

To God's People in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts:

Parishioners enter the conversation about blessing same-sex relationships from many different starting points. Some congregations and individuals do not understand why any Episcopal church would bless same-sex relationships; others do not understand why the blessing of same-sex relationships continues to be controversial. Recognizing these differences, facilitators should begin these conversations with agreement for respectful conversation... beginning and ending each session with prayers of thanksgiving for the opportunity for dialogue can underscore the value of respectful discussion. The idea that the Church is a safe place to disagree is attractive, but living it out is difficult. Doing so requires that we expand our boundaries to accept those we do not understand or with whom we do not agree on matters of great importance. We do this because, more than anything, Christians do agree on matters of the greatest importance—the love and salvation offered by Jesus Christ. While we may disagree over the definition of marriage and how we understand biblical texts about divorce and sexuality, we can agree on our shared participation in Christ's mission to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The goal of dialogue is not to win the day for one's own point of view, but for all participants to grow in understanding of both themselves and others.¹

We commend these words to every congregation in our diocese. They ring true for us; each of us serves congregations in which some of our members “do not understand why any Episcopal Church would bless same-sex relationships,” while others “do not understand why this is still controversial.” Because there are majority and minority opinions in each of our respective congregations, we as pastors seek to be engaged in conversation with every member of the Body and even more importantly to love one another as Christ has commanded us.²

We believe that dialogue is an essential part of pastoral ministry and a significant dimension of our shared vocation to build up the Body of Christ. We know that respectful, honest, and civil conversation is an increasingly rare and counter-cultural experience for many people. Yet the Gospel of Jesus Christ demands this of us. Toward the goal of recapturing this lost art (and as part of the work of reconciliation that has been given to us in Jesus Christ), we commend to you Appendix A as a guide for beginning such conversations. It comes to us from the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music report. It reminds us that this work is not easy, yet our common experience is that it can bear much fruit. In fact, we commend the entire SCLM report to you, along with the full guide to teaching materials.³

Each of us serves among people who are in different places from where we are on these questions. We do not seek unanimity of opinion in our congregations, but rather to continue to form and make disciples of Jesus Christ. Since one size does not (and cannot) fit all of our congregations in this diocese, we have chosen in this document to share four distinct stories of how the congregations we serve have been trying to faithfully wrestle with these challenging

¹ From *I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing: Resources for the Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant in a Same-Sex Relationship* – A report of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church

² “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35, NRSV)

³ https://www.ctepiscopal.org/images/customer-files/I_Will_Bless_You_Corrected.pdf

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
I Will Bless You, and You Will Be A Blessing: Resources for Congregational Use

questions of our day. Those congregations are St. Francis Church in Holden, Nativity Church in Northborough, All Saints' Church in South Hadley, and St. John's Church in Williamstown.

While these four "testimonies" by no means exhaust the possibilities within our diocese, they are offered as a way of helping to point the way forward. They are descriptive rather than prescriptive. *We mean for these materials to be adapted to local situations and generative of your own contextual approaches.* At the very least, we hope these conversations will take place between clergy and vestries in your unique settings. Quite possibly, however, now is the time to engage the entire congregation—or at least to extend that invitation to prayerful conversations. Wherever we end up as individuals, congregations, and as a diocese, we believe that it is profoundly helpful to be having these discussions now, and that all are enriched by them. Through such dialogue, we become more faithful bearers of good news to the world and even when we reach different conclusions (*especially then!*), we can still love one another.

Therefore, while our contexts are all different, we agree on the following:

1. It is better to engage in conversation than to be silent.
2. How we treat "minority opinions" matters. We do not expect or even desire unanimity in our congregations. What matters to all of us is that we are living more fully into the Baptismal Covenant and "respecting the dignity of every human being." We are committed to all voices being heard, and all members of Christ's Body being honored.
3. We are a liturgical people. Just as one would not best understand *Romeo and Juliet* by reading it (but by seeing it performed) so liturgy comes to life when it is seen and heard. We encourage you to take some time to go through the liturgy not by reading it in isolation from one another, but by walking through it and hearing it together, even in congregations that are not sure they want to do this. (Or are certain they will not!) In so doing we become more fully aware of what has been, is, and will be happening in congregations across our diocese and throughout The Episcopal Church.
4. We can pray for one another.

Following the case studies you will find additional information redacted from the full report of the SCLM that you may find to be helpful resources in your ministry contexts. At Bishop Fisher's request, we are glad to offer ourselves in any way that might be helpful in other parishes. If you wish to contact one or more of us to talk through in more detail our own experiences, or possibly to even to help your vestry to begin a conversation, we are willing to do that.

Peace in Christ,

The Reverends Rich Simpson, Len Cowan, Tanya Wallace and Peter Elvin

Case Study One: St. Francis, Holden

Rector: The Rev. Rich Simpson / Wardens: Craig Stanovich and Beverly Giarusso

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of the year 2003 in the life of St. Francis Church. It is quite possibly second only to our founding year in importance as far as shaping our core values and identity. The election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire exposed some deep divisions which were already present in the congregation, but which could no longer be ignored. And so we engaged in some difficult conversations.

Some people left. Some people came. But most of us were changed for good as we wrestled with big missional questions: who really was welcome in our parish? Did we believe in the full inclusion of all the baptized or not? While big questions are never really settled, we came to a deeper sense of our identity in Christ. We did not, and do not, all agree on matters of human sexuality or much else for that matter. Like most suburban congregations we are pretty diverse politically as a walk through the parking lot on a Sunday morning to read bumper stickers will readily reveal. But we got clear in 2003 that to be an Episcopalian in this time and place meant at least being able to live together in love with those whose theology might differ from our own. In the months that followed we talked, prayed, studied, and grew in love.

Flash forward to 2011. Knowing that the rector would be serving as a deputy to General Convention in Indianapolis in 2012 and anticipating the passage of *"I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing"*⁴ the rector and vestry began talking about what this might mean for the parish. To be very honest, the rector was perhaps feeling some post-traumatic stress and wanting to be sure that the vestry at least was prepared for what would be happening over the summer, so that no one would feel blindsided. The rector told the vestry that he was ready, willing, and eager to be able to offer the church's blessing to same-sex couples, but wanted to be able to engage the vestry along the way so that we were more prepared and informed in 2012 as a congregation than we had been in 2003.

So we spent months talking about this and re-working our marriage brochure in the process. It didn't dominate our agenda; we had and have many other things happening related to our core values and mission. But we carved out some time to discuss the issues. To a person, the vestry unanimously felt that the parish had changed and that the world had changed, and that we should not exclude anyone in our parish who was a blessing to us from having their marriage blessed.

After General Convention, the rector communicated this information to the parish in our newsletter. (See below). Several people had comments to share, perhaps the most poignant coming from a grandmother whose grandson had recently come out. "I'm so proud of my church," she said. A blessing service is being planned for a couple who are already married in Massachusetts and active members of the parish this May. While that event may trigger some negative responses, no one in the parish anticipates that it will trigger the kind of anxiety and divisiveness we experienced in 2003. We are, simply, in a different place now. And even the rector is starting to believe that.

⁴ https://www.ctepiscopal.org/images/customer-files/I_Will_Bless_You_Corrected.pdf

Rector's Notes for September 2012 Newsletter (Rich Simpson/St. Francis Church)

Nine years ago when the General Convention of the Episcopal Church met in Minneapolis, Minnesota, among other things they consented to the election of the Right Rev. V. Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. Bishop Robinson was clearly not the first gay person ever to sit in the House of Bishops, in ours or any other denomination. But he was the first one who was open about it. I was on Cape Cod, on vacation, when that vote took place. While many people (including me) were proud of our Church for taking a step toward more fully embracing the Baptismal Covenant to respect the dignity of every human being, some were upset and even felt blindsided and betrayed. The months and even years that followed were a polarizing time globally, nationally, in our diocese and in our congregation; and quite frankly a fairly challenging time for me, the wardens, and vestry as we navigated our way through.

Bishop Robinson is now retiring, and a new bishop has been elected from our very own diocese to succeed him. (The Rev. Rob Hirschfeld, Grace Church, Amherst.) A great deal has changed in the past decade not only in the Episcopal Church but in our nation as well. Massachusetts was the first state to recognize marriage equality for gay and lesbian people. Since then, eight other states have joined us, and another twelve now offer civil unions or domestic partnerships.⁵ Particularly in our New England context, we've seen a rather seismic social change, and if polling data is correct, a change of hearts as well.

This change has happened rather quickly: not quickly enough, I realize, for those who have been denied the benefits of marriage. Yet, in the greater scheme of human history, it's been a whirlwind of a decade when it comes to our changing cultural perspectives on same sex relationships. This past June, a U.S. Airman and his partner had their civil union blessed at the military chapel at McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, a joint military base in Wrightstown, N.J. Their story humanizes the extraordinary journey we have taken over the past 25 years or so with our gay and lesbian friends and family members in both Church and society.⁶

Three years ago, at the 76th General Convention, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music was asked to develop liturgical and study materials to be considered at the next General Convention, i.e. the one that met this summer in Indianapolis. They did amazing work and communicated well with the entire Church about Resolution A049: "I Will Bless You, and You Will Be A Blessing." I hope that you will take some time to explore the materials they developed, especially the audio-visual materials.⁷

This summer, the 77th General Convention of The Episcopal Church overwhelmingly voted to approve this rite for the blessing of same-sex couples in our Church. While there were dissenters, it was nothing like 2003, and the tone of the conversation was consistently respectful and honest. Our bishop, clergy deputation, and lay deputation all voted in favor of the resolution. Some of you have perhaps seen editorials in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* about Convention. I am not even sure those people were there, but their words do not capture the way that I experienced my first Convention. I commend to you the reflections of our Presiding

⁵ <http://www.marriageequality.org/current-status-map>.

⁶ http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_wedding/2012/07/erwynn_umali_and_will_behrens_the_first_gay_wedding_on_a_military_base.html

⁷ <http://liturgyandmusic.wordpress.com/category/resources-for-same-sex-blessings/>

Bishop⁸ as a more accurate description of what unfolded, as well as the reflections that Bishop Steven Lane shared with the Diocese of Maine. Among other things, Bishop Lane wrote these words, which I think accurately express what we agreed to do in offering a liturgy for blessing same sex couples:

The General Convention authorized a service of same sex blessing, as expected. It made clear in doing so that the service is not a marriage service in disguise and may not be used for purposes other than the blessing of same sex couples. The service must be authorized by the diocesan bishop, and its use will be reported to the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music. No church or clergy person can be required to hold such a service, and no penalty may be imposed for declining to do so.⁹

This decision means that the clergy of our diocese will be permitted, as of Advent I, to share this new liturgy with same-sex couples who desire to have their relationships blessed. Such services must be authorized by the bishop, and our bishop-elect has said that he will enthusiastically do so. As Bishop Lane points out, General Convention was clear that this is a blessing service; not Christian marriage. The differences are theological and historical; but quite frankly in places like Massachusetts this is still going to be a little bit confusing as we live into this change. At this point, at least, clergy will not be able to sign marriage licenses for same sex couples, even though we do live in a state with marriage equality. Bishop-elect Fisher has promised to revisit this question after his ordination, which coincidentally falls on December 1. (See *The Boston Globe* article, July 16, 2012.)

I have been talking with our vestry for the past two years about this upcoming vote and about what it would mean for St. Francis Church. They have been incredibly open and supportive of this change that will allow for a more pastoral response to gay and lesbian people who are in committed, monogamous relationships (whether legally married in Massachusetts or not.) Both Karen and I stand ready and willing to share this rite with those who may desire it. As with marriages, this will require conversation, pastoral counseling, and planning.

Even in the midst of great joy for many, I am very mindful that people are on their own journeys and that conversations about human sexuality may trigger some deep emotional responses. I pray that we will continue to honor one another going forward, not divided as "winners" and "losers" but as God's people on a journey together; one in Christ Jesus. I felt strongly a decade ago (and still feel) that while I am entitled to my own theological views, as your rector I am called to be the pastor to all members of the parish including (and most especially) those who may disagree with me on this or any other matter. It is important to me that all members of our parish know that my door is always open for further conversation. Ultimately, what binds us together is bigger than any of our theological perspectives: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, who has claimed us and sealed us and marked us as God's own, forever.

Peace and all good,
Rich

⁸ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/08/03/presiding-bishops-message-to-the-church-on-general-convention/>

⁹ <http://episcopalmaine.wordpress.com/2012/08/03/bishop-steve-reflections-on-general-convention/>

Case Study Two: Nativity, Northborough

Rector: The Rev. Len Cowan / Wardens: Wayne Deslauriers and Sue Roche

As with our neighbors at St. Francis in Holden, 2003 was a year of deep significance for the clergy and people of the Nativity, Northborough. Our Rector, Len Cowan, was present at the General Convention where Gene Robinson was confirmed as Bishop of New Hampshire, casting a dissenting vote. He returned to find a majority of parishioners deeply disturbed by the actions of Convention, while others were extremely excited, and still others were unsure or unaware. Eventually, a number of long-term parishioners left the parish, and a number of parishioners and others from neighboring parishes and church communities joined us. The grief attending all of these transitions was deep and profound, as was the very mixed blessing of welcoming grieving parishioners from other congregations. In some ways, we are still recovering a decade later.

The Rector and Vestry approached the decisions expected at the General Convention of 2012 with anxious anticipation. As Convention ended, we were pleased with the maturity which has developed among parishioners in the past decade. Those who rejoiced at the decision to allow same-sex blessings were able to respect the sorrow of others, and vice versa. It appeared as if we had walked through the summer largely whole and united. It would have been easy for us to breathe a collective sigh of relief and move forward without considering the impact of the summer on our present and future together.

At the end of the summer, the Vestry and Rector met on retreat where, among other considerations, we asked God and ourselves whether we were being led to have a conversation about same-sex blessings at Nativity. Given that the Nativity clergy and staff were unwilling to support or participate in such blessings would seem to have rendered any conversation superfluous. And yet, it did seem as if God was inviting us to discern our response as a parish, rather than just follow the lead of our staff. The Vestry was unanimous in its conviction that we engage in a listening process, focusing less on the “issue” involved, and more on the people involved, particularly the voices which had been largely silent at Nativity, those of “out” LGBT people as well as those who have moved away from embracing a prior LGBT identity and way of life.

We designed a four-week conversation, which was held in January of 2013. Our first session focused on studying the actual resolutions and rite coming out of General Convention, a statement from 2007 about Nativity’s convictions about marriage, and a Bible Study of Acts 15. The second week we welcomed an Episcopal cleric who is a married lesbian with family, so that we could hear her story and perspective. We did the same the following week with an Episcopal cleric who had identified himself as gay earlier in life, but now no longer believes this is God’s call for his life. On our final week, we discussed among ourselves our responses to what we had heard from our guests, from one another, and from God. The fruit of these conversations was forwarded to our Vestry, who met with the Rector the following week to discern whether Nativity should participate in same-sex blessings. Though the Vestry has decided that Nativity will not participate, we reaffirmed our commitment to respect the diversity of opinion in Vestry and parish in this matter, and to engage, invite, and welcome all people to the parish, without reservation. A letter was sent to parishioners explaining our process, conversations, and decision. (See below).

January 30, 2013 letter from the Nativity Vestry to Nativity parishioners

Dear Members of Nativity:

Thank you for praying for Nativity while we went through four weekly conversations on human sexuality, initiated in response to The Episcopal Church's decision to allow same-sex blessings. The Vestry and I believed God was inviting us to listen to Him and to one another as to our response to this decision, and to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people among us and around us. Some 20-25 parishioners participated in the conversations.

On our first evening, Steve Symes presented both The Episcopal Church General Convention resolution approving the blessings, and the liturgy for the blessings. He made it clear that, in the wording of the resolution, same-sex blessings are not being mandated by the Church, but rather offered as a possibility, and that any priest or parish not wishing to participate will not be punished, marginalized, or humiliated for so doing. Fr. Len presented the Nativity Statement, "Reconciling and Transforming", which includes these sentences:

We promote Holy Matrimony, the lifelong union of a man and a woman in Christ, and, though we respect those in other kinds of faithful, loving relationships, we promote being chaste in body, mind, and spirit ... We seek to be a reconciling presence in the church and in the world, bearing witness to the transforming power of God in a way which explores and engages, and invites and welcomes, particularly the marginalized and the oppressed. We seek to walk in the way of Christ Who sought reconciliation with all people.

Finally, we had a Bible Study from Acts 15, in which the church both recognized the Presence of the Holy Spirit in those whom the church didn't expect to be touched by the Spirit, and yet corrected the behavior of these new brothers and sisters in Christ. We asked if there were parallels to today's situation.

On the following week, our guest speaker was an Episcopal cleric who is a married lesbian with family. She shared her life experience with us, as well as her positive views on the blessing of same-sex unions. She was honest, inviting, and clear, offering us a perspective on the development of her self-understanding, and her approach to a teaching on sexuality which derives from a feminist and gay perspective. She was warmly welcomed and received, and good and faithful conversation around table groups followed.

Next week brought an Episcopal cleric who used to live as an "out" gay man, but now believes that this is not God's call. He also was very frank about the development of his former way of life, his decision to leave it, and his ongoing struggle to remain chaste in his commitment to his wife and family. He offered a simple conclusion to his story, indicating that he believes the entire sweep of Scripture and tradition promotes a hetero vision of reality and sexuality, including heterosexual marriage, and does not support anything less than that. Again, a warm welcome and good conversation for all.

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
I Will Bless You, and You Will Be A Blessing: Resources for Congregational Use

On our final week, we concluded our conversations with table discussions and a report-back to the group as a whole. We responded to four questions, the last of which was, *is there anything you believe needs to be reported to the parish?* From the three table groups we heard how important it is to listen to God and to one another; the value of open and respectful conversation; the need to live out the mission of the Church with all people; that our convictions were strengthened even as our hearts were softened toward the “other”; that the process has been open, honest, and not “agenda-driven”; and that we can disagree but still believe in Jesus Christ, as some of us are not in favor of same-sex blessings, whereas others of us are.

Last evening, Tuesday, the 29th, the Vestry met to ask the Lord and one another how we as a parish should respond to the possibility of same-sex blessings at Nativity. We prayed and are praying that our conclusions will bear good fruit among us all, of a kind which advances God’s mission among and through us, even though we are aware that not all will agree with our decision, and that some may be deeply disappointed. What follows is our statement on these matters.

Based on its *Reconciling and Transforming Statement*, a document addressing a number of concerns in culture, and our response to them, the parish officially holds the following posture relating to our church and our culture, though our parishioners and Vestry members may not all be of one mind in the particulars.

We promote Holy Matrimony, the lifelong union of a man and a woman in Christ, and, though we respect those in other kinds of faithful, loving relationships, we promote being chaste in body, mind, and spirit.

Therefore, Church of the Nativity will not be holding same-sex blessings or marriages on its property, nor will its clergy be performing them on or off property.

We seek to be a reconciling presence in the church and in the world, bearing witness to the transforming power of God in a way which explores and engages, and invites and welcomes, particularly the marginalized and the oppressed. We seek to walk in the way of Christ Who sought reconciliation with all people.

Therefore, we will engage, invite and welcome all people into the parish, without reservation.

The Vestry gives thanks to God for His gracious presence throughout this process, and for your gracious support of Nativity throughout. We welcome your reactions and comments, and ask you to continue to pray that, as He enables us, we can continue His mission that we be and make faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sincerely in Christ,
The Nativity Vestry and Rector

Case Study Three: All Saints', South Hadley

Rector: The Rev. Tanya Wallace / Wardens: Rene Beauchemin and Tina Lee

The people of All Saints' Church hadn't talked much about same-gender blessings before General Convention, but they had done the work of living into what it means to be a parish that is truly welcoming. In its long-range planning process of 2010, the vestry adopted a set of six core values, the first of which states: *We believe in God who welcomes unconditionally, and who calls all Christians to be welcoming in Christ's name. We enjoy the diversity inherent in God's people and understand that to be truly welcoming is to be open to being changed by others. We commit to sustaining a spirit of openness that makes All Saints' Church a place to belong, whoever you are, just as you are.*

The Rector, just having returned from General Convention, told the vestry at its July 2012 meeting that together they should consider what a faithful response would be to the passing of resolution A049. A good, honest, and faithful conversation ensued, using care to listen deeply to every person, to honor what was said, and to call on God to guide them forward. Some of the conversation focused on wanting to be careful to honor "those parishioners" who would have trouble with the notion of same-gender blessings; when the question was raised about how many people we considered to fall into this category, the vestry thought for a moment, and realized that they could think of no more than maybe 2 or 3 people. That fact helped them to realize they were projecting fear onto a group of people that didn't actually exist, and helped them to articulate the desire that they did have for those 2-3 to be cared for. One member of the vestry articulated a view that opposed same-sex marriage; that person was listened to, honored, encouraged to articulate concerns, and met with a community of deep caring.

The vestry decided to write a letter to the parish articulating their perspective on the place of same-gender blessings in the life of the parish, and to use the process of writing the letter—and agreeing on its contents—to build consensus. At the next meeting of the vestry, a draft of the letter was presented, having been written to encompass the ideas and opinions articulated in the previous meeting. The process of editing the letter as a group enabled the members of the vestry to articulate more clearly what they believed God was calling them to do. At the end of the editing process, consensus had been reached. It was decided that a vote to support the blessing of same-sex relationships would be in order. A new vestry member, who had never before initiated a vote of the vestry, crafted the motion. The vestry member who had most struggled with supporting same-sex marriage, articulating how moved he was by the process and how much he loved the parish, seconded the motion. It passed unanimously.

The letter was sent to the parish in September 2012. (See below). It included an invitation to a three-week Adult Forum series in October which would explore some of the issues related to the vestry's decision. A UCC pastor from the neighboring parish led the first week, exploring the scriptural references often used against homosexuality; she also shared her parish's experience of becoming an Open and Affirming parish in South Hadley. An Episcopal deacon from Vermont, who worked with The Episcopal Church's committee to develop the resources to accompany resolution A049, led the second week's discussion. He talked about the national process that led to General Convention, and shared the guiding principles that went into the development of the liturgy. The Rector of All Saints' led the third week's discussion. She talked about the actual

content of the General Convention decision, what precisely the Bishop and Bishop-elect had granted permission to do, and what that would look like at All Saints' Church. Many important questions were explored and answered.

The community, for the most part, has celebrated the decision of the vestry. One parishioner has articulated a dissenting opinion. No one has left the parish. One couple has approached the Rector to have their relationship blessed. On Sunday, December 2, 2012 (the first day allowed by the General Convention resolution), at 4:30 in the afternoon, Bishop Fisher and the Rector presided at the blessing of a 26-year relationship between two faithful, loving, well-connected members of the parish. The congregation was comprised almost entirely of parishioners. The *whole* vestry attended.

September 2012 letter from the Vestry of All Saints' Church, South Hadley, to the parish

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

We, the Vestry of All Saints' Church, are writing to share with you a significant development in the life of The Episcopal Church which will impact our parish. This letter is meant to share information, but also to serve as an invitation to join us in conversation.

As you may have heard, The Episcopal Church, meeting in General Convention in Indianapolis in July of this year, after years of discussion, study, prayer, and conversation, voted to allow for the blessing of same-sex couples who are in lifelong, faithful, committed relationships. Bishop Gordon Scruton and Bishop-elect Doug Fisher wrote to our diocese on July 11 and shared the following statement:

“At General Convention, our church authorized a provisional rite and accompanying resources for blessing same-sex relationships. As your Bishop and Bishop Elect, we will encourage parishes who choose to do so, to use this provisional rite beginning on the First Sunday of Advent, 2012. Our Church has prayed, debated and sought guidance for this decision for a number of years. Same gender couples, committed in love, may now be blessed to enter into a life-long covenant of fidelity with one another and the Living God.

“In the next several months we will consult with members of our diocese and develop details of a way forward so that clergy and congregations who choose to do so, may help couples celebrate this commitment with soulful discernment and faithful preparation.

“We recognize that in most congregations there are people who have been eager for our church to provide a liturgy for same-sex blessings and also some who cannot in conscience support same-sex blessings. The resolution says that "(no person) should be coerced or penalized in any manner...(for) conscientious objection to or support for this resolution." Our desire is to continue to respect and value the comprehensive diversity of theological perspectives that has been our character as Anglicans, recognizing that none of us and no group among us knows the full mind of God or has the definitive interpretation of Scripture.

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
I Will Bless You, and You Will Be A Blessing: Resources for Congregational Use

“What was truly remarkable about the debate on this resolution in the House of Bishops was that almost all of the conservative bishops who spoke against this decision began by saying how much they appreciated the respect shown for them and their perspective in the resolution and in the process of developing the resolution. This was a decision reached in the context of respectful, grace-filled relationships and without rancor.

“In humility we seek to focus on Christ and let Christ and God's mission hold us together in our differences, as we kneel together to be nourished at God's altar week by week. In humility we will also seek to maintain close and respectful relationships with those in the Anglican Communion and with our Ecumenical partners who differ from the direction discerned by our General Convention. May Christ hold us all together and continue to guide us for the sake of God's mission in this generation.”

Your Vestry has discussed the decision of The Episcopal Church, as well as the permission of our bishop and bishop-elect to move forward in offering such blessings. We have had good and respectful conversation at more than one meeting. At our most recent meeting, as a Vestry we have voted to move forward in allowing for the blessing of these relationships. We recognize that members of our parish may not be of one mind on this matter, and we are fully committed to listening deeply to each other, honoring differing perspectives, and staying in relationship with each other even when we disagree. We believe what we all have in common is a deep love of All Saints' Church and a desire to be faithful to God's call.

We also believe that the permission that has been granted supports the vision of our parish articulated in the core values of our Long Range Plan: “We believe in God who welcomes unconditionally, and who calls all Christians to be welcoming in Christ's name. We enjoy the diversity inherent in God's people and understand that to be truly welcoming is to be open to being changed by others. We commit to sustaining a spirit of openness that makes All Saints' Church a place to belong, whoever you are, just as you are.” We are a congregation that honors and values diversity. We are a congregation that embraces its members and strives to share God's love. We are a congregation that celebrates liturgically all things that matter most in our lives: our commitments, our questions, our giving, our births and deaths, our families and pets, our relationships. We are a congregation that understands that God works in and through each and every one of us, equipping us for the building up of God's kingdom. We welcome the ability to offer God's blessing on all couples in our community equally, homosexual and heterosexual alike.

We have worked with Rev. Tanya in developing a series of discussions on the topic which we hope you will attend. The goal of these sessions is to share information, to learn together, to ask questions, and to listen to each other as we enter this new territory as a community of faith.

- Sunday, October 14, **following the 10:30 service**, the Rev. Lori Souder, Senior Pastor of Center Church Congregational in South Hadley, will lead a discussion including references in Holy Scripture, theological understandings of blessing, and her congregation's experience asking these questions.
- Sunday, October 21, during the Adult Forum at 9:15 am, the Rev. Stan Baker, Deacon at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Burlington, Vermont, will lead a discussion including

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
I Will Bless You, and You Will Be A Blessing: Resources for Congregational Use

his experience in Vermont and his work with the national board in preparing resources for General Convention. Stan will also preach at both services on this day.

- Sunday, October 28, also during the 9:15 Adult Forum, the Rev. Tanya Wallace will lead a discussion including what happened at General Convention, what's happening in the diocese, and what's happening at All Saints' Church.

Please plan to join us for these important conversations. And please don't hesitate to be in touch with us, or with Rev. Tanya, with any questions or concerns you may have. We look forward to hearing from you.

Ours is a community that loves and supports our gay and lesbian members. Ours is a community that loves and supports our heterosexual members. Ours is a community that loves and supports our families and our single members and our college students. Our parish is a better and stronger community when all of our voices are shared, heard, and honored. All Saints' Church continues to strive to be a place where All truly means ALL. We are so thankful that you are part of this journey with us.

In peace,

The Vestry of All Saints' Episcopal Church

Case Study Four: St. John's, Williamstown

Rector: The Rev. Peter Elvin / Wardens: Polly Macpherson, Steve King, and Claudia Ellet

Following General Convention's decision, our Vestry took a simple two-step approach to encourage discussion within the parish and to support the Vestry in discernment. The first step was education, the second conversation.

From August to late October, we offered four Sunday-morning opportunities to examine the enabling resolution A049. A Vestry member and the Rector facilitated a simple review of the key provisions in that document (with Q & A, each forum took about 45 minutes).

For the second step, parishioners who had attended one of the Sunday forums were offered an opportunity for conversation in a small-group setting of respectful listening facilitated by a couple of Vestry members. The object here was to invite each participant to express what he or she celebrates in this decision, and what he or she struggles with. (Parishioners who hadn't attended a forum were asked to come a half hour early for a brief introduction to A049.)

At their November meeting, Vestry members took stock of the process. 45 people had attended forums, 25 had come to conversations—not large numbers, and no noticeable surprises along the way, though we heard distinct impatience about limiting this pastoral and liturgical care to already-performed civil unions only. We heard this message saying that until clergy are free to conduct same-sex marriage we will be short-changing same-sex couples.

At their December meeting, our Vestry approved a proposal drafted by the Rector and presented by the Vestry's Steering Committee. That decision has been communicated to parishioners by a letter in our January newsletter (see below) and a brief report on this new extension of pastoral and liturgical care was given at the parish's Annual Meeting in February. We anticipate at least one sermon on the subject, this spring, and will expect to maintain thoughtful communication with parishioners.

Letter from the Rector of St. John's, Williamstown, to the Parish

Dear Members and Friends of St. John's,

On December 12th, the Vestry of St. John 's approved the following proposal:

The General Convention of the Episcopal Church having authorized a rite for blessing covenanted same-sex unions and approved the use of this rite in dioceses where the bishop allows it;

The Bishop of Western Massachusetts having indicated that the rite may be used in

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
I Will Bless You, and You Will Be A Blessing: Resources for Congregational Use

parishes where the Rector and Vestry approve;

The Rector of St. John's having expressed his desire to offer such blessing ceremonies here;

The Vestry of St. John's records its readiness to proceed with the blessing of covenanted same-sex unions as of January 1, 2013, with these expectations:

That the Rector will practice equity in the pastoral care and preparation of all couples;

That the Parish will practice equity in the welcome, support, and faith formation of all couples;

And that the Rector and Vestry will maintain thoughtful communication with parishioners regarding this new dimension of pastoral care and liturgical celebration.

At St. John's, news of the Episcopal Church's decision this past summer led us to offer Sunday-morning forums (four in all) examining the action taken by our General Convention. Education was our first response, and the second was conversation: having first attended a forum, parishioners were encouraged to take part in a smaller-group conversation (facilitated by Vestry members) to express their own views and listen to one another. Three such gatherings were held, and the Vestry members had their own comparable conversation as well as participating in parish sessions.

Warden Sam Coughlin writes,

“We have taken this action because it is hard for us to imagine that love in any guise is unworthy or unnatural or unacceptable to God. Surely in this world full of violence and exploitation and hatred, we should hold fast to love wherever we find it. And surely we should argue for the justice for all people that we see as God's wish for humankind. “What would Jesus say if he were here at St. John's today? We believe he would ask us all to hold one another in love, even when we disagree, and we believe he would embrace any action that would elevate the love of two people above the letter of ancient law. He might even help us see the brimming fullness of God's love for all of us by turning water into wine.”

That metaphor, resonant in this Epiphany season and recalling our Lord's first public action revealing his nature and mission, suggests also that the deep waters of our communal discernments and disagreements are holy places where we meet him, reach for him to steady us in the swirling currents, and hear the Spirit call us all to fresh understandings of one another and the otherness of God.

The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
I Will Bless You, and You Will Be A Blessing: Resources for Congregational Use

We can say that we have taken three steps—education, conversation, and decision—and now embrace a fourth, communication. I look forward to our considering together how the blessing of same-sex unions is motivated primarily by the passion of Jesus Christ, not the dictates of fearful correctness. Over time, as we experience this wider practice of sacrament, I look forward to our learning how our parish life and ministry can best support all marriages and families and individuals.

Yours in Christ,
The Rev. Peter Elvin

Handout A: Covenant for Discussion ¹⁰

As we gather in the name of Christ to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, we accept this covenant to guide our conversation along God's path of love.

- I recognize that everyone comes to this experience with different backgrounds, experiences, and views.
- I will respectfully seek clarification of other perspectives to add to my understanding.
- If I choose to disagree with a perspective different from mine, I will do this in a loving and respectful way.
- I will:
 - Speak only for myself (using “I” statements)
 - Take responsibility for my own thoughts and feelings
 - Remember my baptismal promise to “respect the dignity of every human being”
 - Seek and acknowledge common ground
 - Honor confidentiality unless permission to share is explicitly given
 - Practice “sacred listening” by:
 - Listening for God in the experiences of others
 - Accepting those experiences as valid for the speakers
 - Searching for strengths in the other’s position
 - Avoiding interruptions and argument
 - Avoiding applause or other reactions to speakers
 - Allowing each person to speak before I speak again.

If a particular group is going to be discussed, some of them should be present.

¹⁰ Adapted from *Our Covenant for Conversation*, the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont; *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*, by the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston (2003); and *Intimate Human Relationships: Resources for Conversation in the Congregations and Deaneries of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont*, edited by Anne Clarke Brown (2004)

Handout B: Some suggested questions for group discussion as you begin

Begin by reflecting on the committed relationships of some couples you know—friends, colleagues, family members, and so on, including your own. (Whether same-sex or not.) Consider questions such as these:

- How is each relationship named or described? (e.g. marriage? covenant? union? some other way?)
- Are those involved in the relationship considered husband and wife? Partners? Lovers? Does the term vary depending on circumstances? How important (or not) is the terminology used for your understanding and experience of these relationships?
- As you reflect on these relationships, what about them (their qualities, gifts, character) would make them appropriate for a liturgical blessing? Or, to put this in another way, why do we “bless” committed relationships in a Church at all?

For those who are in (or have been) in a committed relationship:

- Have you discerned any spiritual gifts that have emerged from your commitment that you may not have recognized apart from that commitment?
- What role does your faith community play in your ongoing commitment? Does the community offer something you find important in your relationship?
- What role (if any) did your Christian faith play in the early and now ongoing development of your relationship and in discerning your commitment to each other?
- Would you consider your committed relationship as part of your Christian calling and vocation to ministry? If so, how and in what ways?

For those who are reflecting on another couple’s relationship:

- Have you discerned any spiritual gifts emerging from their relationship that benefit the wider community or perhaps yourself?
- Have you discerned what you or your faith community contributes to their relationship?
- How would you name the primary “blessing” of that relationship in your own life and in your faith community?
- Have you learned anything or gained fresh insights about your own life from observing the relationship and interacting with the couple?

Handout C

Resolution A049 passed in both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies.

Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, That the 77th General Convention commend "Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing" for study and use in congregations and dioceses of The Episcopal Church, with the following revisions [wording changes, mostly in blessing rite itself] and be it further

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

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

Resolved, That bishops may authorize adaptation of these materials to meet the needs of members of this Church: and be it further

Resolved, that the provision of Canon I.18.4 applies by extension to these resources, namely, "It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to" preside at any rite of blessing defined herein; and be it further

Resolved, That this convention honor the theological diversity of this church in regard to matters of human sexuality, and that no bishop, priest, deacon or lay person should be coerced or penalized in any manner, nor suffer any canonical disabilities, as a result of his or her conscientious objection to or support for the 77th General Convention's action with regard to the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships; and be it further

Resolved, That the theological resource for the blessing of a life-long covenant be further developed by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music over the 2013-2015 triennium with specific attention to further engagement with scripture and the relevant categories and sources of systematic theology (e.g., creation, sin, grace, salvation, redemption, human nature); and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music include the work of diverse theological perspectives in the further development of the theological resource; and be it further

Resolved, That the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music develop an open process to review "I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing," inviting responses from provinces, dioceses, congregations, and individuals from throughout The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, and from our ecumenical partners, and report to the 78th General Convention.

In The Diocese of Western Massachusetts, Bishop Fisher is allowing clergy who wish to use this liturgy to do so. This is permission, not a command.

Handout D: The Liturgy

To the extent possible, we encourage all who are engaging in these conversations to find a way to act this liturgy out in an appropriate way, ideally in your liturgical space, rather than reading the liturgy on your own and in isolation. Then find ways to de-brief the shared experience together by using the questions below or others that might more appropriately fit your particular context.

A link to a PDF file of the liturgy can be found here:

<https://www.churchpublishing.org/media/869869/IWillBlessYouandYouWillBeaBlessingEXTRACT.pdf>

After experiencing this liturgy together, here are some possible discussion questions for your group. (Please review the covenant found on Handout A.)

- What did you hear?
- What did you see?
- What did you feel?
- What words, symbols, and actions in this liturgy stand out for you and draw you into reflection on your own experience of covenantal relationship?
- What do the words, symbols, and actions call forth, challenge, or offer to the couple who experience them in the context of a blessing of their relationship?

Handout E: Theological Reflections¹¹

Christian Life and Covenants

All Christians are called to bear witness to the good news of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered for such witness by our covenantal relationship with God. Baptism initiates us into that covenant, making us Christ's own forever and members of Christ's Body, the Church. The Eucharist sustains us in that covenantal life and strengthens us to be Christ's witnesses in the world. Our covenantal life with God is expressed in relationships of commitment and faithfulness, including those of same-sex couples. It is the Church's joy to celebrate these relationships as signs of God's love, to pray for God's grace to support couples in their life together, and to join with these couples in our shared witness to the gospel in the world.

Themes for Theological Reflection and Spiritual Practice

A sacramental framework for covenantal relationships offers a way to reflect on the grace of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of faithful, committed couples. Several theological themes can assist couples as they consider their covenantal vows as a form of spiritual practice:

- **Vocation:** God calls people into various kinds of relationship, whether as single people, in monastic communities, or as intimate couples. These vocational callings can empower our witness to the gospel. The decision to enter into a covenantal union is a vocation marked by these characteristics: "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."
- **Households:** Covenantal relationships are often lived in households in which we practice daily the giving of ourselves for the good of another. While households take many different forms, they create a space of mutual trust and accountability. The joy, intimacy, and shared vulnerability of households can thus help us learn the spiritual disciplines of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation in lives of committed monogamy and fidelity.
- **Fruitfulness:** The divine grace that sustains a covenantal relationship bears fruit in countless ways, not only for the couple but for the wider community as well. Covenanted couples manifest this grace in their shared gifts for ministry and in lives of service, generosity, and hospitality.
- **Mutual Blessing:** A blessed relationship is set apart for a divine purpose: to bear witness to the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying love of God in the world. As the Spirit empowers the couple for this witness, the Church is likewise blessed and strengthened for its mission and ministry.

In all of these ways and more, the blessing of a same-sex relationship invites the couple and the whole Church to renew our commitment to the Baptismal Covenant. That commitment is expressed by *faith* in the good news of Jesus Christ, in the *hope* for union with God that Christ promised, and with the *love* that knits us together as the Body of Christ. As the apostle Paul says, we live our life together as God's people with faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

¹¹ From <https://www.churchpublishing.org/media/869869/IWillBlessYouandYouWillBeaBlessingEXTRACT.pdf> Portions of this resource may be reproduced by a congregation for its own use. Commercial or large-scale reproduction, or reproduction for sale, of any portion of this resource or of this resource as a whole, without written permission of Church Publishing Incorporated is prohibited.