

## **WHERE DO WE STAND? – A Background Paper on Gay & Lesbian Inclusion in the Episcopal Church** *(Compiled by Susan Russell; updated 10/05)*

*SOME HISTORY:* The Episcopal Church has been officially debating the issue of human sexuality, particularly as it applies to gay and lesbian people, since the General Convention of 1976 when resolutions passed by the Bishops and Deputies began to frame the parameters of the debate. In the intervening years resolutions have been passed and then amended as the church's position has evolved in response to the dialogue. In 1976, the General Convention asserted in a resolution that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance and pastoral concern and care of the Church." But there continues to be a wide divergence of opinion on just how we live out that understanding in the Church.

In 1991, at the General Convention held in Phoenix acknowledged its inability to resolve the complex issues surrounding human sexuality by means of the normal legislative process. The Convention opted instead for a process of continued study and dialogue across the whole church, with a report to be issued from the House of Bishops. That report, "Continuing the Dialogue," was published in 1994 and is highly recommended as a resource for more detailed information.

While resolutions from General Convention are important aspects of our polity - the process through which we govern the church - they are generally perceived to be recommendatory and therefore lacking the force of a canon or law. The only canon to deal with the issue of homosexual orientation in any specific way was adopted in 1994:

"All Bishops of Dioceses and other Clergy shall make provisions to identify fit persons for Holy Orders and encourage them to present themselves for Postulancy. No one shall be denied access to the selection process for ordination in this Church because of race, color, ethnic origin, sex, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, disabilities, or age, except as otherwise specified by these Canons." -- *Title III, Canon 4, Section 1 of the Constitution and Canons for the Government of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, p. 60*

In 1996, the Court of Trial for a Bishop refused to hear charges filed against Bishop Walter Righter for ordaining a gay man living in a relationship. The court said there was no doctrine against such an ordination and that there is no canonical bar to gay and lesbian ordination in the Episcopal Church.

### **ACTIONS OF RECENT GENERAL CONVENTIONS**

In 1996, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Philadelphia, APPROVED HEALTH BENEFITS FOR DOMESTIC PARTNERS, to be extended to the partners of clergy and lay employees in dioceses that wish to do so. It also voted to APOLOGIZE ON BEHALF OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH to its members who are gay and lesbian and to the lesbians and gay men outside the Church for years of rejection

and maltreatment by the Church and affirm that this Church seeks amendment of our life together as we ask God's help in sharing the Good News with all people.

Meeting in Denver in 2000, General Convention approved the following resolutions: The IDENTIFICATION OF "SAFE SPACES" (A009), establishing a formal process for congregations to identify themselves as safe spaces for GLBT people; urging congregational CONVERSATION WITH YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS ABOUT SEXUALITY (A046); promoting DIALOGUE ON FIDELITY IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS (A080); and recommending that congregations engage in dialogue with the BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA REGARDING THEIR POLICY ON HOMOSEXUALS (C031).

Arguably the most influential resolution adopted in Denver was D039 "Human Sexuality: Issues Related to Sexuality and Relationships." Passed overwhelmingly by a voice vote in the House of Deputies and by a 119-19 margin in the House of Bishops. An "8th Resolve" which called for the preparation of rites for inclusion in the Book of Occasional Services failed to pass by a narrow margin in both houses. However, this important resolution broke new ground by moving the Episcopal Church into conversations about relationship that transcend sexual orientation ... and set the stage for the 2003 General Convention in Minneapolis.

### **GENERAL CONVENTION 2003**

#### **What exactly was approved at General Convention 2003 regarding the Blessings of Relationships?**

Resolution C051 – (\* FINAL VERSION – Concurred)

Topic/Title: Rites: Blessing of Committed Same-Gender Relationships

Proposer: Diocese of Michigan

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Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, That the 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention affirms the following:

1. That our life together as a community of faith is grounded in the saving work of Jesus Christ and expressed in the principles of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: Holy Scripture, the historic Creeds of the Church, the two dominical sacraments, and the historic episcopate.
2. That we reaffirm Resolution A069 of the 65<sup>th</sup> General Convention (1976) that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church".
3. That, in our understanding of homosexual persons, differences exist among us about how best to care pastorally for those who intend to live in monogamous, non-celibate unions; and what is, or should be, required, permitted, or prohibited by the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church concerning the blessing of the same.

4. That we reaffirm Resolution D039 of the 73<sup>rd</sup> General Convention (2000), that “We expect such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God”, and that such relationships exist throughout the church.
5. That, we recognize that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions.
6. That we commit ourselves, and call our church, in the spirit of Resolution A104 of the 70<sup>th</sup> General Convention (1991), to continued prayer, study, and discernment on the pastoral care for gay and lesbian persons, to include the compilation and development by a special commission organized and appointed by the Presiding Bishop of resources to facilitate as wide a conversation of discernment as possible throughout the church.
7. That our baptism into Jesus Christ is inseparable from our communion with one another, and we commit ourselves to that communion despite our diversity of opinion and, among dioceses, a diversity of pastoral practice with the gay men and lesbians among us.
8. That it is a matter of faith that our Lord longs for our unity as his disciples, and for us this entails living within the boundaries of the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church. We believe this discipline expresses faithfulness to our polity and that it will facilitate the conversation we seek not only in The Episcopal Church, but also in the wider Anglican Communion and beyond.

### **What does this resolution accomplish?**

- It recognizes what we believe is one of the most distinctive features of Anglicanism: the ability to maintain unity without requiring uniformity. We are convinced that this resolution offers a way forward in the best spirit of Anglican comprehensiveness: recognizing that rites for blessing are and will be used by those who choose to offer them in response the pastoral needs of their constituency and providing room for theological consensus to emerge out of liturgical practice.
- We believe that the fuller inclusion of all the baptized into the Body of Christ is not an issue which will split the church but an opportunity which will move the church forward in mission and ministry – if we will claim it and proclaim it.
- We believe it is an opportunity for evangelism which will breathe new life into our work and our witness to those yearning to hear an alternative to the strident voices of the religious right who have for too long presumed to speak to the culture as representing Christian Values. We have Good News to tell and it’s time to get on with the business of telling it.
- No one is or will be compelled to bless same-sex unions in this church, but the church must also respect the theological judgment of those who wish to bless these relationships by providing such rites for the use of the church.
- It is true that many view this issue as fundamentally about the authority of Scripture, and therefore, central. At most, however, it is about the interpretation of Scripture, and if how we interpret Scripture is to split us apart, we are in for splitting on a whole host of issues.

- The larger question is whether or not this issue is so central to our common faith so as to split us apart. The answer is “no” according to the 2003 House of Bishops’ Theology Committee Report: [5.3] “We believe that disunity over issues of human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, needs to be taken seriously by all members of the Church. And diverse opinion needs to be respected. But we do not believe these should be Church-dividing issues.”

**What message is the Episcopal Church sending about sexual morality and traditional family values?**

- The message we are sending about traditional family values is that those are the values that emerge from significant, committed human relationships, including, but not limited to, marriage.
- The message we are sending about sexual morality is that the expectations of fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and holy love are the same for all Christians ... gay or straight, bisexual or transgender.

**Where’s “the theology?” What exactly does it mean for the church to give its blessing?** (*From the Claiming the Blessing Theology Statement, 2003*)

“Blessing” is perhaps the most controversial word in the Church’s consideration of the treatment of same sex households in its midst. Because of this fact, we must take great care to be precise about what we mean when we use the word. The following are the building blocks for a theology of blessing: Creation, Covenant, Grace, and Sacrament.

Creation itself is the fundamental act of blessing. Creation is a blessing (gift) to humankind from God and humankind blesses (gives thanks to or praises) God in return. The Hebrew word for “blessing,” *barak*, means at its core the awesome power of life itself. A fundamental claim of the Bible in regards to creation is that there is enough, in fact an abundance, of creation, and therefore of blessing, to go around.

“Blessing” is a covenantal, relational word. It describes the results of the hallowed, right, just relationship between God and humankind. Blessing is what happens when God and humankind live in covenant. It is important to remember here that the relationships between human beings and the relationship between God and human beings cannot be separated. “Blessing” and “justice” are inseparable biblical concepts.

When we ask for God’s blessing, we are asking for God’s presence and favor. In Christian terms this favor is what we call “grace,” God’s disposition toward us that is not dependent upon our merit, but is a sure and certain gift to the believer in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In our tradition, the Sacraments are the primary ways the grace/blessing of God is communicated to us (“a sure and certain means,” BCP, p. 857). The two “great” Sacraments “given by Christ” (BCP, p. 858) are Baptism and Eucharist. In them we see the two fundamental aspects of blessing: the blessing of life from God and the blessing of God for that life.

Five other rites are traditionally known as sacraments, but they are dependent for their meaning on the two Sacraments and are not “necessary for all persons.” A whole host of other actions in the life of the Church, and of individual Christians, are “sacramental” in nature, i.e., they mediate the grace/blessing of God and cause us to give thanks and praise/blessing to God.

In our tradition, priests and bishops have the authority to pronounce God’s blessing within the community of faith. They do so not by their own power, but as instruments of the grace (blessing) of God within the Church. Their authority to bless, too, finds its meaning in the two great Sacraments.

When the Church chooses “to bless” something it is declaring that this particular person or persons or thing is a gift/blessing from God and his/her/its/their purpose is to live in (or, the case of things, to assist in) covenanted relationship with God (and with all creation), i.e., to bless God in return.

To bless the relationship between two men or two women is to do this very thing: to declare that this relationship is a blessing from God and that its purpose is to bless God, both within the context of the community of faith. If the Church believes that same-sex relationships show forth God’s blessing when they are lived in fidelity, mutuality, and unconditional love, then this blessing must be owned and celebrated and supported in the community of faith.

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### **Clearing up some questions:**

#### **Just what are we blessing when we bless a same-sex relationship?**

We are blessing the persons in relationship to one another and the world in which they live. We are blessing the ongoing promise of fidelity and mutuality. We are neither blessing orientation or “lifestyle,” nor blessing particular sexual behaviors. “Orientation” and “lifestyle” are theoretical constructs that cannot possibly be descriptive of any couples’ commitment to one another. And every couple works out their own sexual behaviors that sustain and enhance their commitment. We don’t prescribe that behavior, whether the couple is heterosexual or homosexual, except to say that it must be within the context of mutuality and fidelity.

#### **Isn’t marriage and same-sex blessing the same thing?**

That they are similar is obvious, as is taking monastic vows, i.e., blessing a vocation to (among other things) celibacy. Each (marriage, blessing unions, monastic vows) grounds a relationship that includes sexual expression in public covenant which gives them “a reality not dependent on the contingent thoughts and feelings of the people involved” and “a certain freedom to ‘take time’ to mature and become as profoundly nurturing as they can” (Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” p. 63). The question remains as to whether “marriage” is appropriately defined as the covenant relationship

between a man and a woman only, as is the Church's long tradition. The Church must continue to wrestle with this issue. To wait until it is solved, however, in order to celebrate the blessing of a faithful same-sex relationship is pastorally irresponsible and theologically unnecessary.

### **Is same-sex blessing a sacrament?**

We can say it is sacramental. Strictly speaking in our tradition there are only two Sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist). Five other rites are commonly referred to as sacraments because of the Church's long experience of them. But in a sacramental understanding of creation, everything in creation has the potential to be sacramental—to mediate the presence/blessing of God. Priests and bishops “pronounce” blessing on those things the community lifts up as showing forth this blessing. The New Testament word for “blessing” is *eulogein*, literally “to speak well of.”

### **Sources**

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