



The Diocese of New Jersey

THE RIGHT REVEREND GEORGE EDWARD COUNCELL, D.D.

October 21, 2013

A Pastoral Letter to the Clergy of the Diocese

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Grace to you and peace in the name our Lord Jesus Christ.

This past Friday, The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriages can proceed in the State of New Jersey beginning Monday, October 21. We have both publicly stated our clear support of this right for same-sex couples and rejoice at the court's decision. Many same-sex couples have longed to have their relationships afforded the same civil rights and privileges as heterosexual couples. It is also true that many same-sex couples long to be married in the Church and to have the sacramental nature of their relationship acknowledged and blessed by, and within, the Church. Equally, many clergy have a strong desire to respond to the pastoral and sacramental needs of same-sex couples committed to their charge by performing same-sex marriages. We are writing to clarify the implications of the State Supreme Court's ruling and to provide provisional guidance for the clergy of the Diocese of New Jersey.

In 2012, General Convention adopted an amended resolution (A049) titled "Authorize Liturgical Resources for Blessing Same-Gender Relationships." Below is a link to the final legislation:

<http://www.generalconvention.org/resolutions/download/115-1342125335>

As a result of this legislation, *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing: Resources for the Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant in a Same-Sex Relationship* was released for the Church's use by The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music. This resource addresses various theological, pastoral and canonical concerns and issues and also includes liturgical resources for blessing rites. Follow the link below to order this resource where you can also find a free PDF of the liturgy licensed for congregational use:

<https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/index.cfm?fuseaction=productDetail&productID=9743>

During the House of Bishops' consideration of the question of A-049 at the 2012 General Convention in Indianapolis, the question was asked if the resolve that read, "*That bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church*" could be interpreted to mean that clergy in jurisdictions that allow civil marriage of same-gender couples, were permitted to officiate at those services? The Chairperson for the Special Committee answered that yes, that was what they had had in mind. No amendment was offered. Resolution A049 passed by a nearly 2/3 majority (See The Right Reverend Mark Sisk, Letter to the Clergy of the Diocese of New York – July 19, 2012 at <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs039/1102067254998/archive/1110523536861.html>).

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We, therefore, concur that “generous pastoral response” in the Diocese and State of New Jersey in light of the State Supreme Court’s decision allows clergy, who so desire, to officiate at the marriages of same-sex couples. Consequently, if a cleric of the Diocese of New Jersey feels moved by conviction and pastoral need to respond affirmatively to a request to perform a same-sex marriage, he or she has our permission to do so on or after October 21, 2013 under the following guidelines:

- Clergy will provide the same pastoral care and counseling to same-sex couples leading up to the ceremony that they would provide heterosexual couples. They will also have the same standards and expectations for participation in the life and worship of the congregation that they have of heterosexual couples. At least one of the parties shall have been baptized.
- Clergy will inform the leadership of the congregation that the blessing of same-sex marriages is to be a part of the ministry of the congregation; and seek their support.
- A priest needs to pronounce the blessing; a deacon may participate.
- Clergy should use the common liturgy for same-sex blessings approved at the 2012 General Convention and found in *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing: Resources for the Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant in a Same-Sex Relationship*. **Please note: The marriage liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer is not authorized for use with same-sex couples.**
- Clergy are permitted to sign civil marriage licenses and/or to have a state official (e.g., Justice of the Peace, Judge) do so, while the clergy person presides at the liturgical blessing. Clergy *are not required* to officiate at any wedding, or blessing service, whether it is a same-sex couple or an opposite-sex couple.
- If a clergy person is approached by a same-sex couple who desire to be married or receive a blessing in the church and that clergy person is unable to support them based on theological grounds or grounds of conscience, we direct that the clergy person refer that couple to a colleague who can in good conscience support them.
- If a clergy person chooses to sign civil marriage licenses, the clergy person should adapt the liturgy to reflect the fact that, in addition to receiving a blessing on their covenant relationship, the couple is also being married according to the laws of the State of New Jersey. Such adaptations to the liturgy are permitted when authorized by the Bishop Diocesan. To facilitate such requests, we hereby authorize two adaptations to the liturgy, when the clergy person is also signing the civil marriage license.

- 1) In the opening Address to the assembly, the words in italics below may be added, so that the address reads:

Dear friends in Christ, we have gathered together today to witness N. N. and N. N. publically committing themselves to one another *in marriage according to the laws of the State of New Jersey*, 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.

- 2) In the Pronouncement, the words in italics below may be added, so that the Pronouncement reads:

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, *and united in marriage according to the laws of the State of New Jersey.* Amen

- Clergy should record the ceremony in the Parish Register.
- In the case of a new lifelong union/marriage that follows either a divorce or the end of a previous lifelong union, clergy must seek permission from the bishop's office to bless the marriage following canonical policy for second marriages.


With all of this, we are entering a new era in society and in the life of the Church. These guidelines may not meet every exigency and we may need to discuss and modify them in the future. At present, however, we ask you to abide by them. We feel it is especially important that only the rites from *I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing* be used for same-sex marriages and blessings in the Diocese of New Jersey. We are a church that engages in "common worship" and these are the rites that have been approved by our governing body. Moreover, The Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music has asked us to track our use and to offer them feedback. We ask clergy, therefore, to keep a good record of their use of these materials and to journal any thoughts and reflections they might have so that these can be offered to the S.C.L.M. before the 2015 General Convention.

We also urge generous hearts and love where disagreement and differences concerning the marriage and blessing of same-sex couples exist. While we rejoice with same-sex couples who are now being allowed access to marriage and to rights and privileges long denied them, and we believe this is right, we also recognize that there are many within the body of Christ and in the wider culture who in genuine faith and good conscience do not agree. We are called to honor and respect their right to disagree.

Please feel free to contact us to discuss any matters of concern you might have with us, or to seek guidance from us if questions arise.

Please know that you are in our thoughts and prayers as you seek to minister to all of the people of God entrusted to your care.

Faithfully yours in Christ,



The Right Reverend George E. Councell, D.D.
Bishop of New Jersey



The Reverend Canon William H. Stokes
Bishop-elect of New Jersey