

White paper- Status of C-056: Rites for Blessings

By Deputy Ruth Meyers

General Convention Resolution 2009-C056 directs the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM) to “collect and develop” theological and liturgical resources for blessing same-gender relationships, and to do so in consultation with the House of Bishops, through an open process that invites participation from throughout the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

General Convention has been considering the place of gay men and lesbians in the Episcopal Church since 1976, when Resolution 1976-A069 declared 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.” The subject has been addressed by a number of resolutions since then. Of particular importance to the SCLM’s current work is Resolution 2000-D039, which acknowledged couples in the body of Christ living in lifelong committed relationships other than marriage and set forth the expectation that “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.”

The Commission has completed its work on the resources that General Convention directed it to develop, and submitted them to the General Convention Office, which is preparing a Spanish translation. “Liturgical Resources I: I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing” (the proposed title) includes:

- “Faith, Hope, and Love: Theological Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships” which explores the theology of blessing and considers the blessing of same-gender relationships in the context of mission and in light of the broader sacramental life of the Church. Key themes include covenant, vocation, households, fruitfulness, and mutual blessing. The essay proposes that covenantal relationships, including the relationships of same-gender couples, can reflect God’s own gracious covenant with us in Christ, manifest the fruits of the Spirit in holiness of life, and model for the whole community the love of neighbor in practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. It also acknowledges differing interpretations of scripture and the challenge of living into our baptismal communion with one another in the context of disagreements over biblical interpretation, a challenge that churches have faced many times over the course of Christian history.
- “The Church’s Canon Law and Laws of the States” which considers how civil law affects the Church and how the requirements of the marriage canons (Canon I.18) intersect with different state contexts.
- “Hearing, Seeing, and Declaring New Things: Preparing Same-Gender Couples for a Liturgy of Blessing” which provides an outline for preparation that builds on practices of preparation for different-gender marriage while also addressing concerns that are unique to same-gender couples.

- “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant: Liturgical Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships” which is a rite for use as the liturgy of the Word in a celebration of Eucharist. An alternative ending is provided when Eucharist is not celebrated.
- Discussion Guide to “I Will Bless You, and You Will Be a Blessing: Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships” which is intended both for congregations who are considering whether they will host blessings and for those who want to understand why the Episcopal Church can offer blessings for same-gender couples.
- “A Review of General Convention Legislation” which includes the texts of key General Convention resolutions, beginning in 1979.

As the SCLM developed these resources, the process has been as important as the product. The work was assigned to four task groups, each including members of the commission, involving a total of thirty-five people from all nine provinces of the Episcopal Church. The task-group chairs presented a draft of theological and liturgical principles at the September 2010 meeting of the House of Bishops and invited small-group discussion, and the bishops who are members of the commission updated their colleagues at the March and September 2011 meetings of the House of Bishops.

In October 2010, the SCLM meeting in New Hampshire included a hearing at which thirty-three people from all seven dioceses in Province I (which comprises the six New England states) testified about their experiences of blessing same-gender relationships in the context of changing civil legislation in those states. A web-based survey about pastoral and teaching resources, circulated in late 2010, received over a thousand responses. The March 2011 meeting of the SCLM concluded with a churchwide consultation on C056 attended by one hundred ninety-five deputies from ninety-four dioceses.

In July 2011 one hundred thirty-three reviewers, representing all nine provinces of the Episcopal Church, responded to a first draft of the resources with thousands of comments. When the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation met in Canterbury in August 2011, two representatives of the SCLM (Thomas Ely, Bishop of Vermont, and Ruth Meyers, SCLM Chair) presented theological and liturgical principles, along with the draft liturgy, and invited feedback. In light of the responses from the Anglican consultation and from reviewers in the Episcopal Church, the task groups made significant revisions, and a revised draft theological essay and liturgy were made available to the House of Bishops prior to its September meeting. Comments from the bishops helped the SCLM complete its work on the resources at its October 2011 meeting.

To facilitate an open process with widespread participation, the SCLM partnered with Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP). The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society contracted with CDSP, and CDSP secured major grants from the Arcus Foundation and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

The SCLM is proposing two “A” resolutions to the 77th General Convention:

- The first resolution commends the entirety of “Liturgical Resources I” for study and use, authorizes the liturgy for trial use beginning the First Sunday of Advent 2012, allows bishops to provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of the Church, and directs the SCLM to develop an open process to review the material.
- The second resolution asks the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies to appoint a task force, with funding authorized by General Convention, to consider the scriptural, theological, historical, canonical, and liturgical aspects of marriage and to develop tools for theological reflection along with norms for theological discussion at a local level.

Additional Resources:

Resources that the SCLM collected and materials from the March 2011 churchwide consultation are posted on a digital archive created by the Archives of the Episcopal Church: <http://www.episcopalarchives.org/SCLM/>.

An appendix in *To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Invitation of Windsor Report ¶135* includes a summary of relevant General Convention legislation and official reports relevant to same-gender relationships:

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/ToSetOurHope_eng.pdf

The SCLM blog includes a section on resources for same-gender blessings: <http://liturgyandmusic.wordpress.com/category/resources-for-same-gender-blessings/>

Discussion questions:

In what ways do the theological principles summarized in the white paper (first bullet on page 1) describe your experience of lifelong monogamous relationship (your own or someone else’s)? How do or might they help the Church consider the monogamous, lifelong, covenantal relationships of same-gender couples?

How well do the report and resolutions as outlined in the white paper respond to the current pastoral realities and needs of your diocese?

How might the General Convention continue to honor the historic and dynamic Anglican tradition of the Episcopal Church as it receives and acts on the resources for blessing same-gender relationships that the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music has developed?

How might this work advance the mission of the Episcopal Church?

How might the Episcopal Church continue to be in dialogue with other provinces of the Anglican Communion as we make decisions about blessing same-gender relationships?