

Claiming the Blessing

“I will bless you so that you will be a blessing.”

— GENESIS 12.2

The General Convention of the U.S. Episcopal Church resolved in 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.” Since that time great strides toward realizing that “full and equal” claim have been taken. There are a growing number of places in the church where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (lgbt) persons are welcomed, affirmed in their ministries and blessed in their committed relationships. There are, however, many more places where they are still not fully included in the life of the church. A coalition of leading justice organizations in the Episcopal Church — Integrity, Beyond Inclusion and diocesan Oasis ministries — along with numerous individual leaders, are determined to see the 1976 resolution become a reality. To that end, this partnership, called “Claiming the Blessing” (www.claimingtheblessing.org), has committed itself to obtaining approval at the 2003 General Convention of a liturgical rite of blessing, celebrating the holy love in faithful relationships between couples for whom marriage is not available, enabling couples in these relationships to see in each other the image of God.



Claiming the Blessing

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Claiming the A Message

By The Rev. Michael W. Hopkins,
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Claiming the Blessing

What is this movement about?

It is about being clear. It is about being transparent. It is about witnessing. It is about how the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit compels us. It is about our love for the Church.

This is my message to the Church at large and, in particular, certain portions of it who wonder if this movement is such a good idea. My purpose is to be crystal clear and utterly transparent.

First to the Church in general:

We are absolutely committed to this Church and we are absolutely committed to the continuance of as broad a diversity—including theological—as is possible for us to maintain together. **This commitment is, in part, a commitment to continued messiness and frustration. We understand this to be true even if the General Convention passes the resolution that we are advocating, to formulate a Book of Occasional Services rite for the blessing of faithful, monogamous unions other than heterosexual marriage. We know and accept that such a rite will not be used or even allowed to be used universally.**

The materials in this booklet represent the classic Anglican approach of engaging Scripture, Tradition, and Reason in deciding matters of faithful living. Reflection questions are included to assist your own consideration of the issues relating to the blessing of relationships between two people for whom marriage is not available.

We are quite deliberately advocating for a rite whose use would be optional for the sake of the unity of the Church we love. We believe in our heart of hearts that our relationships are equal to heterosexual relationships, whether or not the term “marriage” is appropriate for them, and so, in our heart of hearts, we believe the rite used to publicly celebrate them should be equal. But that is not what we are asking for.

Blessing: to the Church

We are compromising, moderating our position, for the sake of the Church. We do so in the spirit of a resolution from the 1920 Lambeth Conference (Resolution 9:VIII): "We believe that for all, the truly equitable approach to union is by way of mutual deference to one another's consciences." We offer compromise in the spirit of that same resolution, which said, "We can only say that we offer it in all sincerity as a token of our longing that all ministries of grace, theirs and ours, shall be available for the service of our Lord in a united church."

These words were said in the context of ecumenical dialogue, but they are appropriate for our current internal dialogue, which looks far more like ecumenical dialogue—dialogue across deep and serious divisions—did in the 1920's.

Liberals and conservatives, progressives and traditionalists, must learn to live together in this Church or there will be no Church in which for us to live. But learning to live together must mean "mutual deference" not moratoriums or some insistence that we all convert to being "moderates."

My second message to the church at large is that we are not going anywhere. Gay and lesbian Christians make up a significant portion of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America. We will continue to do so after General Convention 2003 no matter what happens. We will not attempt to get our way by threatening to leave. I ask those on all sides of this debate to make this commitment as well.

Now three comments especially for our conservative brothers and sisters.

First, we do not desire for you to go away. Yes, some sympathizers with our movement have said from time to time that it would be just as well if you did. Of course, some of yours have said the same about us. Let us together commit ourselves to finding every way possible to move forward with our debate without threatening either schism or purge. It is simply not necessary for us to do so.

Second, we do not desire to force same-sex blessings on you or anyone. We do desire to enable them in those places where the church is ready to receive them as a blessing but is not able to because of an understandable desire for some level of national recognition. Of course we will continue to work towards local communities desiring to bless same-sex unions. Of course you will work to keep them from doing so. We ought to be able to live with each other's efforts on that level.

Third, we do challenge you to stop scapegoating lesbian and gay Christians for every contemporary ill in the Church, particularly for our current state of disunity or the potential for the unraveling of the Anglican Communion. You know as well as we do that the issues are far deeper than human sexuality. They are issues of scriptural interpretation and authority, including the very different polities that exist in different provinces of the Communion and whether or not local autonomy is a defining characteristic of Anglicanism. Issues of human sexuality are just one tip of that very large iceberg and if sexuality went completely away tomorrow, the iceberg would still be there.

This movement is not about getting our way or else. This movement is a means to further the healthy debate within the Church, to deepen it on a theological level, to begin to articulate how we see the blessing of same-sex unions as a part of the Church's moving forward in mission rather than hindering mission. We believe that it is time for the church to claim the blessing found in the lives of its faithful lesbian and gay members and to further empower them for the mission of the Church. We are trying to find a way forward in this endeavor that holds as much of this church we love together as possible. We ask all our fellow-Episcopalians to join us even if they disagree with us. ●

What, if any, change of mind and/or heart are these materials asking of you?

Michael Hopkins is also rector of St. George's Church in Glen Dale, Maryland.

Edited version of a speech first given at the Claiming the Blessing Conference, St. Louis, Missouri, November 8, 2002

What does it mean for the church to give its blessing?

“**B**LESSING” 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 regard 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, in 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.

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 couple’s commitment to one another. And every couple

What do you think of the idea that justice and blessing/grace are inseparable? Are there situations in the church where one is appropriately stressed over the other?

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," in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, Charles Hefling, ed.). 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.

Blessing and justice are inseparable biblical concepts.

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."

Can the church withhold blessing? Certainly, in its official, liturgical sense. Priests and bishops should only "pronounce" blessing over those things or persons the community of faith lifts up as being mediators of blessing. That means that the authority to pronounce blessing over particular persons or things can change over time within a community and vary from community to community, particularly from culture to culture. Our Anglican Communion has long said that the only truly universal "blessings" are Baptism and Eucharist (see the *Lambeth Quadrilateral*). ●

Prepared by the Claiming the Blessing theology committee: Michael Hopkins, Elizabeth Kaeton, Joseph Lane, Mark Kowalewski, Katie Sherrod, and Sarah Dylan Breuer.

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church Seventy-Third General Convention, Denver, Colorado, July 2000

D039: HUMAN SEXUALITY: ISSUES RELATED TO SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

RESOLVED, the House of Bishops concurring, That the members of the 73rd General Convention intend for this Church to provide a safe and just structure in which all can utilize their gifts and creative energies for mission, and be it further.

RESOLVED, We acknowledge that while the issues of human sexuality are not yet resolved, there are currently couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in marriage and couples in the Body of Christ and in this Church who are living in other life-long committed relationships, and be it further.

RESOLVED, 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, We denounce promiscuity, exploitation and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members, and be it further.

RESOLVED, 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, and be it further.

RESOLVED, We acknowledge that some, acting in good conscience, who disagree with the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality, will act in contradiction to that position, and be it further.

RESOLVED, That in continuity with previous actions of the General Convention of this Church, and in response to the call for dialogue by the Lambeth Conference, we affirm that those on various sides of controversial issues have a place in the Church, and we reaffirm the imperative to promote conversation between persons of differing experiences and perspectives, while acknowledging the Church's teaching on the sanctity of marriage.

What does the word 'sacramental' mean to you?

The Gospel vs.

Biblical theology and the debate about rites of blessing: An interview with Walter Brueggemann

BY JULIE A. WORTMAN



JULIE A. WORTMAN, editor/publisher of *The Witness* magazine, interviewed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann to get his perspective on the controversial issue of whether churches should approve rites of blessing for lifelong, committed relationships outside of marriage.

Walter Brueggemann is the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga. He has been interested in the interpretive issues that lie behind efforts at Old Testament theology. This includes the relation of the Old Testament to the Christian canon, the Christian history of doctrine, Jewish-Christian interaction and the cultural reality of pluralism. He is the widely read author of many books and articles, including *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Fortress Press, 1997) and *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, Patrick D. Miller, ed. (Fortress Press, 2000).

Julie Wortman: The Episcopal Church's 2003 General Convention will be considering a proposal that rites of blessing be developed to support "relationships of mutuality and fidelity other than marriage which mediate the Grace of God." When I asked if you'd be willing to offer your perspective on whether such rites of blessing should be approved, you said that you were just an "exegete" and that maybe we'd want to talk to someone with a "larger horizon" on the issue. What did you mean by that?

Walter Brueggemann: I just think that after you do the Bible stuff, there are people who know the whole ethical tradition of the church better than do I. The arguments can't just be made out of the biblical text as such, but they have to be made in the context of how the church has handled the Bible in many other ethical questions.

Julie Wortman: But I'm told your views are views that the "movable middle" takes seriously. Maybe a big reason is that you're a scholar who writes accessibly, which many scholars don't, but it seems likely that it is also because you're a biblical scholar whose social and political views are grounded in Scripture and ancient tradition. Is it your experience that Scripture is the chief authority for moderate Christians, and is it the chief authority for you?

Walter Brueggemann: The answer to both of those questions is, "Yes." It is the chief authority for moderates and it's the chief authority to me as long as one can qualify that to say that it is the chief authority when imaginatively construed in a certain interpretive trajectory.

I incline to think that most people, including the movable moderates, probably make up their minds on other grounds than the Bible, but then they are uneasy if it collides with the Bible or at least they have an eagerness to be shown how it is that the Bible coheres. I don't think, on most of these contested questions, that anybody — liberal or conservative — really reads right out of the Bible. I think we basically bring hunches to the Bible that arrive in all sorts of ways and then we seek confirmation. And I think that I'm articulate in helping people make those connections with the hunches they already have.

Scripture?

Julie Wortman: Do you think lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (lgbt) folks are sinners?

Walter Brueggemann: Yes, like we all are. So I think that our sexual interpersonal relationships are enormously hazardous and they are the place where we work out our fears and our anxieties and we do that in many exploitative ways. So I don't think that gays and lesbians and so on are exempt from the kind of temptations that all of us live with.

Julie Wortman: Is their struggle for full inclusion in the life of the church a justice struggle?

Walter Brueggemann: Yes. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said that the arc of history is bent toward justice. And the parallel statement that I want to make is that the arc of the Gospel is bent toward inclusiveness. And I think that's a kind of elemental conviction through which I then read the text. I suspect a lot of people who share this approach simply sort out the parts of the text that are in the service of inclusion and kind of put aside the parts of the text that move in the other direction.

Martin Luther's conviction that you have to make a distinction between the Gospel and the Bible is a terribly important one... It's very scary now in the church that the Gospel is equated with the Bible, so you get a kind of biblicism that is not noticeably informed by the Gospel.

Julie Wortman: And what do you do with those other parts?

Walter Brueggemann: Well, I think you have to take them seriously. I think that it is clear that much or all of the Bible is time-bound and much of the Bible is filtered through a rather heavy-duty patriarchal ideology. What all of us have to try to do is to sort out what in that has an evangelical future and what in that really is organized against the Gospel. For me, the conviction from Martin Luther that you have to make a distinction between the Gospel and the Bible is a terribly important one. Of course, what Luther meant by the Gospel is whatever Luther meant. And that's what we all do, so there's a highly subjective dimension to

Brueggemann speaks of the "arc of the Gospel" as being "bent toward inclusiveness." What examples can you identify in Scripture and in the tradition of the church that bear this out?



Scripture

that. But it's very scary now in the church that the Gospel is equated with the Bible, so you get a kind of a biblicism that is not noticeably informed by the Gospel. And that means that the relationship between the Bible and the Gospel is always going to be contested and I suppose that's what all our churches are doing — they're contesting.

Julie Wortman: You've done a lot of work on the Hebrew prophets. What do you think we can learn from the prophets about justice in this particular issue of lgbt people and their quest for justice?

Walter Brueggemann: As you know the prophets are largely focused on economic questions, but I suppose that the way I would transpose that is to say that the prophets are concerned with the way in which the powerful take advantage of the vulnerable. When you transpose that into these questions, then obviously gays and lesbians are the vulnerable and the very loud heterosexual community is as exploitative as any of the people that the prophets critiqued. Plus, on sexuality questions you have this tremendous claim of virtue and morality on the heterosexual side, which of course makes heterosexual ideology much more heavy-handed.

I have the deep conviction that the adrenaline that gathers around the sexuality issues is not really about sexuality. It is about the unarticulated sense people have that the world is falling apart.

Julie Wortman: Yeah. This makes me think of an interview you did with former *Witness* editor Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann about four years ago in which you said, "The church has made a centerpiece of our worship how bad we are." It sort of connects with the virtue thing. Can you say something about that again?

Walter Brueggemann: That's a judgment I make of my Calvinist liturgics tradition. I never have that feeling in Episcopalianism — even though there's a regular confession of sin, it doesn't seem as weighty as a Calvinist confession of sin. But I incline to think that the weight of God's graciousness readily overrides our guilt and what we ought to talk about is God's grace.

The other conviction I have is that, on the whole, I don't think people are troubled by guilt in our culture. I think they are troubled by chaos. And therefore most of our talk about confession and forgiveness is beside the point. The reason that's important to me is that I have the deep conviction that the adrenaline that gathers around the sexuality issues is not really about sexuality. It is about the unarticulated sense people have that the world is falling apart.

The anxiety about chaos is acute among us. Obviously, 9/11 makes that more so, but it was there before that. The world the way we have known it is passing away from us and I believe that people have taken the sexuality issue as the place to draw a line and take a stand, but it's not a line or a stand about sexuality. It's about the emotional sense that the world is a very dangerous place. Sexuality is, I think, one way to talk about that.

Julie Wortman: That opens up for me something that I heard Peter Gomes say

recently about young people at Harvard who are hungry for a life of sacrifice and service. Does that connect with what you're talking about?

Walter Brueggemann: I would have some wonderment about whether it's that clean and simple. But people are becoming aware that the recent practices of material consumption are simply destructive for us and they do not contribute to our humanness. And the more people that know that, the more encouraging it is.

Julie Wortman: What I was thinking is that the sexuality debate seems so beside the point, given the church's call in these times.

Walter Brueggemann: Yeah. Well, in my own [Presbyterian] context, I have the sense that continuing to argue about sexuality is almost a deliberate smoke screen to keep from having to talk about anything that gets at the real issues in our own lives.

I think the issues are economic and, you know, many of the great liberals in my church don't want to talk about economics. The reason for that is many of us liberals are also into consumption in a big way. So this is something else you can talk about without threatening them.

Julie Wortman: What's the nature of blessing in the Old Testament? How is it used there?

Walter Brueggemann: It's used in a lot of ways, but I believe that the primary meaning is that it is the life force of creation that makes abundance possible. If you look at the recital of blessings, for example, in Deuteronomy 28, it's about very mundane material matters. May your livestock prosper. May your bread rise. May your corn grow. So I think it has to do with abundance, productivity, the extravagances of the material world. And a curse then, as in Deuteronomy 28, is that the life force of vitality is withdrawn from us and our future just kind of shrivels up.

Julie Wortman: Is that different from the way Jesus would use it in the New Testament? Especially thinking about the Beatitudes?

Walter Brueggemann: No, I think the Beatitudes are exactly that way when it says, you know, blessed are the peacemakers. I think this means the life force of God's creative spirit is with people who live that way. And that they are destined for abundant well-being. So when you talk about a ritual of blessing, it is the church's sacramental act of asserting that this relationship will be a place in which God's generativity is invested.

Julie Wortman: So why do you think folks balk at the idea of rites of blessing for same-sex relationships that are free of promiscuity, exploitation and abusiveness and that are marked by "fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection, respect, careful honest communication and the holy love that enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God," as they did at the Episcopal Church's 2000 General Convention?

Walter Brueggemann: I think it's very complex and it's

about anxiety and all of that, but in the light of what I was saying, I think it's a moralistic judgment that people like this are not entitled to well-being. And therefore for the church to sacramentally guarantee well-being for these people is an unearned gift that falls outside the moral calculus.

Now in Presbyterianism the question that's sometimes put to theological articulation is "too many people are being saved!" You don't want all these people saved. That's called universalism. I think it's the same calculus that is articulated by Job's friends, that only the obedient are entitled to well-being. If these relationships are understood to be an act of disobedience, then the church ought not to be asserting well-being for them.

Julie Wortman: So there's a logic to the balking?

Walter Brueggemann: I think it is a logic. I think it's a logic that's rooted in fear and it's rooted in resentment. It is parallel to welfare reform in which the undeserving poor ought not to get food stamps.

Now, morality does matter and living obediently and responsibly is important. But that is always in tension with the other claim we make that the very fact that we exist as God's creatures gives us some entitlements.

Julie Wortman: As a person who bases what he thinks on Scripture, what would you say the biblical standards are for relationships?

Walter Brueggemann: Well, I think fidelity. It takes a lot of interpretation, but it's basically to love God and love neighbor. And the first neighbor I suppose we love is the one to whom we make these holy vows. So that has to do with relationships that are honorable and just and faithful and reliable and all that neat stuff. Then you can argue out what all that means. This is relational thinking.

But the sort of thinking that you can establish out of the Book of Leviticus, where so much of this anti-same-sex blessing stance comes from, involves a substantive material sense of contamination that has nothing to do with relationships. To this way of thinking there is a palpable poison that is turned loose in the community that must be resisted. People who think this way cannot take into account the relational dynamics that we're trying to talk about. That way of talking about physical contamination is deeply rooted in the Bible, though, which is a problem.

Julie Wortman: There are people who say the situation of lgbt people is analogous to that of the canary in a coal mine.

Walter Brueggemann: I've said that in the city homeless people are the canaries, but I think that's right about lgbt people. A general principle is that whoever is the most vulnerable is the canary. That is, it is always the test case about whether we are following Jesus. And then if you extrapolate to say that gays and lesbians are the most vulnerable in this issue, then they are indeed the canary. ●

(This interview first appeared in the November 2002 issue of The Witness magazine, <www.thewitness.org>.)

The Big House of Classic Anglicanism

Condensed from a speech at the
Claiming the Blessing Conference in
St. Louis, MO, in November 2002

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WE ARE HERE TO CLAIM THE BLESSING — that is, to celebrate the gospel at work in the lives of people. Particularly gay and lesbian people, but that's a way of celebrating the gospel at work in the lives of everyone. It's a way of saying that God plays no favorites, that even you, whoever you are, are really and truly welcome here.

I've noticed that people who object to what we are working toward here often speak of it as the work of a 'gay/lesbian lobby,' the functional equivalent of the 'outside agitators' of the not so distant past. They like to say that this is the world's agenda intruding on the life of the church. It's such a silly misconception, really.

The church ought to be delighted, of course, if it found people outside the church beating down its doors, clamoring for its blessing. But I don't see that happening. Some people outside the church could hardly care less; others are actively suspicious. No one is beating down the doors.

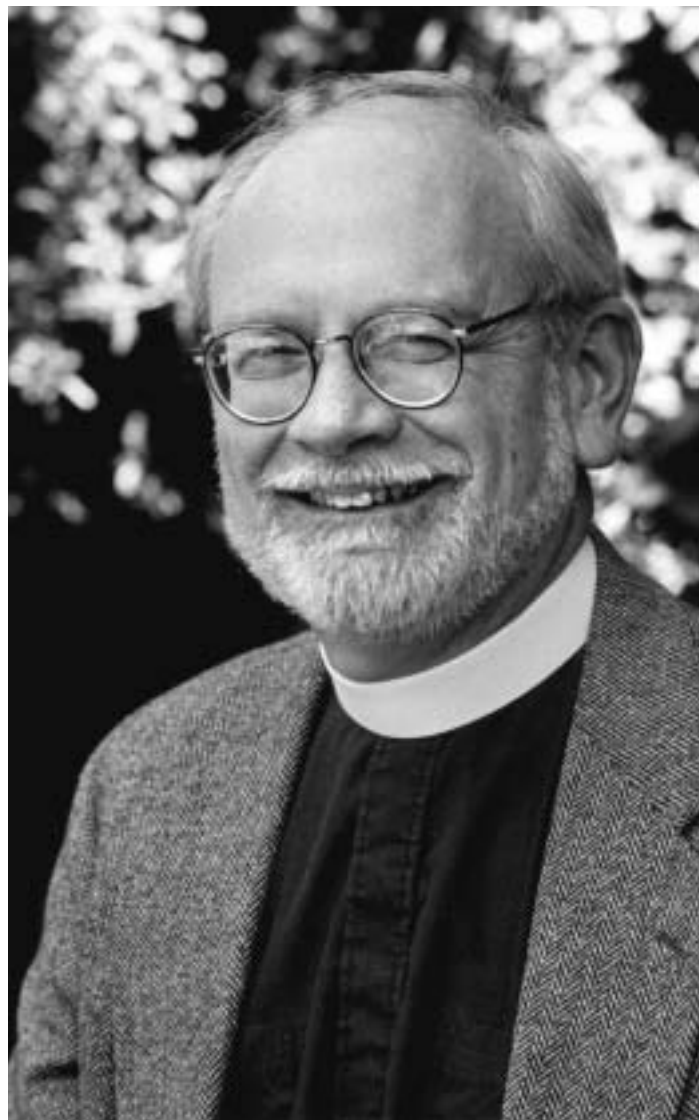
As we all know, this movement has come from within, welling up from the Spirit, from the hearts and minds and lives of faithful church folk. The issue of blessing our unions has arisen for us as a result of our growth in faith, hope, and love; and it summons us to further growth. The last few decades have seen extraordinary outpourings of grace among us. What strikes me when I visit parishes that have joined in this undertaking is that the tone of life in them is not partisan or polemical. What I encounter again and again is a sense of deep gratitude for God's ability and willingness to surprise us with new gifts of insight, with new faith and new hope, even in the difficult times in which we live. And we celebrate these gifts by sharing them with others.

We recognize afresh what Christians have recognized, in their various ways, from the beginning: that human desire, the same desire that informs our human loves, is an integral part of what draws us to God.

God's gifts are not just for us, and we haven't kept them just to ourselves. Over and over again, we see lesbians and gay men, people who would have been hiding in the shadows of our church a generation ago, now coming forward to contribute their gifts, their strength and loyalty and wisdom, freely and openly to the whole community of faith. And heterosexual people who have seen this happening have also been freed to give more generously of themselves.

What about human love makes you most comfortable? — uncomfortable?

The move to have a form of blessing for same-sex unions is, in an important sense, an appeal for justice. But it is even more a renewal of grace, an opportunity for the whole church to renew its trust in God for the future. And it is a celebration of one of God's greatest gifts — our human love for one another.



I want to return to this theme toward the end of this address. But first I want to say a little about what it means that we are Anglicans dealing with issues of sexuality here as Anglicans. Our position is rather ironic, in fact. What we're living out here together is classic Anglicanism. What do I mean by 'classic Anglicanism'? I mean the broad mainstream of Anglicanism as it was shaped in the Reformation. It was formed, in the 16th and 17th centuries, in contradistinction to two other types of Christianity, both of which thought they knew the mind of God pretty well: Roman Catholicism and the Geneva tradition, whose chief English representatives were the Puritans. We worked to distinguish ourselves from both — and especially from their assumption that they knew the mind of God so well.

This isn't just a modern way of interpreting those remote times. It was their own way of seeing the issues, too. It was particularly the Puritan challenge that caused Richard Hooker to write *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Hooker put the theological challenge that confronted classic Anglicanism very succinctly in a marginal note he wrote in a religious tract: "Two things there are which greatly trouble these later times: one that the Church of Rome cannot, another that Geneva will not erre."

Tradition

Classic Anglicanism, by contrast, focused not on having a detailed and certain knowledge of the mind of God, but on maintaining life and conversation in the faithful community. We believe that no one will ever know it all, but that the Spirit will work with us in the unity (not uniformity) of the church to bring us toward truth.

Hooker was broadly sympathetic to the theology of Calvin and the Puritans. What he objected to was their utter certainty of knowing the mind of God — their unwillingness to err. Classic Anglicanism values the ongoing life and conversation of the faithful community, however awkward and irritating it may become, far above such doctrinal assur-

This Anglican focus on maintaining the unity of the church has created a big house, one with room for all sorts of people

ance, attractive though it may seem. We are pretty sure the assurance is mistaken. We are also pretty sure that God's help will not fail us if we continue to work and pray together.

This Anglican focus on maintaining the unity of the church has created a big house, one with room for all sorts of people. What's held us together is that classic Anglican concern for the life and conversation of the faithful community. I have yet to hear any advocate of blessing gay and lesbian unions threaten to leave over the issue. The threats of schism come from elsewhere.

If there are those within the Episcopal Church who already know the mind of God too well to go on participating in this conversation, to go on maintaining the unity of the church — well, we have to say to them, 'We do not want you to go. We want to have you in the faithful community. But we are maintaining the classic Anglican tradition here. And we will not give that up to keep you here.'

What about Anglicanism is most important or appealing to you? Examples: the via media, the use of scripture/tradition/reason in deciding matters of faith and practice, Anglican's bias toward including rather than excluding?

To move toward the blessing of lesbian and gay unions is important because all members of the church ought to be treated equally and with equal respect. But there is even more to it. It is important because it touches on the love that is at the very heart of our faith, of our relationship with God. It's a truism that Christianity is focused on love — and equally a truism that we fail to live up to that. Our attitudes toward those with whom we disagree lapse easily into quite

savage hostility. I hope that we who have experienced this kind of hostility from others will learn not to let it infect and consume us, will keep discovering ways to speak with love and respect even when we are not met with the like.

We recognize afresh what Christians have recognized, in their various ways, from the beginning: that human desire, the same desire that informs our human loves, is an integral part of what draws us to God. The Song of Songs enshrines this principle in the heart of our Scriptures. The love of the human beloved is our closest, most decisive analogy to the love of God. Both loves are difficult to express adequately. What I am saying is that without human love, we would have almost no analogy for our relationship with God. Flawed as all human love is, it is still the best thing in our makeup, the brightest treasure that God placed there. And it is by this that God calls us home.

Well-meaning people sometimes say to me, 'Why can't the gay and lesbian community just hold back on this point so that the church can get on to more important things in its mission?' To that, my answer is, 'Spiritually, there may not be anything more important.' I do not say that to slight the other very real sufferings of the world — the disaster, say, of AIDS in Africa or the unfinished struggle against racism here and throughout the world. I say it rather because our reluctant, body-avoidant Christian psyche needs to understand that this blessing of unions is not finally, for lesbians and gay men, about social convenience, or status, or even justice. It is about our access to God.

We, of course, know that our loves give us access to God. But the church at large needs to understand that, too. And as the church comes to understand it, I believe all Christians will be freed to rediscover the passion of their relatedness to God in new ways. This is not just for lesbians and gay men. It is for everyone.

What is our task now? Our task, first and foremost, is to live as people of faith, to live in celebration of God's generosity, to live as people shaped radically, from the ground up, by our experience of the gospel, to live as people converted to trust in God, to hope in God's continuing presence with us, to love the way God loves us.

And in our particular place and time, one way we have to do this is to hold up the loves of gay and lesbian people as opportunities for blessing. Through them, God's blessing can come to us and does come to us. Through them, God's blessing can and does come to the people around us. For the church to extend its blessing does not make our unions better; it simply acknowledges and gives thanks for the blessings of God already present.

The church's blessing is important not because God cannot bless without it! God is not constrained by our fears and anxieties, by our hugging of blessings to ourselves and denial of them to our neighbors. God blesses where God wills. But we, the church, need to be a part of that blessing — for our sake, not for God's. That's why we continue to move toward this goal — so that grace and blessing will continue to abound ever more and more, in this world as in the age to come. ●

READING LIST

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What aspect of being part of an 'interpretive community' in conversation with scripture calls you to (a) remain the same, or (b) be open to new possibilities and interpretations?

Eight frequently about blessing

1 How do we, as Episcopalians, make moral decisions? What is the basis of our authority to make such decisions?

Karl Barth once observed that doing theology is much like the attempt to paint a bird in flight. That image is an apt one for describing the way in which Anglicans make moral decisions. Wrestling with the Word of the living God in the midst of the ever-changing landscape of the human scene makes it impossible to write in stone an eternal formulation for a moral code. In making moral decisions, however, as Anglicans, we always begin with Scripture. We also look to what the tradition of our faith has had to say, being aware that both Scripture and tradition have been translated in the voice that was inspired by God to speak a Word of Truth to its own generation. We carefully consider the impact of archeological, scientific and anthropological discoveries as well as the insights from other theological perspectives, including those developed by people who live on the margins of society. Anglican moral decision making also takes seriously the human experience in our time and place as an arena for God's ongoing revelation in the unfolding stories of our lives of faith as children of God. This often finds us in a messy, chaotic predicament that seems antithetical to the desire of Christ for us "to be one." The exhortation of Paul to the Church in Philippi may bring us some guidance, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (2:12b-13) In the words of a resolution from the 1920 Lambeth Conference (Resolution 9:VIII), "We believe that for all, the truly equitable approach to union is by way of mutual deference to one another's consciences."

How has the church's consideration of blessing same-sex unions called you to "work out your own salvation"?

2 How do Episcopalians understand God's Word to be revealed through Scripture? In light of that understanding, how do we deal with those passages of Scripture that have historically been used to label homosexual relationships as sinful?

As Christians, we believe that "all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We believe these things about Scripture, but we confess only one Word of God: Jesus Christ, come in the flesh (John 1:14). So we are careful to focus on Christ, and we note that immediately preceding 2 Timothy's oft-quoted sentence about the usefulness of scripture, 2 Timothy's readers are urged to learn not just from Paul's letters or his teaching, but from his conduct, aim in life, patience, love, and steadfastness in persecution (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

We join in a tradition going back to the writers of our Scriptures themselves when we say that while Scripture is inspired, useful, and authoritative, it is not the only venue through which we experience the Spirit, grow in faith and righteousness, and find authority. We are held in interpretive communities of those who taught us not only what words mean, but the context in which we should read any particular set of words. These interpretive communities serve as a "cloud of witnesses" as we read Scripture, but they also kick up a lot of dust; thus, we locate ultimate authority in

asked questions relationships

Christ rather than in any particular interpretation of a text, and we find ourselves called to use spiritual discernment to listen for Christ's voice amidst the cacophony of voices claiming to speak in Christ's name.

Scripture itself provides some insight into how Christians can practice discernment, and while Scripture may inform our discernment, it calls upon us to consider the example as well as the words of Jesus and his apostles, and it challenges us to imitate above all the example of Jesus' self-giving love. "From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error," words which apply not just to what precedes them in the text, but to what follows them: that "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God," while "whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:6–8).

Sincere Christians frequently differ in their opinion of what conduct is most loving, even as they frequently differ on interpretation of biblical texts, including those which have been historically used to label homosexual relationships as sinful. What we must keep in mind at all times is that our conduct toward each other when we disagree bears powerful witness to the spirit at work among us. The extent to which we bear witness in our life together to the Spirit who has made us one Body, and especially the extent to which we find ways to honor those whom we perceive as weaker in the faith, is the extent to which we ourselves serve as the ongoing revelation of Christ, the Head of the Body and the very Word of God made flesh, to the world.

We are instructed in righteousness in this regard by the combined witness of Scripture, the example of apostles and saints (Tradition) and the Spirit's work in the saints today as we gather in community (Reason). We believe this to be a solid hermeneutical model for the church as we seek to live into our identity in Christ, both as individuals and in our relationships with one another.

3 What do we mean when we talk about faithful relationships other than marriage that show forth the purposes and glory of God?

The 2000 General Convention, in Resolution D039s, offered the foundation of a theology of holy relationship that transcends sexual orientation. It acknowledged within the Body of Christ the presence of life-long, committed relationships other than marriage and articulated the expectation that such relationships be characterized by "the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God." Further, it declared that we as a church "will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully." Whether or not we think of the blessing of faithful

relationships other than marriage as "a sacrament," D039 declares that such relationships have the potential to be sacramental, i.e., "show forth the purposes and glory of God" Faithful relationships which meet the standards expressed in D039 are clearly signs of God's radical grace, by which God in Christ indiscriminately chooses to love and save humankind, and therefore meet the theological and pastoral criterion for blessing.

4 What does it mean for the church to bless something or someone?

When the church chooses "to bless" something it is declaring that a particular person or persons or thing is a gift/blessing from God and his/her/its/their purpose is to participate in covenanted relationship with God and with all creation, i.e., to bless God in return. To bless such a relationship—whether between a man and a woman or 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 (therefore in a supportive and accountable context).

5 Yet it has been said that blessing same-sex unions "undermines marriage." If we authorize this rite, what message will we be sending about sexual morality and traditional family values?

To affirm same-sex blessings does not diminish the vocation of marriage between men and women. Rather, blessing same-sex unions celebrates the diversity of creation and the various ways Christians create families. Moreover, as we listen to one another, we will find that we share many values, although they may be expressed differently. Families are best defined less by the characteristics of their participants (e.g. a man, woman and children), and more by the quality of the rela-

What loving relationships (marriage, partnerships, etc.) have you encountered that have been sacramental for you?

When have you experienced seeing God bless something or someone from which, at least initially, you would have been inclined not to bless? What did you learn in that experience?

How would the church be bettered by offering blessing and support to more relationships between two people rather than fewer? (That is, relationships other than marriage in addition to those of holy matrimony.)

tionships. Same-sex couples work against the odds to create families that may not look like what has been called the traditional nuclear family, yet these families may serve as sources of support, nurture and love as well. The message we will be 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. The message we will be sending about traditional family values is that those are the values that emerge from significant, committed human relationships, including, but not limited to, marriage.

6 But isn't blessing a relationship the same as the Sacrament of Marriage? Why will this rite go into the Book of Occasional Services and not the Prayer Book?

Christian marriage is the loving, committed relationship between two people reflecting the love that Christ has for the church. The love between these partners serves as an icon or a reminder to the Christian community that the love of God comes to us in the love of another person. The term marriage has historically referred to the union of a man and a woman and we do not propose to change that definition. We do propose raising up other forms of relationship and family as signs of

God's love in the world. By blessing the relationships of gay men and les-

bians, and others for whom marriage is not available, the church points to the manifold ways Christians can form families, including single people and men and women who live in religious communities. Because, however, it is clear that the entire church is not of a mind on these questions, we are asking that such a rite be placed in the Book of Occasional Services and thus be clearly optional for use.

The Preface to the Book of Occasional Services states that the materials included therein "arise out of the specific use of worshipping communities engaged in the process of creating liturgical responses to particular occasions in the life of the church." How does this rubric inform your understanding of the potential use of the optional rites being sought for blessing the relationships of those for whom marriage is not available?

7 Will this rite cause schism in the church? Will it cause a split in the Episcopal Church or threaten our relationship with the rest of the Anglican Communion?

No one in the church wants schism—even those who threaten it. There is, therefore, no reason for the authorization of a rite of blessing to split the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion. In terms of the Communion, member provinces of the Anglican Communion have always acted with "mutual deference," as equal partners. In terms of the Episcopal Church, dioceses and even parishes have rarely been forced to "toe the line" on matters of conscience, except in the instance of geographical

diocesan unity. A rite for the blessing of a relationship between two persons for whom marriage is not available will not be forced upon anyone. That is why the request is for a rite to be included in the Book of Occasional Services, a set of authorized but optional rites.

While these rites allow for the diversity of practice in our church, they do not bind others to use those rites if in conscience they do not wish to use them. 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."

8 Why now? Why the sense of urgency to pass this authorizing resolution at this General Convention? Aren't there more important issues that need our attention?

The urgency is two-fold. It is first of all pastoral. The church has already recognized that committed relationships other than marriage exist in the church and that they can and should 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" (Resolution D039, 2000 General Convention). As people of Common Prayer, since we acknowledge these relationships exist and we state that we expect them to show forth the glory of God, then a public rite to celebrate that reality and support that vocation is simply essential to us. Second the urgency is the mission of the church. We do need desperately to move on to other important issues and other focuses demanding our energy. We cannot do that while this issue remains

an unsettled source of continued wrangling. The time to move on for the sake of the mission of the church is now. The way to move on is by claiming the blessing of our Anglican heritage and, finding a middle way, a via media, authorize rites for blessings for inclusion in the Book of Occasional Services as an option for those who choose to employ them and getting on with our baptismal call to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ to all people.

What, at its best, does the idea of 'mutual deference' signal to you?

What is your greatest fear about (a) people leaving the church as result of General Convention authorizing a rite for the blessing of a relationship between two persons for whom marriage is not available, or (b) people coming to the church as a result of offering such blessing?