

Resolution A049 Guidelines - 2012

(excerpt)

**Hearing, Seeing,  
and Declaring New Things**  
*Preparing Same-Gender Couples for a  
Liturgy of Blessing*

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## Overview: Pastoral Care for Same-Gender Couples

You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known.

*Isaiah 48:6*

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

*Isaiah 49:6*

The pastoral resources in this essay are provided to assist clergy and trained lay people who are preparing same-gender couples for a blessing of their relationship, using the liturgy “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant.” The expectation of such preparation is equivalent to the canonical requirement that couples preparing for marriage receive instruction “as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of Holy Matrimony” (Canon I.18.2[e]).

Preparation is similar for all couples, whether same-gender or different-gender. Most clergy and lay people who currently offer premarital preparation to different-gender couples are more than capable of working with same-gender couples. However, understanding the differences is necessary—and helpful.

The pastoral resources described in this essay address differences in the preparation of same-gender and different-gender couples and include some of the available resources for preparing same-gender couples for the blessing of their relationships.

### Contextual Competence

Clergy and qualified lay people preparing couples for blessings need to be *contextually competent*, a concept derived from *cultural competence*. In fields such as health care, social work, and education, culturally competent professionals embody awareness, a positive attitude, knowledge, and skills that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Consider the different situations that one might encounter when preparing a couple for a blessing or marriage:

- Preparing a couple in their seventies for a blessing of their relationship is very different from preparing a couple in their twenties.
- Preparing a couple entering a new relationship is different from preparing two people who have been living in a committed relationship for a long time.
- Preparing an interracial couple differs in some aspects from preparing a couple of the same race.
- Preparing a couple without children differs from preparing parents.

Being “contextually competent” means understanding and appreciating these, and many more, differing situations. Clergy and trained lay people need to examine their own contextual competence as they consider working with same-gender couples. If they feel they cannot work with—or learn to work with—a same-gender couple with appreciation and awareness, then they must refer the couple to another clergy person or trained lay person.

The materials below will help clergy and trained lay people adapt their skills to work with same-gender couples in a contextually competent manner.

## 1. Available Resources: Materials for Pastoral Preparation

In their Churchwide survey regarding pastoral and teaching materials, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music found that the following resources are among those commonly used to prepare same-gender couples for a blessing.

### **Prepare/Enrich (Life Innovations, Inc.)**

Prepare/Enrich is a relationship inventory that assesses couples' strengths and growth areas on topics such as finances, communication, conflict resolution, and sexuality. This assessment tool is by far the one used most frequently among respondents to the Commission's survey.

"Facilitators" (the term that Prepare/Enrich employs) must be trained in its use; see website for cost of materials.

#### *Positives*

- newly revised (2008), customized version easily used with same-gender couples
- uses the language of "partner"
- most comprehensive tool to address personality, conflict resolution, family, health, and financial and spiritual issues
- assesses goals, strengths, and growth areas
- large, national norm base (more than five hundred thousand couples)

#### *Negatives*

Currently, research results are standardized only for different-gender couples, so there is no "norm" against which to compare a same-gender couple's data.

### **Premarriage Awareness Inventory (Logos Productions)**

This resource is preferred by persons not trained in Prepare/Enrich.

#### *Positives*

- three customized formats, including inventories for those living together or previously married
- thorough personality assessment
- coverage of major areas, such as faith, finances, family of origin, children, power issues, life goals

#### *Negatives*

This is also standardized for different-gender couples only, though the author indicates that he will be implementing a same-gender version (no target date given).

## 2. Particular Issues Affecting Same-Gender Couples

Issues or differences that are particular to same-gender couples are not necessarily challenges in blessing preparation. They are more often gifts, especially if the clergyperson or layperson preparing a couple understands variation as part of God's plan for the world and a sign of God's blessing. Contextual competence is important here, especially in a preparer's awareness of places where skills for preparing different-gender couples do not transfer to same-gender couples. In addition, the person working with the couple needs to examine his/her own understanding of same-gender blessing, as well as the assumptions of the couple's faith and civil communities, including diocesan authority and various state laws.

Same-gender couples come to ask for a blessing with a variety of life backgrounds; thus provision for some variations and differences appear, for example, in the prayer choices in the liturgy. Other variations that clergy or lay preparers will meet in their work with same-gender couples follow below.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>79</sup> This material is adapted from "Pastoral Resources for Province One Episcopal Clergy Ministering to Same-Gender Couples," which covered these topics well.

### **Legal Civil Unions / Same-Gender Marriages and Diocesan Policies**

Currently the laws regarding state-recognized same-gender civil unions or marriages are very much in flux throughout the United States and other countries where The Episcopal Church is located. As a result, tracking these laws can be confusing. Some states recognize civil unions while others recognize marriages. A marriage or civil union in one state may not be recognized in another. Some states may have residency requirements for civil unions or marriages, or for the dissolution of those unions. Likewise, diocesan bishops have differing guidelines as to how clergy should respond pastorally to couples seeking a blessing for their union.

Therefore, clergy and couples seeking blessing must be familiar with the laws of their state and with the policies or guidelines of their diocese. Because some dioceses require professional counseling for a couple if one member of the couple (or both) has been divorced more than once or has had more than one previous long-term relationship, clergy should check with the diocesan office for guidance on what is expected in such situations.

Clergy who feel they cannot confer formal blessings upon same-gender couples may wish to provide a pastoral response to those couples. Such a pastoral response might involve:

- Affirming and supporting their desire for God's blessing upon their relationship
- Attending their union ceremony conducted by a civil authority
- Referring the couple to another Episcopal clergyperson or minister of other denomination who would be willing to conduct a formal blessing (those who choose to refer couples to other clergy might think about ways to continue and reaffirm a pastoral relationship with the couple after the blessing)
- Acknowledging the relationship within the congregation and reaffirming the congregation's ties to, acceptance of, and love for the couple, remembering that the blessing is transformative not only for the couple but also for the congregation.

A final issue: very few denominations authorize their clergy to conduct same-gender blessings or marriages, so an Episcopal clergyperson may be approached by a couple seeking a blessing of their union simply because it is not an option for them within their own denomination. Episcopal clergy may expect that some of these couples from other denominations feel tender and vulnerable in their relationship to the wider Church and so may need particular nurture and support.

### **Issues Arising from Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity**

*"Late bloomers" who "come out" later in life:* Some gay and lesbian people recognize their orientation from a very young age. Others may have a growing realization that does not become fully clear until much later in life; some may have understood their sexual orientation for some time but are only recently "coming out" publicly. A "late bloomer" may need some time to begin to live into his/her sexual orientation or explore with a counselor this core change in self-perception before entering into a lifelong commitment.

*Gay/lesbian/bisexual:* Despite studies of sexuality since the 1940s, many people commonly perceive that a person is either homosexual or heterosexual—with no category in between. However, sexual orientation is a spectrum with many gradations, and a person's primary orientation may vary at different times in life.

One or both members of the couple may have been in previous heterosexual relationships. While some individuals may have done so in an attempt to conform to familial, societal, and/or religious expectations, others may have done so as bisexuals for whom a different-gender relationship was satisfactory.

A bisexual person who seeks the Church's blessing of a same-gender relationship is expected to commit to monogamous, lifelong fidelity. In preparing a couple with a bisexual member for a blessing of their relationship, a clergyperson or trained layperson should treat the bisexual member's previous relationships in the same manner as any other person's previous relationships would be considered.

*Transgender:* The term “transgender” includes a wide range of people who experience and/or express their gender differently from broader societal expectations. This includes expressing a gender that does not match the sex listed on one’s original birth certificate or physically changing one’s sex. This complex situation for both the individual and the couple needs to be explored during the process of preparing for a blessing. (This is not unique to same-gender couples because one member of a different-gender couple may be transgender.) Preparers are encouraged to seek out and study some of the excellent sources on this complex subject, and/or to consult with a professional counselor experienced in working with transgender people.

*Internalized homophobia:* One or both members of a same-gender couple may have been subjected to a continual societal onslaught of negative or stereotypical messages. These messages may have been internalized, with the result that a person may be severely uncomfortable with his/her sexual orientation. A clergyperson or trained layperson who perceives that a person has significant negative feelings or stigma about his/her orientation may appropriately refer the person for counseling with a therapist trained to handle this issue.

### **Long-Term Relationships**

Preparers may be working with people who have been together for many years or have previously had long-term, monogamous relationships. This means the preparers must be open to learning and benefiting from the wisdom generated by a couple’s long years together.

### **Higher Level of Hurt**

One or both members of a same-gender couple may have been wounded by exclusion or marginalization, that is, experiences and feelings of being “other” or “less than.” Certainly, lesbian and gay people are at greater risk in their teen years of being victims of abuse or exploitation. Clergy and lay people preparing couples for blessings need to be sensitive to these issues.

All too often, one or both members of the couple may have a history of being excluded from benefits that heterosexuals receive from the state and especially from the Church. For the couple, a clergyperson or layperson providing blessing preparation represents the Church, so a preparer will need to build a trusting relationship with the couple in order to support them in dealing with the anger, hurt, or confusion that erupts from rejection.

### **In or Out?**

Although a couple is seeking a public union, one or even both members of the couple may need to remain “closeted” in some aspects of their individual lives. For instance, one person may be employed in a workplace or profession where being “out” could jeopardize the ability to function there at top form or even to continue to work there. Unfortunately, a prime example is the Church. For gay and lesbian clergy in many denominations, “coming out,” especially when in a relationship, can result in being stripped of the ability to function as ordained clergy or to hold any position of leadership in the Church. In secular places of employment, where lesbian or gay people might be protected by law, their orientation or relationship could affect their ability to be hired or result in a tense and unfriendly work environment. Being “out” could have a negative impact on seeking or maintaining a position in public office. Lesbians and gays serving in the military no longer need to remain closeted, but many who were in the military previous to this change might need to talk about their pasts as closeted members of the armed services.

Gay and lesbian couples take risks, even to their lives, when they display affection in public; when they cannot hold hands, they hold secrets. Because of this, there can be tension in a relationship when one person is fully “out” and comfortable with some public, visible displays of affection while the other is not. In some work situations, one person in the relationship may need to be careful when calling a partner at the workplace or taking messages at home.

Couples need to discuss when, where, and with whom it is okay to be open about their relationship in general. Specifically, as part of their preparation, they need to discuss each other’s comfort levels and needs regarding making their relationship known in a public ceremony.

### **Relational History and Resolution of Previous Relationships**

All couples have to deal with what went before; however, since legal recognition for same-gender relationships has only recently been available, it is less likely that couples have recorded formal, written, legal dissolutions of these relationships. Couples will be freer to proceed into a new relationship when they have processed what one or the other has learned from earlier relationships and when they have resolved matters of finance, property, child custody, and responsibility to former spouses or partners.

### **Families of Origin**

Most clergy and trained lay people inquire about each individual's family of origin when preparing different-gender couples for marriage. The answers can give the couple insights regarding a number of issues, including their understanding of what a healthy or unhealthy relationship looks like and their attitudes toward finances and parenting practices; the responses may also enable couples to identify unresolved issues that could affect the relationship.

One area which may be unique to same-gender couples is their families' responses to their orientation, their public lives as lesbian or gay people, and their life together as a couple. Couples will benefit from exploring questions such as: Have the individuals "come out" to their own families? If so, what was the response? Has either member of a couple told his/her family about the intended blessing liturgy? Is the family supportive, hostile, or grieving, or simply absent? How will each family respond to the individual's partner: will the family define a partner as a spouse and therefore part of the family, or will they treat one's partner as a friend or roommate? In other words, has the couple discussed what they anticipate their relationship with the in-laws will be as they enter into a lifelong, committed relationship? Likewise, is the couple able to engage a network of support, individually and as a couple, and do they perceive how it will become a part of their new life together?

### **Legal Matters**

For different-gender couples, marriage automatically comes with legal protections and obligations (above and beyond the legality of the union itself). In states where no civil union or same-gender marriage is allowed, and even in states which make legal provision for same-gender couples, it is critical that same-gender couples pursue private legal protections that substitute for some of the legal protections flowing from civil marriage (though private measures cannot cover all of the legal attributes of civil marriage). The couple should consider arranging for medical and financial durable powers-of-attorney, wills, and living wills, and may need to seek professional advice regarding financial and property matters. In addition, couples should consider soliciting legal advice on their rights and risks, especially regarding issues of tax, Social Security, or other state and federal legal matters (for example, Social Security benefits do not pass to the survivor of a same-gender couple).

### **Children**

As with any different-gender, childless couple preparing for marriage, same-gender couples should also discuss with each other whether one or the other wants children. This discussion might include topics such as when to have children, how to reproduce, the impact of children on finances and employment, and matters of parenting, such as childcare and discipline. Couples entering the relationship with children should discuss how to help the children adjust and integrate into the new family constellation. Same-gender couples, especially those blessed with children from a previous heterosexual relationship, also need to support their children through their various stages of development, particularly as the children relate to their peers, who may have no understanding of, or possibly even a hostile reaction to, a friend with same-gender parents.

Same-gender couples should be aware of the legal ambiguity, in both federal and state law, pertaining to custodial cases and may want to seek counsel to protect themselves and their children. This applies whether or not the couple resides in a state that provides civil unions or marriage for same-gender couples.

### 3. Presenters

Presenters are people chosen by the couple to support and present them to the presider and the assembly during the blessing liturgy. The proposed liturgy for same-gender couples provides for the option of presenters, just as some congregations offer to different-gender couples. This option gives a voice to important people in the life of the couple during the liturgy and enriches the experience for all present. Presenters can also serve an important role in supporting the couple before and after the blessing liturgy. The selection of a couple mature in their relationship can be particularly helpful to a couple starting life together. The couple, together with the clergy or lay preparer, should talk as soon as possible about selecting presenters, so that the prayerful work of the presenters can begin early on.

Two short handouts (one for the couple and one for presenters) detail the role of presenters and are intended for use at the conclusion of the initial pre-blessing preparation session.

### 4. Outline of Pre-Blessing Preparation for Same-Gender Couples

Below is a guideline for a five-session, pre-blessing preparation that may be used along with the two assessments described above. In their Churchwide survey regarding pastoral and teaching materials, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music found that a large number of trained lay people and clergy want a very specific template; however, those with experience preparing couples may choose to adapt, combine, or reorder this outline. Ideally, sessions last 60 to 90 minutes each, and both partners should be present for all sessions (although the preparer may decide to meet with one of the individuals to address specific issues).

#### Goal

Pre-blessing preparation sets as its goal the strengthening of a lifelong, monogamous partnership rooted in Christ. General Convention Resolution 2000-D039 addresses the hope—the Church's and the couple's—for an enduring relationship:

*Resolved*, 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 be it further

*Resolved*, That we denounce promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members; and be it further

*Resolved*, That this Church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values, and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement, and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them.

#### Expectations

##### *Realities*

- Clergy and lay people are trained in many different ways to conduct premarital preparation.
- Clergy and trained lay people apply a wide variety of methods for pre-blessing/marriage preparation.

##### *Assumptions*

- The priest or bishop is prepared to preside at the blessing.
- The clergyperson or trained layperson is experienced in preparing couples before marriages and / or blessings.
- The clergyperson or trained layperson is willing to refer the couple to a professional therapist should circumstances warrant.

##### *Truth*

- Each couple is unique, requiring adaptations as appropriate.



### **Preparing Same-Gender Couples in Long-term Relationships**

When preparing people who have been together for many years, the session structure may need to be changed, and fewer sessions may be needed. One suggestion is to adapt the first session to get to know the couple, introduce the liturgy, and so on. The second session could employ the following questions or discussion topics, which respect the length of the couple's relationship and invite them to discuss their understanding of the Church.

- What does it mean to you to have your relationship blessed by the Church after all these years?
- How will having the Church's blessing and making a commitment in public, even if you have done so privately or in a non-Church setting, affect you or your relationship?
- What can your relationship teach the Church?

Finally, the third session could be adapted from the current fifth session: wrapping up, clarifying the liturgy, and fielding any other questions that may have arisen.

### **Session One: Getting To Know You and an Overview**

This session focuses on getting to know one another. It also starts to address the details of the rite, offering the couple and the clergyperson an opportunity to study the rite together, looking at its meaning and choices and affirming that the blessing, grounded in God, is given through the Church. Some clergy, however, may prefer to do a very general overview of the rite in this session, then study it more intensely later in the process.

Addressing the practical issues of the blessing at the outset helps to build trust and allows the couple to open themselves to the substance of the next four sessions. By providing even a general overview of the rite, the preparer can address questions and alleviate anxieties about the actual day.

Session One includes a great deal of material, some of which may be moved to another session. Handouts for this session include:

- The liturgy "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant"
- Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Gender Couples
- Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant
- About Presenters—For the Couple
- Information for Presenters

### ***Outline of Session One***

- Pray together.
- Get to know one another (varies as to how well the preparer knows the couple).
- Explore the couples' religious backgrounds, their experiences with the Church(es), and their reasons for being in this congregation.
- Reflect on the theological significance of the couple's relationship. The handout *Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Gender Couples* may be useful in this discussion. (This reflection might be moved to a later session.)
- Review and ask the couple to sign the Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant.
- Walk through the blessing rite, raising theological issues and naming liturgical choices:
  - Discuss the eucharist as normative in the service. However, including a celebration of the eucharist may not be appropriate if only one member of the couple is Christian.
  - Emphasize the difference between a civil service and an ecclesial blessing.
  - Answer general questions regarding details of the service and the Church's practice.
  - Introduce the possibility of presenters.

At the end of the session, provide written handouts and suggest "homework" topics for the couple to think about for Sessions Two and Three:

- Families of origin and growing up in them
  - What worked and didn't work so well in their families of origin (this topic may also influence work in Session Four)

- Family Church/religious history as well as each individual's history—positive and negative—with the Church/religion
- Marriages of family members, particularly parents
  - Parents' ways of dealing with conflict
  - Parents' styles of child-rearing
  - Family tolerance of children's sexual orientation.

### Session Two: Learning from the Past, Part 1

This session provides a time for one member of the couple to speak and for the other to listen. Session Two opens with prayer, then looks back to focus upon the relationship of one partner with his/her family of origin, including exploring the marriage(s) of his/her parents and siblings and, if possible, grandparents and close friends. This discussion includes what the individual would or would not replicate from the past in his/her own ongoing and future relationships, particularly the relationship that is to be blessed. In addition, the individual can look at levels of acceptance of his/her relationship by his/her family and at other issues from family of origin and childhood.

The guiding assumption underlying this analysis is that certain issues are replicated from generation to generation, and that, once the issues are identified, individuals can choose to continue those patterns or deliberately alter them. This session works most effectively if the conversation flows naturally, rather than following a rigid interview, and if it includes the following important areas:

- Family: number and birth order of siblings
- Money: its role and influence in the family
- Sex: attitudes in family of origin about monogamy, fidelity, and the role of sex in relationship
- Alcohol and drugs: their places within the family as children grew
- In-laws: relationship with in-laws and greater family
- Children:
  - agreement or disagreement between parents about child-rearing
  - the individual's feelings about being a child in his/her family
- Conflict: parents' methods of arguing and disagreeing.

As the conversation concludes, the preparer invites the individual to identify what he/she would or would not replicate in his/her own adult relationship with the life partner. Following that, the silent partner is given the floor to comment on what he/she has heard and learned, especially any surprises.

### Session Three: Learning from the Past, Part 2

This session continues the look back by extending the chance for the other member of the couple to speak about his/her family of origin. Both members of the couple need the opportunity to explore the topics and to hear each other's stories so that each can learn and appreciate more deeply what the other brings to their relationship.

Session Three, which also begins with prayer, duplicates with the second person the process with the first from Session Two. If time permits at the end, the couple might discuss the impact of family history on their own relationship.

### Session Four: Looking to the Future

This session, an opportunity to look at the relationship today and into the future, invites the couple to name areas in the relationship that appear strong and supportive while also opening a space to identify and address areas that may be problematic. Thoughts, questions, and new information from previous sessions may help determine where the couple is today and where their relationship and household may need attention in the future.

After opening with prayer, this session should include discussion of:

- The couple's relationship in general: in-depth exploration of where they have been and where they are now
- Role of sex and intimacy in the relationship (for example, potential changes of sexual behavior as a result of committing to a monogamous relationship)

- Role of alcohol and drugs in the relationship
- Money (for example, household finances and financial planning)
- Legal protections (for example, medical and financial durable powers-of-attorney, wills, and living wills, insurance)
- Household roles (for example, who takes out the trash, who keeps the social calendar?)
- Communication:
  - How the couple talks things through
  - What happens when they disagree
- Concerns for the future
- Decision-making as a couple
- Dealing with families as individuals (one's own as well as one's partner's) and as a couple
- Support networks, now and in the future.

Session Four concludes with a discussion of the need for boundaries between generations so that the couples' life as a unit may be seen as distinct from older and younger generations.

#### **Session Five: Liturgical Decisions and Wrap-up**

Session Five, focused on the blessing service itself, is an opportunity to make choices for the liturgy, based on the Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship handout (and discussed) at the first session. The depth of this discussion will be determined by what was or was not addressed in Session One. In addition, as the final session, Session Five serves as a time to consider questions that may have arisen from previous sessions.

#### ***Outline of Session Five***

- Pray together.
- Address questions and concerns regarding previous sessions and other issues that have arisen.
- Review theological reflections in light of previous sessions and what is to come. The preparer can help the couple connect the spiritual practices of their life as a couple and the "staging" of the service. For example, will they process into the service together or separately, or will they be already in the worship space as the liturgy begins? Will they sit together during the Ministry of the Word or across the aisle from one another?
- Discuss details of the service itself:
  - Scripture (which passages speak particularly to the couple's life together?) and whether non-biblical readings may be included
  - Will the liturgy take place at the congregation's principal weekly celebration? Is celebration of the eucharist to be omitted for pastoral cause?
  - Other liturgical choices, especially:
    - Which collect will be used?
    - Which of the two vows will be used?
    - Will rings be exchanged, or, if rings have already been worn, are they to be blessed?
    - What music, if any, will be included? (The couple should consult with the congregation's musician.)
- Discuss presenters and their roles in supporting the couple in the service and in their ongoing life.

In closing, the preparer can assure the couple that they have done hard and important work together, work that is a gift both to the preparer and to the couple. The preparer can express his/her eager anticipation of the couple's blessing and of meeting their close and extended families, seeing them with their friends, and celebrating their relationship in the sight of God.

## Handouts

1. Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Gender Couples
2. Declaration of Intention for Lifelong Covenant
3. About Presenters—For the Couple
4. Information for Presenters
5. Model Congregational Guidelines

The Declaration of Intention requires the replacement of *N.N.* and *N. N.* in the first sentence with the couple's names. Handouts 3 through 5 are samples that may be adapted for the use of a specific congregation. In these, "*N. Episcopal Church*" should be replaced with the congregation's name, and a similar change made for "*Episcopal Diocese of X.*"