diocese of Rupert's Land honours and appreciates the diversity represented in its parishes and clergy. This diversity will continue to be reflected in the selection and appointment of clergy, and in the membership of committees and councils of the Diocese. It is recognized and respected that there are theological and cultural differences across our Diocese and within parishes.

- All congregations and individual Anglicans are called to exercise pastoral generosity one to another.
- Permission and authorization for the blessing of same-sex unions will be extended only to those parishes and clergy who fulfill the requirements noted above and are granted permission by the Diocesan bishop.
- Neither clergy nor parishes will be required to participate in the blessing of same-sex relationships.

- Clergy who object to blessing same-sex unions will, if requested, be asked to exercise pastoral generosity by referring same-sex couples seeking a blessing to the Bishop.
- Clergy who support blessing same-sex unions will be asked to exercise pastoral sensitivity to their fellow clergy and to those in their parish who are not in agreement with this pastoral practice.

The Rite of Blessing

Clergy should feel free to consult with the Bishop, or the Bishop's designate, in preparation for the Blessing. The Bishop would appreciate receiving a printed copy of Blessing Rites that have been successfully tried; to be kept as Diocesan resource material. A list of websites containing liturgical resources appears below.

Same-Sex Blessings

1. The blessing of any duly solemnized and civilly registered union of a same-sex couple is expected to be part of an existing pastoral relationship with a priest and local congregation.
2. At least one member of the couple is required to be baptized.
3. The record of a blessing will be entered into the vestry book only.

The Nature of the Blessing

As with any blessing, the prayers will reflect the desire to publicly acknowledge within a faith community the already present creating and loving presence of God. The prayers will acknowledge the affection, support, care, responsibility and understanding of love and commitment of the couple for each other as a reflection of their lived experience of God's grace within their relationship, not only as a couple but as a couple within the Church, the Body of Christ. The language of blessing should reflect the language of covenant and the promises of baptismal vows as the foundation for living their relationship.

Liturgical Rubrics The act of worship should include the following elements:

1. The Gathering of the Community

Which may include one or more of these elements:

- a) A song, hymn or a piece of music
- b) A gathering responsorial prayer or greeting
- c) An introduction to the blessing of a relationship
- d) A collect

2. The Proclamation of the Word

- a) At least one reading from the Holy Scriptures
- b) A song, hymn or a piece of music
- c) A sermon

3. The Blessing of the Commitment

Which may include one or more of these elements:

- a) A statement of covenant and commitment by each member of the couple
- b) The blessing of the couple in their covenant and commitment

4. The Prayers of the People

Which may include one or more of these elements:

- a) Prayers of the people for the couple
- b) Lord's Prayer (unless after the Eucharist)
- c) The passing of the peace
- d) A song, hymn or piece of music

5. The Celebration of the Eucharist (*optional*)

6. Blessing and Dismissal

Which may include one or more of these elements:

- a) Blessing of the congregation
- b) A final song, hymn, or piece of music
- c) Dismissal

Limitations to the Rite

In order to be clearly distinguished from a marriage liturgy, the rite of blessing for a same-sex union will NOT include the following:

- 1. An exchange of legal consents.
- 2. Opportunity for public legal or canonical objections.
- 3. A declaration of union.
- 4. A rite of civil marriage.

(#1 – 4 will have been part of the ceremony of solemnizing and registering the union civilly.)

- 5. Signing of a parish marriage register.

- 6. A nuptial blessing – understood specifically as any of the prayers found on page 567 of the Book of Common Prayer (1962) or on page 534-535 and 548 – 549 of the Book of Alternative Service (1985) or any blessings found in other marriage liturgies.

Possible liturgical resources for Blessings of Same-Sex Unions

It should be noted that the material listed below does not necessarily meet the criteria of the rubrics above. Therefore, care should be taken to ensure that material used from these links does conform to the Protocol above.

Diocese of Niagara Resources - http://www.niagara.anglican.ca/Niagara_Rite/index.cfm

Diocese of New Westminster Resources - <http://www.samesexblessing.info/Rite.aspx>

Episcopal Church of the USA Liturgical Resources -

<https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/index.cfm?fuseaction=productDetail&productID=9743>

Helpful Study Resources listed by Diocese of Ottawa -

http://www.ottawa.anglican.ca/Same_Gender_Blessings.html