

# **Vermont Episcopalians unveil ceremonies for same-sex unions: "Consistency in teaching, in language"**

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Episcopalians in Vermont, in a "pastoral response" to the nation's first and only civil unions law, have unveiled liturgical rites that gay couples can use in the state's 48 Episcopal churches.

The worship guidelines, which look and sound like liturgies used for heterosexual weddings, are believed to be the first anywhere in the Anglican Communion that convey church blessings on gay civil partnerships.

The services are contained in a 36-page manual that was distributed to clergy last month. A committee began drafting the rites in October, and they are expected to become official in 2006.

The "blessing of holy unions" is backed by Vermont Bishop Thomas Ely. "It would help our people to have the experience of common liturgy where there's consistency in teaching, in language."

About 1,000 Vermont couples have obtained civil union certificates since the state enacted a landmark law in 2000 that made many of the rights and responsibilities of civil marriage available to gay couples.

The new ceremonies include the traditional vows "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer . . ." The prayers of the priest ask God to "let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads."

For those gay and lesbian Episcopalians who have attended celebrations of holy matrimony, "it will have a familiar ring to it," said Stan Baker, one of the original

plaintiffs in a 1997 suit that resulted in the Vermont civil unions law, and one of the people who helped draft the liturgy.

Episcopal bishops in Massachusetts—the only state in the country to allow gay marriage—have barred clergy from officiating at civil ceremonies, although they are allowed to give couples the church’s blessing. Other Episcopal dioceses, including Washington and Los Angeles, allow the blessing of gay unions, but those services carry no civil or legal standing.

The decision by Vermont to formally bless gay civil unions is likely to exacerbate tension among conservatives in the larger Anglican Communion, who accuse the U.S. and Canadian churches of pursuing a leftward agenda that is unbiblical.

At the same time Ely unveiled the new rites, an Irish archbishop heading a special task force on Anglican disunity was meeting in North Carolina with U.S. church leaders.

Cynthia Brust, a spokeswoman for the American Anglican Council, said the Vermont policy is the newest signal of “growing and deepening chaos and disarray” in the North American church.

“We are just horrified and distressed,” she said. “To equate holy matrimony with [same-sex] holy unions is abhorrent. Marriage is a sacramental rite designed by scripture and 2,000 years of tradition and history to be between a man and woman.”

Ely, who has personally blessed two gay unions, acknowledged concerns that his policy could further alienate the U.S. church from sister churches around the world, but said he is responsible first and foremost to his flock.

“We’re also mindful of the fact that we have a local context in which we’re trying to be the church, and we’re hopeful that others will be respectful of that, and trust that we didn’t enter into this without a lot of thought and our experience,” he said.

Last year, delegates and bishops at the church’s General Convention approved a resolution acknowledging that some bishops allow gay union ceremonies “as part of our common life.”

And in 2000, delegates said such relationships should exhibit “fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and holy love.” Both conventions declined moves to establish nationwide rites.

A theological statement in the manual acknowledges the “ick response” some may feel toward homosexuals. “We believe that together we can find ways to address such gut reactions that build up, and do not tear down, the Body of Christ,” the manual said.

The statement said “a few verses” of biblical condemnations against homosexual activity are “entirely different” from the experience of committed gay couples. Still, it said, such a statement “is not one that can be embraced by all” in the church.

Michael Hopkins, a Maryland priest who is a former president of Integrity, a gay Episcopal group, said Vermont’s decision may prod the church to further action when it meets again in 2006.

“I’ve no doubt that those who are already yelling ‘schism’ are going to continue to yell it, but the more dioceses that embrace something like this, the more obvious it becomes that the church is moving on,” said Hopkins, who had his union blessed by Washington Bishop John Chane on June 12. -Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*