



**Diocese of Toronto  
Anglican Church Of Canada**

**Pastoral Guidelines for the Blessing of Same Gender Commitments  
Anglican Diocese of Toronto  
College of Bishops**

The following guidelines are presented in order to offer a generous pastoral response to stable committed same gender relationships in our diocesan family seeking a blessing of their commitment. The guidelines were formed after consultation with a Commission of clergy and laity across a variety of theological perspectives and opinions seeking to recognize the sensitivity of the issue while being pastorally appropriate. In our discussions, we have seen that there is great diversity among parishes that are opposed to same gender commitments, similar to the diversity found in parishes that are in favour. Recognition of this diversity affirms that parishes which hold similar viewpoints on this subject are not to be painted with one brush, and represent the rich breadth of life in parishes, with parishioners who are theologically astute and deeply committed Christians. The diversity of our diocesan community demonstrates that we are called to witness to the faith in a variety of ways, and though such witness is rooted in differing interpretations and understanding of holy scripture and the tradition, they are recognizably Anglican.

As the practice proceeds, the College of Bishops will evaluate its impact on the mission and ministry of the diocese.

1. **Theological Foundation** – In seeking to meet the needs of gay and lesbian couples in our parishes we recognize the tension between the ‘gracious restraint’ called for in “The Windsor Report” (embodied in the three-fold moratoria<sup>1</sup>) and the ‘pastoral generosity’ called for by the national House of Bishops in their 2007 Pastoral Statement. At the heart of these guidelines is the call of the baptismal covenant on all Christians. We live within our covenant with God, embodied in the tenets of our faith outlined in the Creed and in the daily practice of our lives. We seek to grow in integrity and sanctity as we reflect the life of Christ in ourselves and in our relationships, through worship, reconciliation, proclamation, witness and action. We understand blessing of same gender couples in light of their intention to grow into the fullness of Christ, individually and in their relationship, through faithful reflection of the gifts of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

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<sup>1</sup> Three-fold moratoria include: 1. consecration of clergy to the office of Bishop who are living in a same gender relationship, 2. the authorization of public rites of blessing for same gender unions, and 3. interventions by Bishops into ecclesiastical provinces other than their own.

2. **Permission to be given to a few selected parishes** – The diocesan bishop will designate a limited number of parishes to be given permission to bless people in same gender commitments. Criteria for selection:
  - a. The Diocesan Bishop will select the parishes to be considered for permission
  - b. Parish will have demonstrated a process of prayer, education, consultation, discernment and consensus development that widely engages the parish community.<sup>2</sup>
  - c. When the Priest, Churchwardens, and Advisory Board/Parish Council feel that consensus has been reached, the Churchwardens will write a letter to the Diocesan Bishop outlining the process and decision reached and request permission be granted.
  - d. The Priest will separately communicate his/her support of such a decision and concurrence that the parish is ready to participate in accordance with these guidelines. If either the priest or Churchwardens do not concur then the process ceases.
  - e. The Diocesan Bishop, at his discretion, may grant permission to one or more of these parishes.
  - f. Permission will be given for a two year period. At the end of that period, permission may be renewed or withdrawn after review.
  - g. Permission is granted for the clergy/parish relationship at that time. When a cleric leaves a designated parish the designation will be revisited with the Diocesan Bishop upon the appointment of a new cleric.
  - h. The Area Bishop will be kept informed through the process and consulted prior to a final decision.
  - i. The parish will be expected to report annually to the diocesan bishop through the office of the Area Bishop indicating the number of blessings and offering evaluative remarks on the significance of the practice for the mission of the parish.
  
3. **Same Gender Blessings** – This pastoral response is extended to couples in our midst who seek to live in mutual love and faithfulness in a stable, long-term committed relationship. A blessing may be made available to couples who are not civilly married as the blessing is not considered to reflect, or to be understood as, marriage.
  - a. The blessing of any same gender relationship is expected to be part of an existing pastoral relationship with a priest and local congregation.
  - b. At least one of the couple should be baptized.
  
4. **Same Gender Couples in Parishes not Designated**
  - a. It is expected that no one will be excluded from receiving the eucharist or baptism in any parish on the basis of their sexual orientation or their views on the issue of same gender blessings, whether in favour or opposed.
  - b. Same gender couples in a parish not designated to perform blessings may approach their Area Bishop to seek an alternative. It is expected that the couple and the priest designated will first seek to develop a pastoral relationship before a blessing is offered.

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<sup>2</sup> Consensus is not total agreement; however, every effort should be made to reach a decision where everyone feels heard and is willing to live with the wider body's decision. The way forward should not be achieved or prevented by a very few taking an opposing view to the vast majority.

5. **The Nature of the Blessing** – As with any blessing the prayers will reflect the desire to publicly acknowledge within a faith community the *already present* creating and loving presence of God. They will acknowledge the affection, support, care, responsibility and understanding of love and commitment of the couple for each other as reflective of their lived experience of God’s grace within their relationship, not only as a couple but as a couple within a worshipping community of faith. The language of blessing should reflect the language of covenant and the promises of baptismal vows as the foundation for living their relationship.
  
6. **Guidelines** – The following are guidelines for planning of an act of worship drawing from the elements below. These guidelines are not to be understood as an authorized rite of the Anglican Diocese of Toronto.
  - a. The act of worship will be entered in the vestry book only.
  
  - b. Introductory remarks should identify the theological understandings and differences between the act of blessing and the sacrament of marriage.
  
  - c. The act of worship should include the following:
    1. The Gathering of the Community  
*Which may include one or more of these elements:*
      - a) A song, hymn or a piece of music.
      - b) A gathering responsorial prayer or greeting.
      - c) An introduction to the blessing of a relationship.
      - d) A collect.
  
    2. The Proclamation of the Word  
One or more readings from the scriptures  
*And may include one or more of these elements:*
      - a) A song, hymn or a piece of music.
      - b) A sermon, homily or meditation.
  
    3. The Blessing of the Commitment  
*Which may include one or more of these elements:*
      - a) A statement of covenant or commitment.
      - b) A symbolic expression of commitment, the treatment of which must be distinguished from those understood as symbolizing marriage
      - c) The blessing of the persons in their commitment.
  
    4. The Prayers of the People  
*Which may include one or more of these elements:*
      - a) Prayers for the couple.
      - b) Open, responsorial prayers.
      - c) The passing of the peace.
      - d) A song, hymn or piece of music.

5. The Celebration of the Eucharist (*optional*)

6. Blessing and Dismissal

*Which may include one or more of these elements:*

- a) Blessing
- b) A final song, hymn, or piece of music.
- c) Dismissal

d. In order to be clearly distinguished from a marriage liturgy, the act of worship will NOT include the following:

- i. An exchange of consents. It is presumed that participation in this service is sufficient consent.
- ii. Opportunity for public legal or canonical objections. However the officiating priest may not bless the couple if either is legally married to someone else.
- iii. A declaration of union.
- iv. No rite of civil marriage will be conducted in the context of the blessing act of worship.
- v. No signing of a marriage register will take place.
- vi. A nuptial blessing – understood as any of the prayers found on page 567 of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1962) or on page 534-535 and 548 – 549 of the *Book of Alternative Service* (1985) or any blessings found in the marriage liturgies of other provinces of the Anglican Communion.

7. **Diocesan Diversity** – The Diocese of Toronto honours and appreciates the diversity represented in its parishes and clergy. This diversity will continue to be reflected in the selection and appointment of clergy, and in the membership of committees and councils of the diocese. We recognize there are theological and cultural differences across our diocese and within parishes which are strained by both the limits and permission represented in blessing same gender relationships.

- ❖ All congregations and individual Anglicans are called to exercise pastoral generosity one to another.
- ❖ Permission to participate in blessings of same gender commitments will be extended only to those parishes and clergy who fulfill the requirements noted above and are granted permission by the diocesan bishop.
- ❖ No clergy nor parishes will be required to participate in the blessing of same gender relationships.
- ❖ Clergy who object to blessing same gender relationships will be asked to exercise pastoral generosity by referring same gender couples seeking a blessing, if requested, to the Area Bishop.
- ❖ Clergy who support blessing same gender couples will be asked to exercise pastoral sensitivity to those in their parish who are not in agreement with the parish designation.