

# Yes to Bless or Christian Marriage for all?

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## Yes to bless or Christian Marriage for all?

*Do we love all the members of our Church enough to take the time to get this right?*

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I write to share my thoughts regarding Resolutions A049 “*Authorize Liturgical Resources for Same-Gender Relationships*” and A050 “*Create a Task Force for the Study of Marriage*” which will be considered at the 77<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church that begins next week. I am in full support of the latter and opposed to the former. What follows is my reasoning for this position.

In the General Thanksgiving found on page 836 of the Book of Common Prayer, we thank God for “for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts and leading us to accomplishments that satisfy and delight us.” I believe the full inclusion of all persons in the life of the Church is such a task. My question is, “***Do we love all the members of our Church enough to take the time to get this right or do we want to risk taking an action that will fall short?***” I believe such an action will have the unexpected consequence of delaying the true full inclusion of all members of our church. It is easy to say, “Yes to Bless,” but might our yes have the unintended consequence of delaying what is the end goal for many, marriage equality.

At the 76<sup>th</sup> General Convention in 2009, I was part of a group of bishops who met in an Indaba session to address an impasse we faced over resolution CO56 “*Liturgies for Blessing*”. Later I was part of a group of 5 bishops who drafted a substitute resolution which later passed with amendment in the House of Bishops and with which the House of Deputies concurred. The original substitute resolution called on the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to “collect and develop theological resources and design liturgies.” It was later amended to read “collect and develop theological liturgical resources,” with those proposing the amendment saying it meant the same thing. While I did not support their reasoning, I voted for the substitute as amended because of my belief that it was through the creation of a liturgy that we as Episcopalians would best be able to do the theological work necessary around this issue. For me that has been the case. I am grateful to have been a part of a group of bishops who responded to and commented on early drafts of the proposed rites.

The Episcopal Church has been wrestling with issues surrounding human sexuality for many years, a wrestling made more urgent because of the approval of an openly gay

partnered person to be Bishop of New Hampshire, the authorization of same sex blessings in the Diocese of New Westminster in Canada, and the Windsor Report published in October of 2004—a report written in response to these actions. All throughout this time the General Convention passed nuanced resolutions open to broad interpretations on the matter, many of which are reviewed in the Report of the SCLM and depending on where emphasis is placed can be understood to say very different things.

This issue has been one which I have wrestled with a great deal. Like many in this Church I have known the faithful witness and wise counsel of openly gay clergy. I have had the privilege of working with life-long partnered persons as the rector of a parish. And like many of my generation I have wept for people I loved who died from AIDS. On the other hand, as a bishop I have promised to guard the faith and unity of the Church, a unity which has been challenged by the actions of this Church and the responses to it both within The Episcopal Church and around the world. I have taken seriously the concerns of our mission partners in Africa. And I cannot think about this issue without recalling the memory of a young Egyptian boy, the grandson of a former bishop of that diocese, telling me the effect our actions had on him as a member of the Christian minority in a predominantly Islamic country.

I am also aware that, in our context and that of much of Western Europe, this issue will cease to be one in a very short period of time. This is already true for many people under 30. A number of states have already legalized same-sex marriage. This is also true of a number of European countries. As I write the British Parliament is considering similar legislation. This means that the Church in many places will find itself ministering in a culture where same gender marriage is legal. This is a part of what Phyllis Tickle describes in her work, The Great Emergence as the “once every 500 year fire sale” of Western Civilization.

What is our call as the Church at such a time as this? We know that the understanding of marriage has changed over the course of history. Is it possible that it needs to change again? The question I am asking myself is, “What is ‘Christian Marriage’, or more specifically what makes Christian Marriage *Christian*?” Is there a hermeneutic that could allow for what is, in the culture at large, commonly called ‘marriage equality’ that would both expand and strengthen marriage? Would such an interpretive framework, also provide clarity to all that the proper place for sexual relations is within the bounds of a life-long monogamous marriage?

The hermeneutic of course is Jesus Christ. He always is. Christ is our life. For us, to live is Christ and to die is gain. We read in Paul’s letter to the Galatians that in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek. In 1976 The Episcopal Church, claiming this truth, approved the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate.

In our catechism we make a distinction between prayer and Christian Prayer (BCP p.856 ). Do we not need to make the same claim for marriage? Could we not make the claim that Christian marriage is between two Christians who vow to minister Jesus’ love to one another until they are parted by death? What makes such a marriage Christian is Holy Baptism and the confessing of Jesus as Lord and Savior by the couple.

Unfortunately, our canons and Book of Common Prayer do not help us make this distinction for in them only one of the parties is required to be baptized. I suspect this the result of the heritage from the era and image of Christendom in which the church functions as an agent of the state. Even today, clergy are authorized by the states to perform marriages, and in some places the civil authority requires those who do to be registered and receive authorization. Others require a posting of a bond. The canons of our church also require that marriages conform to the laws of the state (BCP, p. 422).

If we believe that marriage is an honorable estate ordained by God, that Jesus adorned this manner of life, that it signifies for us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church, and that it is the proper place for sexual relations, then what has become clear to me is that the proposed rite for blessings falls short of what we are called to as the Church. This is not a criticism of the Rite itself which I believe as a liturgy has much to commend it. Rather it has to do with what it is not. It is not specifically marriage.

Some have argued that there is nothing other than the enabling resolution that makes what is proposed in A049 specifically a same-sex liturgy. What is to prevent the use of this rite for two 70 year old heterosexuals who want the churches blessing on their living together because if they were to marry it would cause them economic hardship? Does not a liturgy of blessing create a second class of citizens in the Church – - those who have blessings rather than marriage? There are others who are opposed to same- sex marriage but in favor of blessings that reject the proposed rite because it looks too much like a marriage rite. I would submit that is precisely because it is marriage which is the ideal.

As Christians we believe in marriage. We see it as a calling, a school for character, a source of blessing. Our catechism tells us it is a sacramental rite, and as such, it is a means of grace. Every sacramental rite has proper matter, minister, form, and intention. I believe we could also agree that sacraments are administered by Christians. As I have reflected on this issue, Jesus' words in the Gospels "Let your yes be yes and your no be no," and the words from the Revelation to John, "because you are neither hot nor cold I spit you out," have run through my head. With these words in mind, I ask the question, "If in Christ there is neither male nor female could it not be that the proper matter for marriage is simply two human beings?"

I propose this because it is my opinion that the blessing rite falls short of our call as Christians. By failing to offer a new hermeneutic it invites the church to bless something for which it has no warrant to bless. Moreover, it creates a second tier of relationships, clouds the teaching on the appropriate place for sexual intimacy, and may delay much needed work on this matter.

I realize that this is a leap. And I realize that this stands in opposition to the traditional position on Christian Marriage articulated in the study commissioned by the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops entitled Same-Sex Relationships in the Life of the Church. The same can be said of any position that makes accommodation for same-sex relations. But it seems to me the advantage is that it provides clarity to our teaching about the proper place for sexual intimacy in a church that accepts same-sex attraction. As I

stated earlier same-sex marriage will most likely become a non-issue in the next 50 years just as interracial marriage has become. Moreover, the expansion of marriage using this hermeneutic will have a significant advantage in our ministry to young persons as they seek to live godly and moral lives. I also fear the adoption of a blessing rite is simply anachronistic, and while it may have made sense some years ago if a proper hermeneutic could have been found, at present it is too little too late.

So here is what I am proposing—**the rejection of blessings and the affirmation of Christian marriage.**

I am wondering if the best way forward would be the proposal and adoption of a substitute to Resolution A049 calling for the amendment of the Book of Common Prayer and the Constitution and Canons to allow for marriage between two persons regardless of sex while at the same time requiring that both parties be baptized, and removing any role of the civil authority. Those who wished to be civilly married could do so if they considered a civil marriage to be most advantageous for them but the Church would have no part of it. This proposal provides the additional advantage that those who could not be civilly married because state law forbids it or because to do so would cause economic hardship could be married in the Church. As I stated earlier in this letter I propose this because, *“it is my opinion that the blessing rite falls short of our call as Christians.”*

I suggest considering this action at this General Convention *prior* to the study of Marriage because if the study proposed in Resolution A050 finds in favor of same-sex marriage then the findings will be able to be enacted on second reading at the 78<sup>th</sup> General Convention. (The Book of Common Prayer is a constitutional document. Amending it requires affirmative votes at two successive General Conventions). Moreover, this will give us the next three years to consult with our global partners.

I realize that this means the authorization of a blessing rite would be delayed and that those who have waited for this Church to do so will be told again to wait. However, the provision for generous pastoral response from Resolution C056 would still be in effect, a provision which has allowed for some bishops whose dioceses are in states that have approved same-sex marriage in the civil realm to permit clergy in their diocese to officiate at these marriages and others to allow blessings. The adoption of Resolution A049 as it is now written would continue this practice. This would mean in effect that the Episcopal Church would have approved same-sex marriage without laying the theological groundwork to do so while still stating in a constitutional document, the Book of Common Prayer, that marriage is between a man and a woman. I believe we owe it to God and to all the members of our Church to get this right.

I ask you to prayerfully consider this proposal. Allow me to conclude by asking your prayers for all the members of both Houses of General Convention. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide our work.

To Him who can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine be all power, majesty, dominion and glory now and forever.