

Pastoral Resources for Province One Episcopal Clergy Ministering to Same-Gender Couples



The Provincial Task Force on the Counseling of Same-Gender Couples

October 2008

Preface

The Task Force on the Counseling of Same-Gender Couples was established at the April 2006 meeting of the Province One Synod. This action grew out of a proposal from the Province of New England Executive Committee presented to the Synod on November 2, 2005 asking for the development of pastoral resources for “Initial Couples’ Counseling” and for “Ongoing Couples’ Support”. This report is the first phase of the work asked for by the Synod, focusing upon the counseling of same-gender couples and providing information needed for clergy who are doing this counseling.¹

Pastoral Resources for Province One Episcopal Clergy Ministering to Same-Gender Couples is meant to be simply that: a pastoral resource for clergy in the Province of New England. It does not focus on the current discussion in the Anglican Communion nor does it address the ongoing controversy within The Episcopal Church related to same-gender blessings. The members of the Task Force are aware and appreciative of the tension associated with these issues in the wider Anglican Communion and in The Episcopal Church. The resulting tension pains us, and we hope for a day when unity on these issues may be achieved. We feel that sharing this information with clergy who counsel same-gender couples is a step forward in providing needed pastoral support and a labor of love and reconciliation. We present our findings with tenderness, hoping that all who read this document may find it helpful.

Faithfully,

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¹ Cf. Appendix A for the text of the Executive Committee report to Synod.

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Part I: Blessings

Context

It is useful in introducing this report to highlight its context; something which was noted in the 11/2/05 report of the Executive Committee to the Synod.

“The Episcopal Church is already providing caring and pastoral response to the needs of same-gender couples throughout the country. Unique to New England, however, is that same-gender couples here are able to establish life-long unions of love, mutual support and fidelity in three of our states: civil unions in Vermont and Connecticut and marriage in Massachusetts.”

“No matter what the position of the church regarding the civil aspects of what each state has allowed, there remains the pastoral and caring response of the Body of Christ to same-gender couples. The Episcopal Church, because it is seen as a denomination which respects and supports God’s love for homosexual persons, is in a unique position. We need to be sure that we respond to the needs of same-gender couples with excellent pastoral care, especially when it comes to life-long commitments.”²

Since the 2005 report of the Executive Committee one more New England state, New Hampshire, has been added to the list of states with legal access to Civil Union. Maine has domestic partner protection, thus making the Province of New England even more unique in its need for a pastoral resource. Every state in New England now offers some measure of legal rights to same-gender couples.

Our Task Force report, then, is prepared especially for the Province of New England clergy to use as a pastoral resource in their work preparing same-gender couples for a life-long commitment and possibly a blessing of that relationship. Some of our constituent dioceses have already issued reports at the behest of their bishops which provide other pastoral resources. While there are many similarities with preparing opposite-gender couples, we are purposely focusing on those differences of which clergy need to be aware for same-gender couples. Nonetheless, it may well be that this report will also aide clergy who are seeking more training and support in the area of preparing opposite-gender couples for marriage.

Overview

We recognize that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people are already important and committed members of many of our parishes in the Province of New England. They are serving on church vestries as wardens and vestry members, on altar and flower guilds, on building committees, finance committees, religious education committees, and countless others. They are also serving as clergy and staff in many parishes throughout the Province. In short, they are vital participants in our holy family here in Province One. The steadfast and devoted presence, love, and participation of this group of people make the provision of a pastoral resource to support their loving committed relationships even more important.

² Quoted from a Synod Resolution of November 11, 2005. Cf. Appendix B.

The work of this Task Force in creating a pastoral resource for work with gay and lesbian couples is a natural extension of the work on education and awareness that began in The Episcopal Church in the call of General Conventions of 1982, 85, and 88 for dialogue on human sexuality. This work continues to this day. General Convention 2000 at Denver adopted Resolution D039 that acknowledges those living in life-long committed relationships other than marriage and states expectations for all intimate relationships. General Convention at Columbus in 2006 passed Resolution A095 reaffirming “Support of gay and lesbian persons as children of God and entitled to full civil rights.” This resolution also opposed “any state or federal constitutional amendment that prohibits same-gender civil marriage or civil union.” Creating a pastoral resource for care of same-gender couples upholds the work of “Mutual Ministry” in The Episcopal Church where all baptized Christians are received as part of Christ’s Royal Priesthood and are fully welcomed in the church with complete access to all its sacraments.

We also feel it is important as part of this report to summarize theological concepts related to a blessing of same-gender couples within The Episcopal Church. While this report does not offer any suggestions for a liturgical celebration of same-gender relationships, unions, or marriages, it does recognize that such blessings are being carried out within our Province and that others have already articulated a theological foundation for that.³

Anglican tradition is rooted in an incarnational image of God and a Trinitarian understanding of God as profoundly relational. We understand sin as a breach of right relationship with God, and we believe that our Baptismal Covenant is the basis for how all relationships should be conducted. The church, through the blessing bestowed by its clergy, affirms the holiness of an existing relationship. The blessing does not create the relationship, but rather acknowledges it and literally wraps it in the love and support of God and the people of the congregation. The clergy person, acting on behalf of the church, declares God’s blessing on the couple so that the grace already manifest in their relationship may continue throughout their lives together.

Again, it is our hope that this Task Force report may shed some light on issues of preparation for same-gender blessing. We also hope that it may prove useful to clergy in the Province of New England, aiding them in supporting same-gender couples. Finally, we hope that these tools will enhance ongoing clergy and parish support for same-gender couples. It is our belief that increased clarity and support in this area will strengthen the fabric of our sacred Episcopal community here in our beloved New England.

³ For a more complete treatment of these concepts, please see the *Theology* section of *A Report to the Bishop and People of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont from the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships* - 6/8/04. This may be found at the following website, section 4.
<http://www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonBlessings/VT%20Blessings%20Report.pdf>.

Part II: Different Issues When Preparing Same-Gender Couples

Prologue

There are more similarities than differences between gay and non-gay couples who come to a clergyperson to discuss their life-long commitment to one another and desire for a blessing.

They are two people:

- looking to make a commitment to a life-long relationship together.
- who each come with their own “baggage” of upbringing, personality type, current family dynamics, ways they manage conflict, and expectations as to what this relationship will mean to them.
- who may be facing many of the challenges and decisions of how to merge individual finances, possessions, housing, educational pursuits and careers into a joint relationship.
- who are bringing or may want to bring children into their life together.
- who are or will be expressing their union sexually.
- who may have had previous relationships, which may or may not have been satisfactorily resolved.
- who may have similar or very different spiritual practices, relationships with a faith community, and reasons for seeking a blessing.

All of these issues common to all couples are usually touched upon during counseling.

However there are some distinct differences in gay relationships. These differences primarily arise out of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons living as a minority population in a culture that is often at best tolerant of their relationship and at worst openly hostile. This environment has a profound impact on how one perceives oneself, one’s family relationships, and how one perceives and interacts in various public arenas. While one might be able to live as a “closeted” single gay person, keeping his/her sexual orientation private, it is extremely difficult to do so as a gay couple. Sharing a household and engaging in everyday activities with one another inevitably bring the relationship into public view. The relationship will generate both support and hostility which impacts the couple’s committed life together.

Self-Preparation

Before delving into issues that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender individuals may need to address in counseling, it is important for the persons who will be preparing the couple to take time to first prepare themselves. And if a blessing is to be done in the context of one’s congregation, then it is equally important to have done some preparation with the congregation as well.

Everyone looks at the world through the lens of their own experience. What has been your experience of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community? What are the areas of discomfort, perceptions, and assumptions that color the lenses through which you might view the couple? Are there things that excite you about engaging in a same-gender blessing? Are there fears? What is your understanding Biblically and theologically about homosexuality? Do you need to have more information about gender identity? Self perception is not a matter of having right or wrong answers but of having a clear understanding of one’s own presuppositions.

One need not be an “expert” in the area of homosexuality in order to prepare a couple for a union or marriage since these preparatory meetings are not therapy. Being able to listen and identify issues the couple needs to explore further is the primary goal. But bear in mind that the purpose is to prepare the couple, not to educate yourself. If you sense that you are simply not

comfortable preparing a same-gender couple for a union, then have someone available to whom you could refer them.

Preparing the Congregation

The blessing of a covenantal relationship is a communal event. During the BCP's liturgy for the celebration and blessing of a marriage, the celebrant asks the congregation, "Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their marriage?" It is fundamental that those who attend recognize and affirm their responsibility in supporting the couple's endeavor to have their life together reflect the kind of love God has for us all as revealed through Jesus Christ.

Those who attend the event will be supportive of the couple. But if the couple is a part of the parish or the service will be held in a parish, the greater congregation is involved. Even if a blessing is to take place outside of the context of a parish, some members may have questions about their clergy person's participation. So it can be helpful for a clergy person to at least initiate a discussion with the vestry of the parish. Discussion topics may include:

- The policy of your diocese.
- Your rationale (both personal and theological) for being open to bless the union of a same-gender couple.
- Current issues with the Anglican Communion.
- How such a blessing may prove to be a source of grace and blessing for the parish.
- Concerns the vestry may have.
- The sharing of ideas as to how to best inform and educate the parish.

There could also be some congregational preparation. This would address any concerns members may have before a couple approaches to ask for a blessing. Preparation will also help a parish feel like a safe and welcoming congregation in which to celebrate a union. Some congregations have never even discussed homosexuality. Others may have already had the blessing of a union held at the parish and have numerous gay members who are "out" and playing a vital part in the life and ministry of the church. So whereas one parish may need only to have available information regarding the policies of the church regarding same-gender blessings, others may find it helpful to provide multiple opportunities for in-depth education and discussion.

Finally, it is important that congregations become aware of the need to recognize the couple as a couple. Some congregations have a tendency to speak in terms of toleration instead of support and full inclusion. Little things are important: adjusting the directory to reflect them as a couple, including "partners" as well as "husbands and wives" in written and oral communication, and remembering the anniversary of their union, as with any other married couple.

Part III: Particular Issues Affecting Same-Gender Couples

Legal Civil Unions/ Same-Gender Marriages/ Covenantal Relationships and Diocesan Policies

Currently the laws regarding state recognized same-gender civil unions or marriages are very much in flux throughout the United States just as they are in New England. As a result, tracking these laws can be confusing. Some states recognize civil unions while others recognize marriages. Unions in one state may not be recognized in another. Some states may have residency requirements for unions or for the dissolution of unions. Likewise, the bishops of different dioceses in Province One may have differing guidelines as to how clergy should pastorally respond to couples seeking a blessing for their union. Therefore, it is important for clergy and for couples seeking union ceremonies to be familiar with the laws of their state and with the policies or guidelines of their dioceses.

Clergy who feel they cannot give formal blessings over same-gender unions may wish to be prepared to provide a pastoral response to couples who seek to have their relationship known and blessed. A pastoral response can involve:

- being affirming and supportive of their desire for God’s blessing upon their relationship;
- attending a union conducted by a civil authority;
- being able to refer the couple to clergy of other denominations who would be willing to conduct a formal blessing;
- being liturgically creative. (for instance, the couple may wish to write and exchange their own vows after which family, friends, and members of the congregation could lay hands on them and pray for them);
- acknowledging the relationship within the congregation.

A final issue is responding to couples seeking a blessing who are members of another Christian denomination but whose faith tradition does not affirm or permit the blessing of same-gender couples. Very few denominations authorize their clergy to conduct same-gender unions or marriages. So an Episcopal clergyperson may find a number of couples looking for a blessing on their union simply because it is not an option for them within their own denomination.

Gender Identity Issues

Late Bloomers: Some gay and lesbian persons recognized their orientation from a very young age. For others, it may have been a growing realization that did not fully become clear until much later in life. A “*late bloomer*” who has only recently recognized his/her orientation may need some time to begin to live into his/her gender identity or explore with a counselor this core change in one’s self-perception before entering into a life-long commitment.

Gay/Straight/Bi/Transsexual: Clergy need not be surprised if one or both members of the couple have been in previous heterosexual relationships. While some individuals may have been in previous heterosexual relationships in an attempt to conform to family, societal, and religious expectations, others may have a more bi-sexual orientation and been in previously satisfactory heterosexual relationships. Despite studies since the 1940s, it is still a common perception that a person is either gay/lesbian or heterosexual with nothing in-between. However, sexual orientation is a spectrum with many gradations and can vary at different times in one’s life.

Transsexuality is a whole subject in and of itself. Basically, a transsexual person is one whose gender identity does not match the person's biological gender. Hormonal and surgical adjustments may or may not have been pursued. Transsexuals, regardless of the state of their physical gender, can have either a homosexual or a heterosexual orientation.

Internalized Homophobia: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have been subjected to a continual societal onslaught of negative or stereotypical messages. It is not unusual for some of that to have been internalized. Should a clergy person perceive that a person is uncomfortable with her/his orientation, referral for counseling from a trained therapist would be of great help.

In or Out?

Despite the fact that the couple is seeking a union, there may be areas in their individual lives where one or the other may need to remain "closeted". For instance, one person may be employed in a particular workplace or profession where being "out" could jeopardize the ability to function at work or jeopardize the employment itself. Unfortunately a prime example is the church. There are gay and lesbian clergy in many denominations where "coming out", especially when in relationship, can result in being stripped of the ability to function as ordained persons or hold any position of leadership in the church. There are secular places of employment, where even though a LGBT person might be protected by law, nevertheless their orientation or relationship could affect their ability to be hired or result in a tense and unfriendly work environment. Being "out" could have a negative impact on seeking or maintaining a position in public office. LGBT persons serving in the military currently must remain closeted. And there are many places and communities where any public visible displays of affection could literally put one's life at risk.

As a result, couples need to discuss each other's comfort level and various needs regarding making their relationship known. There can be tension in a couple when one person is fully out and comfortable with some public, visible displays of affection while the other is not. There may be work situations where one person in the relationship has to be careful as to how he or she identifies when making a call to the partner at the workplace or taking messages at home. Has the couple discussed when, where, and with whom it is okay to be out and open about the relationship, and when the relationship needs to be kept less visible?

Relational History and Resolution of Previous Relationships

This is a topic common to both gay and non-gay couples. Couples can be free to move into the new relationship when they have processed what one has learned from previous relationships and resolved financial, material, and child custody and responsibility matters. However, with gay and lesbian couples, there is less likely to be legal dissolution of relationships since only recently have such relationships been able to be legally recognized.

Families of Origin

Most clergy inquire about the individual's family of origin when preparing for a marriage. It can provide the couple with insights regarding their understanding of what a healthy or unhealthy relationship looks like, attitudes towards finances, parenting practices, and identifying unresolved issues that could affect the relationship. But one area which may be unique to gay couples is their families' responses to their orientation, and to life together as a couple.

Have the individuals “come out” to their own families? How has that been for them? Are the families informed of the intended union? Are they supportive or hostile or grieving? Will they respond to one’s partner as a spouse and consider him/her to now be a part of the family, or tend to treat one’s partner as they would a friend or a roommate? In other words, has the couple discussed what they anticipate their relationship with the in-laws to look like as they enter into a union?

Legal Matters

Above and beyond the legality of the union itself, in states where there are no civil unions, it is critical that the couple pursue the legal protections that so often automatically come with marriage. The couple should seriously consider arranging for medical and financial durable powers of attorney, living wills, and may need to seek out formal counsel regarding financial and property matters.

Children

As with any heterosexual couple preparing for marriage who do not yet have children, gay couples should also have discussed with each other whether one or the other desires at some point to have children. Discussion might include when to have children, the impact on finances and employment, care-giving and disciplinary understandings, etc. Similarly, those entering the relationship with children should discuss how to help the child adjust and integrate into the new family constellation.

However, gay and lesbian couples, especially those having children from a previous heterosexual relationship, also need to be aware of and support their children in their various stages of development as they relate to their friends who may have no understanding, and possibly even a hostile reaction, to a peer with same-gender parents.

Gay and lesbian couples living in states that do not have civil unions or marriages should be aware of the legal ambiguity around custodial cases and may want to seek counsel as how to put protections in place.

Part IV: A Framework for Preparing Same-Gender Couples Entering into a Life-long Committed Relationship

Introduction

Many clergypersons find preparing couples for the sacrament of marriage to be a challenge. These challenges can be more daunting in the face of preparing a same-gender couple for a life-long committed relationship.

Here is a framework for a series of four 1½-hour meetings to assist clergypersons in their work with same-gender couples. This is just a framework. While many clergy might use it comfortably as is, other clergy could and should tailor it to their preferences. Realistically, there is more material for each meeting than most clergypersons and couples could go through in the time suggested. Clergy should feel free to by-pass questions or discussions that their judgment and experience tell them may not be necessary.

Overview

When two people come together to commit themselves, their lives, and their fidelity to each other under the eyes of God and in front of a clergyperson and a congregation, this is a moment when past and future come together in a very special way. Questions arise: How did you get here? Where are you going? How do you plan to get there? The clergyperson is in a difficult position. He or she wants to help a couple celebrate and consecrate their love and commitment. Yet at the same time the clergyperson is also there to assist the couple in becoming fully aware of what they are promising and how they might fulfill their promises. The fundamental task of a committed relationship is to find room in it for two whole people, and this framework is designed to help the couple fulfill this task.

Couples come to a clergyperson with problems and dissatisfactions in their relationship. In most cases these are normal and will not affect the couple's chance at having a satisfying relationship. But in some cases the problems are more threatening. If this is not handled sensitively and thoroughly, the couple will be making promises they may not be able to keep. The problems a couple will have later in their marriage are almost always there in some form at the beginning: identifying these problems in their earliest stages prevents a great many divorces.

What follows is a framework for assisting couples to sort out the issues and concerns as well as the hopes and dreams they bring into the community of faith as they seek to celebrate and live out their commitment to one another.

Overall Goals of the 4 Meetings:

- Helping the couple connect with, commit to, and join more fully in God, to the Church in general, and their parish in particular
- Bringing the couple more fully into the life of the church as a whole and their parish in particular
- Helping to heal hurts and respond to fears with respect to the church
- Helping the couple understand their committed relationship as a sacrament and a covenant
- Consulting on planning a ceremony
- Helping all participants better understand the nature of the couple's relationship
- Learning about the couple's strengths
- Discovering potential problems and presenting solutions for resolving them or tools for dealing with them

- Assessing whether this couple is ready to commit to each other at all
- Reducing the risk that this couple will end up getting divorced

The Meeting Framework

FIRST MEETING

Process: Clergy person mostly listens.

Goal: Creating a positive relationship/atmosphere and laying a foundation for assessing the relationship with each other and the church. The most important issue for same-gender couples at this stage is feeling accepted as a couple by the clergy person and the church rather than focusing on them being a same-gender couple at this point. Of course if they bring it up, then by all means address their concerns. Discussion of issues particular to same-gender couples will come up in later meetings.

Content: Ask the following questions:

“How did you two get together?”

“What attracted you to each other?”

“What was your first impression of each other?”

“What are the greatest strengths in your relationship?”

“Why do you want your relationship celebrated in the church?”

“Why do you want your relationship celebrated in this particular church?”

Probe for whether the couple has all five dimensions of relationship chemistry. In each case, ask for examples.

1. “Talk about how easy it is for you two to get close, and when you get close how comfortable it feels.”
2. “Talk about how you have fun together when it’s just the two of you.”
3. “Talk about your physical chemistry.” Assure them that you are not checking to see if they’ve engaged in pre-marital sex. You just want to make sure they like the way the other looks, feels, smells, etc.
4. “Tell me about how you respect each other the way you are right now, and how you genuinely feel respected by the other.”
5. “Tell me about the ways you feel safe with each other.” Look for ways the couple feels safe from being insulted, lied to, betrayed, abandoned, etc.

The point of this part of the meeting is that the best way to get a sense of a couple is to check out the ways they are happy with each other and work well together. On the other hand, since the story of a relationship is ultimately the story of the strengths within it, probing for strengths can reveal when key ones are missing and flagging where serious problems are likely to occur.

Ask if the couple has any questions for you.

Outline the rest of the process.

Ask the couple next time to bring in written outlines of their preferences for a ceremony. Administer the Wallace-Locke Marital Adjustment Test (MAT).⁴ The two people take this very brief test before leaving the office.

At the end of every meeting, the clergy person should ask, “Do you have any questions for me?”

⁴ This is a brief self-assessment instrument that is well established, widely used, and easy to administer and score. It is in the public domain, so there is no fee required to use it. See Appendix C. Appendix D has an additional tool.

SECOND MEETING

Process: Mostly interaction and dialogue.

Goals: To get possible problem areas out in the open as early as possible. To help the couple reinforce their commitment to the church and show how God and the church are powerful resources for the couple. To begin a dialogue on problematic areas in their plan for a ceremony.

Content: Introduce the idea that the faith community asks the question, “Is there room for two whole people in this life we are sharing together?” and continually tests them to show how the other matters.

In order to check for difficult areas in the relationship with each other and with God and the church, the clergyperson could say something like, “You know, I never expect perfect people in perfect relationships. But a lifelong commitment is a covenant with God. So I need to feel that if there are any problem areas that could blow up later on we’ve at least noted them now—that way you can have plans in place for how you will deal with them. Maybe we can even come up with solutions during these talks. So let’s tackle the following questions....”

1. “You two have been together for about _____. In this time, where have you two sometimes gotten into trouble with each other?”
2. “How do you and your partner’s families feel about each other?”
3. “Let’s talk about some of the areas where you might agree or disagree with each other.” Bring up the following:
 - The place God, religion, the Episcopal Church, and regular worship have in their lives. “Let’s talk about where God is in your life now.”
 - Having kids (whether, when, how many, how to bring up)
 - Money (saving, spending, who’s in charge of what)
 - Leisure (what activities, how much to spend together/separate)
 - Your responsibilities to parents and other relatives, their role in your lives, and your degree of separation from them
 - Sex (“Have you experienced an aspect of your sexual relationship that’s caused arguments or tension between you?” is a non-threatening but useful way of bringing this up.)
 - Public displays of affection. This is an easy way to begin to talk about same-gender couple issues.
 - Monogamy (It is very helpful to be candid and to ask people to be candid. Some questions you might want to ask are “What are your expectations?” “What have your experiences been?” “Has infidelity ever played a role in your life?” “What needs or unresolved issues do you have about fidelity as you think about your future with [name of partner]?” These generally involve variations of the need to trust and/or the need to be trusted. Particular issues include: lying, snooping, privacy, friendships, boundaries, “checking in with each other,” relationships with ex’s, and others.
 - “All people in relationships have things they don’t like about each other. Tell me what you like least about each other.” This simple question can be a powerfully prognostic tool. Do not accept “nothing” or innocuous answers.

4. Ask what their real day-to-day lives are likely to be like, and ask what their plans are for keeping their relationship alive in the midst of all that.
5. “Imagine that you two ended up in couples’ therapy 7 years from now. What do you think would be the reason you’d be there?”
6. Ask if there are any issues in their relationship that grow specifically out of their being a same-gender couple.
7. Ask about a history of problems, conflicts, difficulties with the church or with God.

Have a general talk about what they need from each other around whatever difficulties/conflicts come up. Talk about results of MAT. Introduce contract idea of relationship: agreements about how to get needs met.

For example: a couple can be introduced to the idea that a committed relationship is usually felt to be satisfying when people make the promises that the other needs them to make and when those promises are kept. Such promises might include something like “I need you to promise to be honest no matter how hard it is for you and no matter how hard a time I give you when you are honest.” Or, “I need you to promise to spend time with me every day, no matter how busy we get.” The clergy person has to help the couple bring out their most important needs. They have to be formulated as a request for a promise to meet those needs. The other person has to have the opportunity to freely negotiate the issue so he/she can make a promise he/she feels comfortable making and knows can deliver on and that it actually meets the other person’s need. This, of course can result in intense negotiation! Contract/promise-making going into the commitment bridges the unspoken needs of one person and the inability or unwillingness of the other person to meet those needs. Consequences of not doing this work can result in much unhappiness and the dissolution of the relationship.

Homework: each partner writes down “My three most important needs from this relationship.” Needs must be specific.

Other content to explore in this meeting:

Talk about how God and the church and the congregation are here for them to guide and support them. Be specific about the spiritual resources available for them as a couple.

Briefly raise issues/questions you have about their ideas for their ceremony. Ask for changes, tweaks, re-thinks, etc. “We’re not making any decisions at this stage.”

THIRD MEETING

Process: Mostly interaction and dialogue.

Goal: Plan to deal with concerns brought up in previous meetings. Written agreements for implementing solutions. Practical talk about specific issues. More concrete ceremony plans.

Negotiate the “three most important needs” brought up in the previous session to the point that agreement is reached on what will be promised, that these promises are doable, and that they actually meet the other person’s needs. The clergyperson or the couple should agree to write up these agreements for the next meeting. Make sure it is understood how important this process is for their future happiness.

Content: The clergyperson and the couple will have thought about possible solutions to the issues brought up in first two meetings. Detailed discussion about how to implement these solutions. “How will you or life itself sabotage these solutions? And then what will you do?”

Frank and full discussion about the three needs (the homework from the previous meeting) and how they meet these needs. “Here’s what you can do to help me meet your needs.” Debug solutions. Role play how the solutions will actually play out over time.

Ask about the following issues if they have not been brought up:

- Having and raising children
- Blending families (where appropriate)
- Who is in the closet to whom, and how this plays out in the relationship
- Family, friends and community: needs and concerns
- Where the couples finds support
- How clergyperson/congregation can serve as support; address concerns couple might have about this
- Roles in the relationship: who is in charge of what, how do decisions get made
- Possible legal issues: wills, medical, insurance, etc.

More discussion about spiritual resources available in church community, how to use them, and why they are important.

FOURTH MEETING

Process: Mostly interaction and dialogue.

Goal: Finalize relationship agreements and plans for a ceremony.

Content: Nail down agreements about how a ceremony will be conducted. Ask what blessings they feel they specifically need/want given the realities of their lives/relationship. Ask which of these blessings they would feel comfortable with the clergy person actually including during the service. Talk about how to include the relationship and its needs in their prayer life.

Conclude any matters left over from previous meetings.

Appendices

Appendix A: Excerpt from the Proposal to Synod of the Province of New England from the Executive Committee, November 2, 2005

...that the Province of New England establish a “Task Force on the Counseling of Same-Gender Couples,” ...and charge them with the following tasks in two phases:

Phase One – Preparing Initial Couples Counseling

1. Discern the unique counseling needs of preparing same-gender couples who wish to make a life-long commitment and seek the blessings of the church.
2. Research and/or create a list of resources for such counseling.
3. Provide the Province with a resource or resources that can be used by the dioceses to offer training and information to their clergy for this counseling and ministry. Ideally, this would include at least a PowerPoint presentation and handouts with discussion guide that could be used and adapted by each diocese to use within its own context.
4. In all of the above, seek to discern how this work can help the church better prepare opposite-gender couples as well.

Phase Two – Ongoing Couples Support

1. Discern the unique counseling needs of same-gender couples who have made a life-long commitment and ways in which the church – ordained and lay – can support them in their joys and struggles as a couple.
2. Research and/or create a list of resources for such counseling.
3. Provide the Province with a resource or resources that can be used by the dioceses to offer training and information to their clergy for this counseling and ministry. Ideally, this would include at least a PowerPoint presentation and handouts with discussion guide that could be used and adapted by each diocese to use within its own context.
4. In all of the above, seek to discern how this work can help the church better prepare opposite-gender couples as well.

Appendix B: Synod Resolution from April, 2006

Resolved: That the Province of New England establish a “Task Force on the Counseling of Same-gender couples.” To address the issues raised in section A. and section B. of the original motion and that initially a budget of \$1,000 be set aside to begin this work for 2006, and that, the membership of this Task Force be determined using the same principles as were used for the selection of the Search Committee Membership (see attachment 2) with the names being received by Ran Chase no later than May 30, 2006.

Appendix C: Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test

1. Which best describes the degree of happiness, everything considered, of your present marriage?

Very Unhappy	Happy	Very happy
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The middle point "happy" represents the degree of happiness which most people get from marriage. Very few are at the very unhappy point in marriage or experience extreme joy in marriage.

State the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your mate on the following items.

	Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occasionally Disagree	Frequently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree
2. Handling Family Finances						
3. Matters of Recreation						
4. Demonstration of Affection						
5. Friends						
6. Sex Relations						
7. Conventionality (right, good, or proper conduct)						
8. Philosophy of Life						
9. Ways of dealing with in-laws						

10. When disagreements arise, they usually result in:
(a) husband giving in (b) wife giving in (c) agreement by mutual give and take
11. Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?
(a) All of them (b) some of them (c) very few of them (d) none of them
12. In leisure time do you generally prefer:
(a) to be "on the go" (b) to stay at home

Does your mate generally prefer:
(a) to be "on the go" - (b) to stay at home
13. Do you ever wish you had not married?
(a) Frequently (b) Occasionally (c) rarely (d) never
14. If you had your life to live over again, do you think you would:
(a) Marry the same person (b) Marry a different person (c) Not marry at all
15. Do you ever confide in your mate:
(a) almost never (b) rarely (c) in most things (d) in everything

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The test can be accessed online at <http://www.familynow1.com/reviews/lockewallace.htm>.

Other information at

Corcoran, K., & Fischer, J. (1987). *Measures for clinical practice: A sourcebook*. New York: Free Press.

Appendix D: An Additional Assessment Tool

Prepare/Enrich by Life Innovations, Inc., out of Minnesota, is a premarital preparation tool with a comprehensive inventory that examines several areas of couple relations, specifically: communication, conflict resolution, personality issues, financial management, religious orientation, leisure activities, sexual relationship, children and parenting, family and friends, equalitarian roles, realistic expectations.

The program is designed to solicit descriptive data concerning the couple's relationship and then enable them to discover ways to maintain and improve the relationship. There are various inventories for couples in different places or stages. Prepare - CC (Cohabiting Couples) is recommended for same-gender couples.

Their Web Page is www.lifeinnovations.com. The company's address: Life Innovations, 2660 Arthur St., Roseville, MN 5513, USA or PO box 190 Minneapolis, MN 55440. Phone 1-800-331-1661"

Additional Resources

This is not a comprehensive list. It is provided to more easily direct clergy to convenient and accessible sources which may assist in counseling, shaping forms for blessings, or gathering further information to understanding the needs of both same-gender couples and their congregations.

Books and Documents:

Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. **Resource Materials for the Discussion of Marriage and the Blessing of Holy Unions.** 2004. Available by request from the Diocese.

Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. **Questions & Answers Generated from Conversations with Clergy of this Diocese.** 2004. Available by request from the Diocese.

Kader, Samuel, **“Openly Gay Openly Christian: How the Bible Really is Gay Friendly”** (San Francisco, Leyland Publications, 1999). Trained as clergy in the Metropolitan Community Church, Rev. Kader has gone on to serve many churches and is a noted writer and speaker on the exegesis of Scriptural passages that have been used to victimize gays and lesbians.

Marshall, Paul V., **“Same-gender Unions – Stories and Rites”** (New York, Church Publishing, 2004). Particularly useful for locating samples of same-gender liturgies. Written by the Bishop of Bethlehem, this is a collection and analysis of six representative rites for use in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada.

Nimmons, David, **“The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men”** (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2002). Studies of gay men and the contributions their community brings to the larger society.

Oliveto, Karn P., Turney Kelly V., and West, Traci C., **“Talking About Homosexuality: a congregational resource”** (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 2005). This study tool is the first in a fairly new series entitled “Holy Conversations: A Study Tool for Theological Reflection around Debates in the Church that Considers Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.” The writers are African American and European clergy in the United Methodist Church.

Rogers, Jack, **“Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church”**, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Professor Rogers argues for full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the Presbyterian church and in the clergy. He is Professor of Theology Emeritus at San Francisco theological Seminary, and was Moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Sullivan, Andrew, **“Same-gender Marriage Pro & Con: A Reader”** (New York, Vintage Books, 1997, updated 2004). The editor of this ten chapter anthology is Andrew Sullivan, senior editor at The New Republic.

Temple, Gray, **“Gay Unions In the Light of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason”** (New York, Church Publishing, 2004). Gray, an Episcopal priest examines Holy Scripture and the Anglican tradition.

Wolfson, Evan, **“Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People’s Right to Marry”** (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004). The Executive Director of Freedom to Marry, Wolfson is a renowned civil rights litigator.

Claiming the Blessing: A booklet of essays prepared for General Convention 2003.
[Available at www.claimingtheblessing.org]

Web sites dealing with same-gender issues:

www.anglican.ca/index.htm **The Anglican Church of Canada** web site. Click on Human Sexuality for resources.

www.ctdiocese.org/resources/Blessing_SameSex_Unions.htm

Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. Blessing of Same-Sex Unions: Report of the Diocesan Liturgy and Music Commission. 2006.

www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonBlessings/VT%20Blessings%20Report.pdf

Episcopal Diocese of Vermont. Report from the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships. 2004.

www.dioceseofvermont.org/Resources/TFonBlessings/Intimate%20HR%20Rev.pdf

Episcopal Diocese of Vermont. *Intimate Human Relationships: Resources for Conversation in the Congregations and Deaneries of the Diocese of Vermont.* Revised 2004.

www.diocesenyny.org The web site of the **Episcopal Diocese of New York.** Click on “site map”. Under “Info for priests, deacons & laity” click on “Let the Reader Understand,” a response to actions of Lambeth Conference 1998 requested by the Bishop of New York. The 19 page study is entitled: “Let the Reader Understand: Principles of Scriptural Interpretation.” Copyright in 2002, permission to reproduce is provided (see p. 1).

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/AnnotatedBibliography_marriage.pdf The **Annotated Bibliography for Church-wide Conversation on Marriage** by a resolution of the Executive Council in June, 2004 and a resolution that asked the Standing Commission on National Concerns to identify materials related to the subject and distribute through the Church Center web site. *Of particular interest in Tobias S. Haller, BSG Masters thesis prepared for General Theological Seminary entitled: Lawfully Joined: Same-gender Marriage in Light of the Church's Traditional and Liturgical Practice (April 1997) listed on page 4 of the Bibliography. It was judged the most valuable work produced in the seminary the year of its writing. In addition to the reflections on the history and theology of marriage, the paper contains an in depth analysis of the Marriage Rites of the Anglican Tradition from 1662 to the present. It may be accessed through <http://home.earthlink.net/~bsg/lj.htm>. There are numerous other relevant publications.*

www.vancouver.anlican.ca/Home/tabid/1/Default.aspx The web site of the **Diocese of New Westminster, CA**. Click on Resources for five downloads, including four papers comprising the Report of the Commission on Faith and Doctrine. While not publishing the actual rite(s) used, the papers comment on their development and may prove useful to clergy designing rites for their own church use.

www.bridges-across.org **Bridges-Across the Divide** provides models and resources for building respectful relationships among those who disagree about moral issues surrounding homosexuality, bisexuality and gender variance.

www.integrityusa.org **Integrity** is a nonprofit organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] Episcopalians and straight friends. Founded in 1974, Integrity is the leading grassroots voice for the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the Episcopal Church and our equal access to its rites.

www.religioustheology.org **The Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing** was founded in 2001 as a multi-faith organization dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education, and justice in faith communities and society. Click on New Publication for “A Time to Seek: Study Guide on Sexual and Gender Diversity.”

www.RMNetwork.org Reconciling Ministries Network is a national grassroots organization that exists to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientation and gender identities in the life of the of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice.

www.theTaskForce.org The web site of the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**. It's mission is to build the grassroots power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community by training activists, equipping state and local organizations with the skills needed to organize broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and building the organizational capacity of our movement. Its Policy Institute, the movement's premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, it works to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all.