

*TEC Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music
Addressing 2009 General Convention Resolution C056*

**Working Theological Principles
Draft Outline—September 2010**

I. Background

Blessing committed relationships in faith communities is a blessing not only for the couple but also for the wider community. Collecting and developing resources for such blessings offers an opportunity to retrieve key Christian insights concerning these relationships and to renew the church's theological reflection on them.

II. Opportunity

This work presents an opportunity, in part, to retrieve at least two key touchstones in historical Christian approaches to committed relationships, which helps to frame why such relationships deserve a liturgical blessing in Christian faith communities. Those touchstones are:

1. The *sacramental* character of covenantal relationships (committed relationships make God's presence and divine grace visible);
2. The *eschatological* vision inspired and evoked by covenantal relationship (the desire that leads us to commit ourselves to another person reflects the human desire and hope for union with God-in-Christ).

III. Renewing the Church's Theological Reflection

The opportunity to retrieve the sacramental character and eschatological vision in committed relationships can renew the church's theological reflection on those relationships. Several key theological principles emerge from such reflection:

- *Vocation*: While people may "fall" in love, people are by contrast *called* into long-term committed relationships, as a vocation;
- *Spiritual Discipline*: The vocational aspect of committed relationship requires ongoing spiritual discipline, sustained in part by regular participation in a faith community;
- *Covenant*: Rather than "contracts," biblical traditions turn often to the spiritual significance of "covenants" for committed relationships, which reflects God's own covenantal relationship with God's creation;
- *Household*: Biblical traditions likewise emphasize households (often multi-generational) that are established by covenantal commitment and are rooted in a larger community;
- *Fruitfulness*: Faithful love in relationship overflows into countless gifts offered well beyond the couple, including lives of service, compassion, generosity, and hospitality.

IV. Summary of Working Theological Principles

Much like ordination and other forms of ministry, human beings are called into covenantal relationships as a divine vocation. These covenants are sustained by spiritual disciplines, not contracts, and the divine grace in these relationships is discerned by the fruits of fidelity it yields (not least among them are households marked by compassion, generosity, and hospitality). For that reason, covenantal relationships rightly belong to the mission of the Church in its ongoing witness to the good news of the Gospel; these relationships thus point beyond themselves to the Christian hope of union with God.

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**Principles for Evaluating Liturgical Materials
September 2010**

Materials proposed for blessing same-sex relationships must above all be consistent with the implicit theology and ecclesiology of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. This would suggest, for example, that they must reflect the Prayer Book's underlying assumption that the entire life of the Church finds its origin in the baptismal font.

Nearly as important is that the proposed liturgical materials embody a classically Anglican liturgical ethos and style. Recognizing the varying notions of what makes public prayer recognizably Anglican, the task group identified these qualities:

- It has high literary value; is it beautiful according to accepted and respected standards.
- It uses the recurring structures, linguistic patterns, and metaphors of the 1979 BCP.
- It is formal, not casual, conversational, or colloquial.
- It has a ritual or sacral register.
- It is dense enough to “carry the freight” of the sacred purpose for which it is intended.
- It is metaphoric without being obtuse.
- It is performative.

At the same time, these rites must resonate as natural speech in contemporary ears. A sacral register must be achieved without the use of arcane or antiquated words or patterns of speech.

The rites should provide explanatory notes and rubrics. The material must be considered as the script for an event, not a mere collection of texts.

The proposed rites must be an expression primarily of the entire Church, not the couple seeking a blessing. These rites must allow for robust communal participation, reflecting the Baptismal ecclesiology of the Prayer Book. Related to this, since the Eucharist is the symbol of the unity of the Church through unity with Christ, these services of blessing should normatively be celebrated within the Eucharist.

These rites must enact the notion of sacramental reciprocity put forth by the C056 Theological Resources Task Group, suggesting that, even as the Church blesses the relationship of the couple, the relationship of the couple is a blessing to the Church.

Options must be provided so that this action of the entire Church—this common prayer—does not degenerate into a generic rite. The Prayers of the People will be important in this regard, as will other texts. There must be a provision of numerous options.

The rites must hold up the two people making the covenant as the primary actors within this action of the entire Church. The rites should give expression to the Church's understanding that the couple is freely assuming a vocation, which can be expected to yield the fruits of mutual fidelity for the couple, itself, for the Church, and for the entire world, pointing ultimately toward the fulfillment of all human relationships and unity in the eschatological Reign of God, when God will be all-in-all.

They must be what they purport to be—liturgical prayer—not didactic or polemical statements in the guise of liturgy.