

The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant

Liturgical Resources for Blessing Same-Sex Relationships

Extracted from *Liturgical Resources 1:
I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing*

**Authorized for provisional use
by the 77th General Convention of The Episcopal Church
(July 2012)**

under the direction and subject to the permission
of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority

Theological Reflection on Covenantal Relationship: Spiritual Practice for Same-Sex Couples

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).

Concerning the Service

This rite is appropriately celebrated in the context of the Holy Eucharist and may take place at the principal Sunday Liturgy. This rite then replaces the Ministry of the Word. A bishop or priest normally presides. Parallel texts from *Enriching Our Worship 1* are included as options for elements of this rite.

At least one of the couple must be a baptized Christian.

Two or more presenters, who may be friends, parents, family members, or drawn from the local assembly, may present the couple to the presider and the assembly.

To comply with the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the rite is celebrated, the priest shall consult the bishop, who may authorize modifications of the Pronouncement.

The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant

The Word of God

Gathering

The couple to be blessed joins the assembly. A hymn of praise, Psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.

The Presider says the following, the people standing

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

People And blessed be God's kingdom, now and for ever.
Amen.

In place of the above may be said

Presider Blessed be the one, holy, and living God.

People Glory to God for ever and ever.

From Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost

Presider Alleluia. Christ is risen.

People The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

In place of the above may be said

Presider Alleluia. Christ is risen.

People Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Then may be said

Presider Beloved, let us love one another,

People For love is of God.

Presider Whoever does not love does not know God,

People For God is love.

Presider Since God so loves us,

People Let us love one another.

The Presider may address the assembly in these words

Dear friends in Christ,
we have gathered together today
to witness *N. N.* and *N. N.* publically committing themselves to one another
and, in the name of the Church, to bless their union:
a relationship of mutual fidelity and steadfast love,
forsaking all others,
holding one another in tenderness and respect,
in strength and bravery,
as long as they live.

Therefore, in the name of Christ, let us pray
that they may be strengthened for the promises they make this day,
and that we will have the generosity
to support them in what they undertake
and the wisdom to see God at work in their life together.

The Collect of the Day

Presider The Lord be with you. *or* God be with you.

People And also with you.

Presider Let us pray.

The Presider says one of the following Collects

Gracious and everliving God:
assist by your grace *N.* and *N.*,
whose lifelong commitment of love and fidelity we witness this day.
Grant them your blessing, that with firm resolve
they may honor and keep the covenant they make;
through Jesus Christ our Savior,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

or this

Almighty and everliving God:
look tenderly upon *N.* and *N.*,
who stand before you in the company of your Church.
Lift them up in joy in their life together.
Grant them so to love selflessly and live humbly,
that they may be to one another and to the world
a witness and a sign of your never-failing care;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, to the ages of ages. *Amen.*

or this

O God, faithful and true,
whose steadfast love endures for ever:
we give you thanks for sustaining *N.* and *N.* in the life they share
and for bringing them to this day.
Nurture them and fill them with joy in their life together,

continuing the good work you have begun in them;
and grant us, with them, a dwelling place eternal in the heavens
where all your people will share the joy of perfect love,
and where you, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, live and reign,
one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

or this

For those who bring children

Holy Trinity, one God,
three Persons perfect in unity and equal in majesty:
Draw together with bonds of love and affection
N. and *N.*, who with *their families*
seek to live in harmony and forbearance all their days,
that their joining together will be to us
a reflection of that perfect communion
which is your very essence and life,
O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
who live and reign in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

The Lessons

The people sit. Then one or more of the following passages of Scripture is read. If the Holy Communion is to be celebrated, a passage from the Gospels always concludes the Readings. When the blessing is celebrated in the context of the Sunday Eucharist, the Readings of the Sunday are used, except with the permission of the Bishop.

Ruth 1:16-17

1 Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a;
or 1 Samuel 18:1-4

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Song of Solomon 2:10-13, 8:6-7

Micah 4:1-4

Romans 12:9-18

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

Galatians 5:14, 22-26

Ephesians 3:14-21

Colossians 3:12-17

1 John 3:18-24

1 John 4:7-16, 21

When a biblical passage other than one from the Gospels is to be read, the Reader announces it with these words

Reader A Reading from _____.

After the Reading, the Reader may say

The Word of the Lord.

or

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

or

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.

People Thanks be to God.

Between the Readings, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said. Appropriate Psalms are

Psalm 65
Psalm 67
Psalm 85:7-13
Psalm 98
Psalm 100
Psalm 126
Psalm 127
Psalm 133
Psalm 148
Psalm 149:1-5

All standing, the Deacon or Priest reads the Gospel, first saying

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to _____.
or

The Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ according to _____.

People Glory to you, Lord Christ.

After the Gospel, the Reader says

The Gospel of the Lord.

People Praise to you, Lord Christ.

Appropriate passages from the Gospels are

Matthew 5:1-16
Mark 12:28-34
Luke 6:32-38
John 15:9-17
John 17:1-2, 18-26

The Sermon

The Witnessing of the Vows and the Blessing of the Covenant

The couple comes before the assembly. If there is to be a presentation, the presenters stand with the couple, and the Presider says to them

Presider

Who presents *N.* and *N.*, who seek the blessing of God and the Church on their love and life together?

Presenters We do.

Presider

Do you promise
to love, respect, and pray for *N.* and *N.*,
and to do all in your power

to stand with them in the life they will share?

Presenters We do.

The Presider then addresses the couple, saying

Presider

N. and N., you have come before God and the Church to make public your commitment to one another and to ask God's blessing.

The Presider addresses one member of the couple

Presider

N., do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to *N.*?

Answer I do.

Presider

Will you live together in faithfulness and holiness of life as long as you both shall live?

Answer I will.

The Presider addresses the other member of the couple

Presider

N., do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to *N.*?

Answer I do.

Presider

Will you live together in faithfulness and holiness of life as long as you both shall live?

Answer I will.

The assembly stands, the couple faces the people, and the Presider addresses them, saying

Presider

Will all of you here gathered uphold and honor this couple and respect the covenant they make?

People We will.

Presider

Will you pray for them in times of trouble and celebrate with them in times of joy?

People We will.

The Prayers

Presider

Then let us pray for *N. and N.* in their life together and for the concerns of this community.

A Deacon or another leader bids prayers for the couple.

Prayers for the Church and for the world, for the concerns of the local community, for those who suffer or face trouble, and for the departed are also appropriate. If the rite takes place in the principal Sunday worship of the congregation, the rubric concerning the Prayers of the People on page 359 of the Book of Common Prayer is followed.

Adaptations or insertions may be made to the form that follows.

A bar in the margin indicates a bidding that may be omitted.

Leader

For *N.* and *N.*, seeking your blessing and the blessing of your holy people;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For a spirit of loving-kindness to shelter them all their days;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For friends to support them and communities to enfold them;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For peace in their home and love in their family;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For the grace, when they hurt each other,
to recognize and acknowledge their fault,
and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For the outpouring of your love through their work and witness;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For the wisdom to care for the children you may entrust (*have entrusted*) to them;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For the growth of their children from strength to strength;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For the strength to keep our vows and commitments;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

The leader may add one or more of the following biddings

Leader

For all who have been reborn and made new in the waters of Baptism;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For those who lead and serve in communities of faith;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For those who seek justice, peace, and concord among nations;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For those who are sick and suffering, homeless and poor;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For victims of violence and those who inflict it;
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

Leader

For communion with all who have died in the hope of rising again
[especially _____];
Lord, in your mercy (*or* Lord, in your goodness)

People Hear our prayer.

The Presider concludes the Prayers with the following or another appropriate Collect

Giver of every gift, source of all goodness,
hear the prayers we bring before you
for *N.* and *N.*, who seek your blessing this day.
Give them a share in the saving work of Jesus,
who gave himself for us,
and bring about the fullness of life he promised,
who now lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*

If the Eucharist is to follow, the Lord's Prayer is omitted here.

Leader

As our Savior Christ
has taught us,
we now pray,

People and Leader

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Leader

And now, as our Savior
Christ has taught us,
we are bold to say,

People and Leader

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Commitment

The people sit. The couple stands, facing the Presider.

Presider

*N. and N., I invite you now, illumined by the Word of God
and strengthened by the prayer of this community,
to make your covenant before God and the Church.*

Each member of the couple, in turn, takes the hand of the other and says

In the name of God,
I, *N.*, give myself to you, *N.*
I will support and care for you by the grace of God:
enduring all things, bearing all things.
I will hold and cherish you in the love of Christ:
in times of plenty, in times of want.
I will honor and love you with the Spirit's help:
forsaking all others,
as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.

or this

In the name of God,
I, *N.*, give myself to you, *N.*
I will support and care for you:
enduring all things, bearing all things.
I will hold and cherish you:
in times of plenty, in times of want.
I will honor and love you:
forsaking all others,
as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.

*If rings are to be exchanged, they are brought before the Presider, who prays
using the following words*

Let us pray.

Bless, O God, these rings
as signs of the enduring covenant
N. and N. have made with each other,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*The two people place the rings on the fingers of one another, first the one,
then the other, saying*

N., receive this ring as a symbol of my abiding love.

If the two have previously given and worn rings as a symbol of their commitment, the rings may be blessed on the hands of the couple, the Presider saying

Let us pray.

By these rings *N.* and *N.* have shown to one another and the world their love and faithfulness.

Bless these rings, Holy God,
that they may now be signs of the covenant
N. and *N.* have made this day,
through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Pronouncement

The Presider says

Inasmuch as *N.* and *N.* have exchanged vows of love and fidelity in the presence of God and the Church,
I now pronounce that they are bound to one another in a holy covenant,
as long as they both shall live. *Amen.*

Blessing of the Couple

As the couple stands or kneels, the Presider invokes God's blessing upon them, saying

Let us pray.

Most gracious God,
we praise you for the tender mercy and unfailing care revealed to us in Jesus the Christ
and for the great joy and comfort bestowed upon us in the gift of human love.
We give you thanks for *N.* and *N.*,
and the covenant of faithfulness they have made.
Pour out the abundance of your Holy Spirit upon them.
Keep them in your steadfast love;
protect them from all danger;
fill them with your wisdom and peace;
lead them in holy service to each other and the world.

The Presider continues with one of the following

God the Father,
God the Son,
God the Holy Spirit,
bless, preserve, and keep you,
and mercifully grant you rich and boundless grace,
that you may please God in body and soul.
God make you a sign of the loving-kindness and steadfast fidelity manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior,
and bring you at last to the delight of the heavenly banquet,
where he lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*

or this

God, the holy and undivided Trinity,
bless, preserve, and keep you,
and mercifully grant you rich and boundless grace,
that you may please God in body and soul.
God make you a sign of the loving-kindness and steadfast fidelity
manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior,
and bring you at last to the delight of the heavenly banquet,
where he lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The Peace

The Presider bids the Peace.

Presider The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People And also with you.

In place of the above may be said

Presider The peace of Christ be always with you.

People And also with you.

The liturgy continues with the Holy Communion. When the Eucharist is not celebrated, the Presider blesses the people. The Deacon, or in the absence of a Deacon, the Priest, dismisses them.

At the Eucharist

The liturgy continues with the Offertory, at which the couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.

The following proper preface may be used.

Because in the giving of two people to each other in
faithful love
you reveal the joy and abundant life
you share with your Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The following postcommunion prayer may be used.

God our strength and joy,
we thank you for the communion of our life together,
for the example of holy love that you give us in *N.* and *N.*,
and for the Sacrament
of the Body and Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ.
Grant that it may renew our hope
and nourish us for the work you set before us,
to witness to the presence of Christ in the world,
through the power of your Spirit,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.