

**REPORT ON MARRIAGE
AND THE COVENANTING OF SAME-SEX UNIONS**

**St. Thomas' Episcopal Church
Washington, DC
1998**

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INTRODUCTION

At its Annual Parish Meeting on March 1, 1998, the parishioners of St. Thomas' Parish voted unanimously in favor of a resolution expressing enthusiastic support for the Vestry's efforts in developing a liturgy for the blessing of same-sex unions and for creating a discernment process for all couples preparing to enter a covenanted union, that is, entering into a solemn and mutual agreement to be in a life-long, faithful, monogamous relationship. This vote came after an eighteen-month process of study and reflection involving the congregation as a whole. From this process emerged a consensus about the nature of covenanted unions and the role of the parish in upholding such unions. This consensus was summarized by the senior warden in her annual report:

We define Christian union as the mutual covenant between two people who intend their union to be life-long, faithful, and monogamous. Some call this marriage, while others prefer not to use that term, but the nature of the union is the same in our minds.

While civil marriage is not now available to same-sex couples, we expect all couples whose unions we uphold to take steps to assure that they are financially and legally obligated to support and care for one another and for their children, if any.

As a community we respect and honor the couple as a household, working always to support them in the vows they make to one another at the time of their covenant.

We take our commitment to uphold couples as a community seriously, and therefore require that at least one member of the couple be a member of this parish family.

We are a liturgical church and want a rite that can be used by any couple, gay or straight, who seek to be married or have the covenant of their union blessed.

A draft liturgy for use in such services and a proposed process for involving the parish in supporting a couple preparing to enter a covenant of union were distributed to the congregation for comment at that Annual Meeting. (See Appendices A and B.) The draft liturgy has been shared with a number of liturgical experts and theologians across the Episcopal

Church, and their comments have been favorable. While we consider these documents works-in-progress, we feel they are ready for trial use and wish to share them — and the process and study that went into them — with the broader community of faith. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the discussion in our church and our society about the nature of marriage and the covenanting of same-sex unions.

We base our consensus on a prayerful evaluation of what Scripture, tradition and reason have to say about human sexuality and the Christian life. Our study led us to the conclusions which follow.

Scripture

In considering Scripture, we looked to the Bible to inform us on two basic questions: What does the Bible have to say about homosexuality in general? And what does it say about how Christians are to live in relationship with others? We have studied both the Scriptural references themselves and analyses of them, and have come to the conclusion that we can be true to the Bible and support the blessing of same-sex unions.

We realize that not all people will read the Scripture in the same way, nor will they have the same understanding of the role of Scripture in determining the practices of the Church. We share the viewpoint articulated by the Right Reverend Bennett Sims, former director of Continuing Education at Virginia Seminary and retired Bishop of Atlanta, that “[t]he Bible will always be definitive for the Church’s faith, but in the Anglican tradition Holy Scripture is open to what scholars call ‘hermeneutical’ treatment. Hermeneutics means ‘informed and reasoned interpretation.’ In other words, the Bible is not self-authenticating. It needs to be seen in the light that every new era of history and scholarship can provide.”¹ We have tried to be faithful to our Anglican heritage of a reasoned interpretation of the Scriptures.

B. Barbara Hall, professor *emerita* of New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary, poses the question in her essay *Homosexuality and the New Creation*, “How might the Bible inform the current discussion among Christians about homosexuality and the church’s position and attitude toward gay men and lesbians?”² She points out that the Bible in fact says very little on the subject, but what it does say explicitly seems uniformly negative. The Bible, however, has “no conception of the notions which routinely inform our conversation on these issues: the idea of ‘sexual orientation;’ the conviction that some persons are ‘constitutionally’ (that is, ‘naturally’) homosexual, the existence of long-term monogamous relationships among gay people.”³

The Old Testament texts most often cited concerning homosexuality are the creation story found in Genesis 1-2, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 (with related passages in Judges 19 and Ezekiel 16:46-56), and the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The creation story, the Reverend Dr. Peter J. Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University, argues, “reflect[s] the world experience of those

human beings who wrote it... the authors were intent upon answering the question ‘Where do we come from?’ Then, as now, the only plausible answer is from the union of a man and a woman.”⁴ Gomes points out that the creation story does not pretend to talk about all acceptable lifestyles — it is noticeably silent on friendship and on the state of being single, both of which are highly regarded and certainly not considered abnormal. The story is not a “paradigm about marriage, but rather about the establishment of human society.”⁵

The etymology of word “sodomy” traces back to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. But although, as Gomes reminds us, Sodom is synonymous with wickedness throughout the Old Testament, homosexuality is not listed as the reason for its reputation. While the angels who visit Lot are threatened by the men of Sodom, it is Lot’s daughters who are offered up for gang rape — clearly an evil act, but not one involving homosexuality at all. In addition, it was not this act nor the threats made to the angels that caused the destruction of the city — the angels had come to warn Lot because God had already determined to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah even before the incident at Lot’s house. “Among the sins attributed to Sodom in other books of the Old Testament are pride — in the books of Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom in the Apocrypha — and in Ezekiel, in addition to pride, ‘Fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.’ (Ezekiel 16:48-49) In the New Testament, Jesus himself is under the impression that Sodom was destroyed because it was a place lacking hospitality; we find him saying as much in Matthew 10:14-15 and in Luke 10:10-12.”⁶

Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph E. Smith cite scholarly interpretation of the prohibitions against same-sex intercourse in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) as a reference to pagan temple prostitution, an interpretation which they feel is supported by strong historical evidence. Still, they conclude, that might not be the sole meaning of these passages. The Holiness Code was designed primarily as a way to differentiate the Hebrew people and their God from the multiple gods and pagan ways of their Canaanite neighbors. The list contains both purity requirements and moral concerns, but which is which has shifted over time. For example, “[a]ccording to the Holiness Code, some forms of incest as well as intercourse between a husband and his menstruating wife violated Hebrew purity concerns and resulted in cultic defilement. The Hebrews judged both of these behaviors abominable and prescribed severe penalties for both. Presumably most Christians today would uphold and even expand the ancient prohibition of incest, and yet most would ignore the condemnation of genital activity between spouses during menstruation. On what grounds do we dispense with the latter but uphold the former prohibition?”⁷ In general, those prohibitions which are reaffirmed in other parts of Scripture on explicitly moral — as opposed to purity — grounds are the ones which continue to be observed today. This brings us to St. Paul.

While the New Testament (like the Old) has little to say about homosexuality, the passages which are most troubling are found in the letters of Paul (most specifically in Romans 1:26-27, with related passages in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy). Yet Paul was not talking about homo-

sexuality as we understand it today. As Bishop Sims points out, “In those lynch-pin verses St. Paul never uses the word ‘homosexual.’ Instead he uses the terms ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural.’ The operative term in Paul’s original Greek is ‘phooskos,’ [*sc.*, *physikos*] meaning ‘inborn,’ ‘produced by nature,’ ‘agreeable to nature.’ Here are the verses in the King James Version, the 1611 translation. . . . Not surprisingly, given the first century scorn of women, Paul begins with them:

. . . even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature; and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of women, burned in their lust for one another”⁸

Gomes points out that this passage “does not describe the conduct of homosexuals, but rather of heterosexual people who performed homosexual acts.”⁹ Furthermore, ‘[n]ature,’ for Paul, is something more akin to ‘customary’ or ‘characteristic’; it is not to be confused with that which is innate, inherent, or immutable. Among the Jews, homosexual behavior was not customary. It was in fact uncommon. . . .”¹⁰

Paul and his contemporaries would have understood homosexuality primarily as pederasty and male prostitution. Given that these always involve lust and exploitation, they would have been condemned (and still are today). What was unknown to Paul was “the concept of a homosexual nature . . . something that is beyond choice, that is not necessarily characterized by lust, avarice, idolatry or exploitation, and that aspires to a life under the jurisdiction of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

That leads us to the second part of our study of Scripture: what does Scripture tell us about how human beings are to relate to one another, and what does it have to say about couples who “aspire to a life under the jurisdiction of the Holy Spirit?”

One is led inevitably to start with the first two Commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy mind and thy neighbor as thyself.” We see in ourselves and in each other the image of the Creator, and we are called upon to respond accordingly.

The great commandment of love is further defined in the New Testament through the example of Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and sinners and made clear through his parables that everyone is our neighbor. But it is in the letters of St. Paul that we find the most ringing call to acceptance. “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 26-28) Or again, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.” (I Corinthians 12:13-14)

From these concepts of equality and acceptance flow the Christian virtue of seeing the immanent God in the face of every person. When we take what little Scripture has to say about homosexuality and read it without our hermeneutical glasses, we use Scripture to sanction what Bishop Sims calls “a globally spreading visceral revulsion and persecution of homosexuality. . . [and] the parallel agony of self-loathing, silence and incalculable suffering on the part of our fellow human beings.”¹² To deny the second of the great commandments is to sin grievously indeed.

About relationships between members of a couple — about marriage, which is the only context in which this issue is addressed — Scripture has little to say, but what it does say flows from the notions of love and equality grounded in the great commandments. In the creation story in Genesis 2:18-25 we read that God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” God then proceeds to create every living creature, and the man gives name to each, but still is lonely until God creates another human being. While, as was pointed out above, this story was written to answer the question of where we came from, it also describes human sexuality “as designed by God for the expression and enhancement of human communion. Sexuality is about love and fidelity. Equality and mutuality should characterize such ‘one flesh’ unions. . . . The passage as a whole overwhelmingly emphasizes the similarities of the human partners not their differences. They can become one flesh because *they are alike* — ‘bone of my bones’ — *not because they are different* (emphasis added). They can cleave to one another because they are both human, not because theirs is a heterosexual coupling toward an androgynous wholeness.”¹³

In the Apocryphal book of Tobit, Tobias vows, “I now take this my beloved to wife, not out of lust but in true marriage. Grant that she and I may find mercy and grow old together.” (Tobit 8:7-9) Again marriage is described as more than lust — it is life-long companionship. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the faithful nature of marriage and the responsibility of the community to uphold it. “Marriage is honorable; let us all keep it so, and the marriage-bond inviolate.” (Hebrews 13:4) As with the Creation story, the references are to heterosexual couples because that was the only model for human sexuality the writer understood. The virtues of such unions, however, need not be applied exclusively to heterosexual couples.

Bishop Sims, taking into account both the words of St. Paul and an understanding of God’s intent that we not live in isolation, leads us to the following conclusion.

If it be granted that gay and lesbian identity is ‘natural,’ then St. Paul can be scrupulously honored wherever homosexuality is seen to be rooted in Paul’s own word: *phooskos* [*sc.* *physikos*], meaning ‘agreeable to nature.’ As we have evolved a new and higher regard for women than was true for Paul in his time, so we are evolving a new regard for same-sex attraction than was true for Paul, and for most of us, in both his time and our own.

That is why the Episcopal Church and other progressively oriented denominations are moving toward legitimizing 'same-sex unions.' It is a plain matter of justice. It is also a matter of providing a sacramental structure for the expression and protection of the Christian sexual ethic of monogamy, fidelity, and life-long intent.¹⁴

Tradition and Reason

Scripture informs us with great clarity about how individuals should relate to one another and offers a vision of faithfulness and exclusivity in covenanted relationships. But it is silent on the issue of life-long, monogamous homosexual partnerships since the concept of homosexuality as we understand it today was virtually unknown in the ancient world. (The term "homosexual" is a modern construct and was not even coined until the mid-20th century.) Taking what is in Scripture about the nature of covenanted relationships as a starting point, we turn to tradition and reason.

Christianity has traditionally recognized celibacy and marriage as the two appropriate states of human living. Celibacy is widely recognized as being a special calling, one whose discipline few can follow. Given its nature, celibacy offers little to help us discern whether life-long, monogamous same-sex unions can serve as wholesome examples of Christian human relationships. So it is the tradition of marriage, and the church's role in that institution, to which we must turn.

Of all the sacraments, marriage is the one most tied to the civil state. Concepts about marriage have changed over the centuries, and in fact vary from one part of the Anglican Communion to another (not to mention across denominational lines) to this day. Thus, while tradition informs us, it also tells us that how marriage is perceived has been influenced throughout time by the surrounding culture. While we tend to think of mutual consent, monogamy, and life-long faithfulness as the hallmarks of Christian marriage, these have not been the standards over time, nor are they universal today within the Anglican Communion. Some of the most important changes and differences are summarized below.

Monogamy

For the ancient Hebrew people, immortality was achieved through one's descendants, so procreation was of principal importance as was clear establishment of patrimony. Concubinage and polygyny were common and accepted. (Remember that when Sarah was infertile, she chose Hagar to bear Abraham's child, then caused Hagar and Ishmael to be driven away when Isaac was born so his right of inheritance would not be questioned.)

Monogamy as a practical concept came from Greco-Roman traditions, and the Christian belief in life eternal shifted some of the focus away from procreation as the reason for

marriage (although not entirely). The central family unit during Roman times was not, however, the couple but the household (including family members, free persons and slaves). For a long time, marriage was a concern only for people of property who needed to make provisions for their heirs — in fact, slaves and indentured servants were typically forbidden to marry.

The earliest converts to Christianity were primarily the moderately wealthy, whose morality was based on concern for intimate order. They placed high value on solidarity, the natural morality of the socially vulnerable, and on innate restraints of behavior leading to fairness and fidelity. Long before the establishment of the Christian church, these ideas were beginning to impact on law and family life, and in the third century AD slaves were finally given permission to marry. Still, monogamy was not a common practice until the 10th century, beginning first among commoners and only later among the nobility.

Today the Episcopal Church in America condemns polygyny, which is also illegal in this country. However, at the Lambeth Conference in 1988 the bishops agreed that converts to Christianity who came from polygynous cultures could remain married to those wives they had at the time of conversion. They had only to pledge to take no additional wives. So polygyny is tolerated within the Anglican Communion under some circumstances even today.

The role of love and the purpose of marriage

For the people of the Old Testament, marriage was viewed as a contract between the bridegroom and the prospective father-in-law. The bride had no say in the matter. It was the radical Protestants of the 17th and 18th centuries who introduced the concept of the bond between men and women as the incarnation of divine love. However, arranged marriages remained the norm until well into Victorian times, with couples anticipating respect and companionship (but not true intimacy) in their relationship.

The concept of love as a prerequisite for marriage is quite new, dating only from the first part of the 20th century. The ideal of a “couple” appeared in the popular media only after the 1930’s — matrimony alone was no longer sufficient to legitimate intimate sexual relationships, love was essential. Even today, however, this is a peculiarly Western concept. Arranged marriages (often without the consent of the bride) are not uncommon in the Anglican Churches of Southeast Asia and Africa.

When we talk about the purpose of marriage, once again we encounter variations in tradition and teaching. Procreation remains the principal purpose of marriage for the Roman Catholic and some Protestant Churches. However, the Anglican Church has listed it as only one of the purposes, and not necessarily the principal one, since the days of Archbishop Cranmer. The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* states that marriage “is intended by God for [the] mutual joy [of the partners]; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity

and adversity; and when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord."

In an age and culture where people have greater legal access to contraception and abortion, the absolute tie between marriage and procreation has been almost completely broken. In a culture where people frequently marry well past the age of child-bearing, inclusion of the language of procreation in the wedding ceremony hardly seems meaningful. Reason would say that today couples come together in love for mutual joy, for help and comfort and, only sometimes, for the procreation of children.

Divorce

In ancient times, divorce was a man's prerogative and relatively easy for him to accomplish. In Jewish and Greek cultures, women had no such recourse available to them (although Roman society was somewhat more liberal in this regard). Leaving a woman without the protection of the household or tribe was tantamount to a death penalty, so Christ's emphasis on men not divorcing their wives and remaining faithful to them was an important step toward equality. Not until the 10th century did the understanding of marriage as an indissoluble state become widespread. The Counter-Reformation reinforced the ancient view of marriage as a sacrament, further strengthening the concept of its being indissoluble.

This notion was challenged on the civil side in revolutionary France, whose anti-clerical government declared marriage a civil contract only, making divorce possible. The French constitution of 1791 outlined a list of reasons for granting a divorce, a list later reduced by the Napoleonic code to three: conviction of having committed a serious crime, brutality, and adultery. Although divorce remained rare well into the first half of the 20th century, most Western countries instituted requirements for civil ceremonies (or licensing), and couples could obtain a civil divorce even if religious institutions continued to forbid it.

While, in the words of *The Book of Common Prayer*, marriage is "not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately," forbidding divorce often turned marriages into life sentences of unremitting pain and sorrow. It was this recognition that led the Episcopal Church to reconsider its stance on divorce. Where remarriage within the church following a divorce was once forbidden, bishops can now grant permission for previously divorced individuals to marry again in the church. But this change has only occurred within the last thirty years, and it is not universally shared by all churches within the Anglican Communion.

Still, the church plays a role in moral leadership on the issue of divorce. Even when divorce is acknowledged in the religious context, the church applies more demanding standards to remarriage than does the state. In the enforcement of these standards, the church sets forth its vision that the intent of marriage is that it be monogamous, faithful and life-long.

Role of the church in marriage

From ancient times until the middle ages, although a rabbi or priest may have had a role in wedding ceremonies (or, more usually, blessed the marriage bed to pray that children would be born of the union), there were no standard liturgies for marriages. Weddings were not held in places of worship. Liturgical rites for weddings begin to appear in northern France as early as the 12th century, but the ritual was held at the church door (possibly as a public repetition of a private rite which had already taken place). The priest verified that there was mutual consent on the part of both parties and that there were no violations of the laws against consanguinity in the relationship, then stood by while the ceremony unfolded, offering a blessing at the end. Not until the 17th century would the ceremony be held at the altar. Even the sacramental nature of marriage has been in dispute. The Counter-Reformation Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed marriage as a sacrament, the primary purpose of which was procreation of children who would be raised in the faith. The Protestant churches firmly denied its sacramental nature and have been ambivalent about it ever since.

Whether a couple chooses to marry in a religious ceremony is universally optional today. Licensing clergy to serve as civil authorities when they perform a marriage is not widespread. Separate civil ceremonies, which may or may not be followed by a religious one, are the norm for most of Western Europe. As with divorce, the role of the church is to uphold its standards for intimate human relationships — and religious authorities may refuse to marry a couple even if the state would.

The public nature of marriage

Regardless of the role of the church in the ritual, one aspect of marriage that has remained constant is the importance placed on mutually exchanged vows made in the name of God. Whether made for marriage, protection, or some other purpose, the communal — and spiritual — nature of such oaths leads to a public agreement to uphold the vows and to support the person(s) making them. Public vows, although a private covenant between the partners, affect the whole community, offering stability and order to relationships. This aspect of the communal nature of marriage is often lost in our peripatetic world. The congregational response “We will!” in the 1979 order of service reinforces the involvement of the community of faith in upholding the couple in their new life together.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the model for marriage is a heterosexual one. The roots of marriage go back to the need to provide for the passage of property from one generation to the next. However, the concept of what a marriage is for and what constitutes a good marriage have shifted over time to meet the changing understanding of personal relationships.

In our society, marriage is no longer needed to gain independence from family or for protection. Mutual consent, respect, affection, and concern are seen as the core values of intimate relationships — as they have been for the American church for most of its history. Expectations of faithfulness and life-long commitment are still the norm within our community of faith, if not always shared by the society as a whole.

For more than the first half of its life, the church had no standard rites for marriage. The church's positions on everything from polygyny to divorce have changed over time as society has changed. These changes reflect the influence of science, particularly what we have come to understand about psychology and human emotions, and our increased awareness of the equality of all human beings regardless of race or gender.

The church has not always been at the forefront of these changes. The days are not long past when the church supported the justification of slavery based on a belief in the inferiority of people of color, a view that carried through to the segregation of churches and acceptance of the state's prohibition of interracial marriages. These positions changed over time as the sin of such thinking became apparent. Our views on homosexuality are similarly shifting. Today we know much more about homosexuality and its innate nature than did the ancients, and we find this knowledge reflected in changing church attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

The 1976 and 1982 General Conventions of the Episcopal Church called upon Christians to support the basic civil rights of gay men and lesbians in such matters as equal protection under the law and due process. The 1985 General Convention called upon Episcopalians "to foster a better understanding of homosexual persons and to dispel myths and prejudices about homosexuality." A 1993 booklet published by Forward Movement Publications, *Christian Discipleship and Sexuality* by The Right Reverend Frederick H. Borsch, Bishop of Los Angeles, spoke of the need to remember the General Convention's actions in the light of "increasing violence against gay men and lesbians in our society." This call seems even more pointed today and has been reinforced by calls for action against intolerance from the Presiding Bishop, House of Deputies President Pamela Chinnis, and our own bishops in response to the October 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay student in Wyoming.

We are only beginning to recognize that homosexuality is a natural part of God's creation. With that recognition comes the need to respond to the universal longing for companionship and for a stable society. Two people who love each other and mutually commit themselves to a monogamous, faithful and life-long relationship constitute a wholesome example of an intimate Christian relationship. We believe that this example can be set by either opposite-sex or same-sex couples.

Whether we call the covenanting of same-sex unions "marriage" is a matter of debate. For some — gay and straight — the term denotes a heterosexual, civil partnership which is not available to same-sex partners or which brings up strongly held negative images of patriarchy.

For others — gay and straight — to call a same-sex union by any other name is to say that such a union is “second class” and is not held to the same standards of mutual consent, monogamy and faithfulness. We believe that, whatever it is called, we mean the same thing. It is up to the couple to decide what name conveys the greater meaning. Our draft liturgy reflects this philosophy.

In addition, as a parish we take seriously our community’s responsibility to uphold a couple in their life together. All too often churches become mere “wedding chapels,” offering a space for the marriage rite but none of the on-going support that couples need. We seek to strengthen our communal response to holy union by requiring that at least one member of any couple whose union we will uphold have a connection with our parish. We have designed a process whereby parish couples will meet with engaged partners to offer support and the wisdom that comes from experience about what keeps a relationship together. We hope that this process will lead to some lasting friendships and on-going support after the ceremony takes place.

THE PROCESS

While the formal process of engaging the congregation in the discussion of marriage and the covenanting of same-sex unions did not begin until the fall of 1996, in reality St. Thomas’ began its journey several years before. The first open discussions were held in 1992 among the members of the Vestry and the Search Committee prior to interviewing candidates for the position of rector. Although the Vestry had anticipated having gay or lesbian candidates for the position, it had not anticipated that some might be in long-term relationships. The Vestry and the Search Committee met, with the help of a priest who served as consultant to the search, in a half-day session to discuss the General Convention statements on human sexuality referenced above, to review Scriptural passages relating to homosexuality, and most importantly to share their own experiences and fears. From that discussion grew an understanding that celibacy is a special calling — for homosexuals as well as heterosexuals — and the key issues in looking at unions of same-sex partners were the standards of commitment and faithfulness to which the couple held itself.

While not every parish will have a search for a new rector as the instigator, we strongly feel such discussion is necessary. Indeed, the opinion of the ecclesiastical court in the case of Bishop Righter almost requires such a discussion. In issuing its findings, the court stated, “The Court is not giving an opinion on the morality of same-gender relationships. We are not deciding whether life-long, committed, sexually same gender relationships are or are not a wholesome example with respect to ordination vows.” But that begs the question. If celibacy is a special calling and if unmarried heterosexual priests in a long-term monogamous relationship are considered unwholesome examples, then what constitutes a “wholesome example” of same-sex relationships when “marriage” is not an option? How does this relate to traditional marriage? And what should be the response of the faith community?

Like others in the diocese, in 1993 St. Thomas' sponsored a discussion on Scripture, the church's teaching, and human sexuality. The program, developed by the national church, which encouraged its use in every diocese, attracted about fifteen regular participants. It was the first time that the parish had sponsored an open discussion that allowed us to explore what the Bible had to say about human sexuality and to struggle with our beliefs, experiences, fears, and misconceptions. Although the discussion involved only a handful of people, it created a common understanding of Scripture which allowed us to accept each other as equal children of God's creation. We believe firmly that such a discussion must occur before parishes can begin to deal with the covenanting of same-sex unions.

Except for this brief study program, however, the conversation on human sexuality and the covenanting of same-sex unions continued primarily within the Vestry. In the fall of 1995 the Vestry began meeting with representatives of other denominations which had worked through these issues. Ann Thompson-Cook, active in the United Methodist Church's "Reconciling Congregations" program, and Grant Thompson (no relation) of a local Quaker Meeting which had agreed to uphold same-sex unions, met on separate occasions with the Vestry to talk about the processes within their own congregations and to share their understandings of same-sex unions. Later in the process Charles Briody, a Unitarian minister, shared his experience with same-sex unions in one of that denomination's parishes. In addition, the Right Reverend Charles E. Bennison, Jr. (at the time a professor at the Episcopal Divinity School), a member of an informal group looking at the issue of same-sex unions, met on two occasions with the Vestry to share what was going on in other parts of the Episcopal Church. Talking to others who had gone through a thoughtful process of study and reflection and could provide perspective on what was happening in the church as a whole helped us immeasurably. Talking to others of faith who have struggled with the questions surrounding same sex unions provides perspective and broadens the nature of one's own inquiry. We strongly recommend such discussions.

In February 1996 the outgoing and incoming Vestry members met for a daylong retreat at the diocesan conference center in Baltimore. The main item on the agenda was to discuss our understanding of marriage and how that translated into what we believed about same-sex unions. We had two outside facilitators for that discussion. Guided by them, we talked about our experiences with traditional marriage and with same-sex couples in committed relationships. We reached consensus on the similar nature of our expectations for what constituted "marriage" and, while we could not agree on what to call it, did agree that equivalent expectations applied to same-sex unions that we would consider "wholesome examples."

For the Lenten program that year we held a series of discussions entitled, "Beyond Tolerance: Looking at the Nature of Prejudice." The opening session focused on the Bible and what it has to say about how we treat someone who is "other." From the Old Testament suspicion of the "stranger" to the New Testament's insistence of the broad nature of the "household of God," we traced the changing commandments of our faith tradition.

The following sessions dealt specifically with issues of race, gender, and human sexuality with speaker/facilitators leading us in confronting our own experiences and prejudices.

In August 1996 the Reverend Dr. William Countryman, professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific and a guest preacher at our parish, spoke in favor of covenanting same-sex unions but also challenged the parish to take seriously its responsibility as a community to uphold all couples in their lives together, as well as people living singly. While the subject of his sermon was unanticipated, Dr. Countryman moved the discussion forward in important ways by emphasizing the communal nature of a public affirmation of vows.

In October 1996 the senior warden, in a letter to the parish, shared with the congregation the Vestry's commitment to upholding the faithful, monogamous, and life-long commitment of same-sex couples and invited the congregation into an open dialogue around the issue. Over the course of the next month, the senior warden gave a homily on her understanding of marriage and her journey to concluding that same-sex unions could be as sacramental in nature, and the rector delivered a sermon on what Scripture has to say about marriage. (See Appendices C and D.)

On February 21 and 22, 1997, thirty-six members of the congregation (the Vestry and their spouses or partners, plus additional members invited to complete a representative cross-section of the parish) met on retreat with the Reverend Dr. Marilyn McCord Adams, professor of historical theology at the Yale Divinity School. The first session was led by a professional story-teller who told stories of relationships and invited us to share our own. Then Dr. Adams provided a framework for thinking about our sexual and spiritual selves by asking us to reflect in small groups upon a series of questions: What good is sexuality? What are the fruits of love and how are they manifested? What is meant by faithfulness and why is permanence important? If we define certain types of relationships as the ones we would uphold, what would we exclude? How would we, as a parish, support couples in their lives together? A summary of the discussions was shared with the entire congregation through our church *Bulletin*. About this time the Vestry chartered two committees, one to draft a liturgy for the covenanting of unions (for both mixed- and same-sex couples) and a process for supporting the couple through its preparation for such a covenant.

Our 1997 Lenten program followed along the same lines. Using Bishop Borsch's booklet, *Christian Discipleship and Sexuality*, we explored the concepts of marriage and divorce, our beliefs about sexual intimacy outside of marriage, and gay and lesbian sexuality. During the initial session the rector provided an overview of the Biblical and theological teachings on sexuality, then participants broke into small groups which served as their discussion groups for the remainder of the sessions. We used the concept of dialogue outlined in the booklet and, with some modifications, the discussion format suggested. Each group had a facilitator/recorder who captured the group's responses to the various

questions posed. About 35 parishioners attended the series, and a summary of the discussions was shared with the entire congregation.

Up to that time, opportunities for discussion had all taken place on weekend retreats or in evening adult education forums, so an additional series of forums was held after the 11:00 service on four summer Sundays. Followed by an ice cream social, the forums attracted approximately 20 parishioners each time, many of them people who had not been previously involved in the process. The forums lasted about 45 minutes and were led by the rector and various members of the congregation. The rector gave an overview of the scriptural understanding of family and marriage in the opening forum. The second was a panel discussion between two couples, one straight and one gay, on what commitment meant to them. The third and fourth provided opportunities for parishioners to contribute to the development of a process for supporting couples and the drafting of a suitable liturgy for covenanting unions. Again, summaries of the discussions were shared with the whole congregation.

Fifty to sixty percent of our adult membership participated in the Vestry discussions, the weekend retreat, or the Lenten program based on Bishop Borsch's booklet. Additional members attended the Sunday forums, the Lenten program on prejudice and the first study group on human sexuality. All parishioners received copies of the *Bulletin* with the on-going summaries of the discussions; most heard the Sunday morning sermons on the subjects of marriage and same-sex unions. There were (and are) members of the congregation who felt we spent too much time in discussion, but most acknowledge that each conversation raised new and important issues for consideration. There is also strong consensus that open discussion, involving as many members of the community who wish to participate, is the best way to deal with subjects as difficult and emotional as marriage and the covenanting of same-sex unions.

From this process emerged the consensus outlined in the introductory paragraphs above. Along the way it became obvious that what we were doing was bound to strengthen traditional marriages as well. We have come out of this time clearer in our own minds about the standards by which we as Christians are asked to live and the importance of the community in upholding all couples, gay or straight, who try to forge a union based on these ideals. Our liturgy is designed to be used by any couple, gay or straight, who seek to have a holy union. We require that all couples — straight or gay — meet the requirements set forth in our "conditions for marriage" (at least one member of the couple must have a connection with the parish and couples intending to enter a holy union meet with other couples in the parish prior to the ceremony to talk about what that means). We hope, in this way, to promote the Christian ideal of a union between two people who mutually consent to vows of monogamy, faithfulness, and life-long love.

Notes

¹Sims, “How to Be True to the Bible and Say ‘Yes’ to Same Sex Unions!” Turning Point, May/June 1998.

²Hall, “Homosexuality and the New Creation” in Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies, ed. by Charles Hefling (Cambridge, Cowley Publications, 1996), p. 144

³*Ibid.*

⁴Peter J. Gomes, The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart (New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), p. 149.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁷Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith, Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1993), p.72.

⁸Sims, *op. cit.*

⁹Gomes, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Sims, *op. cit.*

¹³Jung and Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

¹⁴Sims, *op. cit.*

Selected Bibliography

Aries, Philippe, and Duby, Georges, general editors. A History of Private Life. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, multiple volumes 1985 ff.

This multi-volume work issued over a number of years traces private life in Europe and America from pagan Rome to modern times. It is an excellent source of information about the role and meaning of marriage in society, the changing nature of the church's involvement in the institution of marriage, and the relationship of church and state in the Western world.

Borsch, Frederick H. Christian Discipleship and Sexuality. Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, 1993.

Borsch is the Episcopal bishop of Los Angeles. This booklet offers an overview of Christian teaching on sexuality and discusses marriage and families, divorce, sexual intimacy, gay and lesbian sexuality, celibacy, and related issues such as contraception, abortion, and sexual abuse. An excellent study guide for group discussions is included.

Countryman, William, Dirt, Greed, and Sex. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1988.

Professor of New Testament at The Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Countryman presents a very engaging analysis of sexual ethics in the New Testament.

Eskridge, William N., Jr., The Case for Same-Sex Marriage. New York, The Free Press, 1996.

A thoughtful treatment of the subject by a liberal Jewish professor at the Georgetown Law Center in Washington, DC. Includes a lengthy appendix of letters from religious leaders advocating the cause of same-sex marriage.

Gomes, Peter J. The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996.

Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Preacher to Harvard University, Gomes is an ordained Baptist minister. The book is a lively and highly readable analysis of the Bible, an attempt on Gomes' part to rescue the Bible's message from those who take it literally. The second section of the book deals with difficult Biblical passages dealing with race, the role of women, homosexuality, and anti-Semitism.

Hefling, Charles, ed., Our Selves, Our Souls & Bodies. Cambridge, Cowley Publications, 1996.

A collection of essays on “sexuality in the household of God” by a variety of authors, most of whom are Episcopalians. There are discussions of the nature of the debate, the place of Scripture and tradition in the debate, and reports of experiences of persons in the midst of the ecclesiastical changes taking place. Also includes discussion questions.

Jung, Patricia Beattie, and Smith, Ralph F. Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993.

When this book was written, Jung, a Roman Catholic scholar and Smith, an ordained Lutheran minister, were both at Wartburg Theological Seminary — she as Associate Professor of Theological Ethics and he as Associate Professor of Liturgics and Dean of the Chapel. The book is a reasoned theological and ethical analysis of the impact of a uniform morality based on a limited understanding of human sexuality. The authors use Scripture, tradition and the reason that comes from emerging social scientific data on human sexuality and the experience of gay and lesbian Christians to develop a pluriform sexual ethic. If you have time to read only one book on the subject of Christian sexual ethics — this is it.

Spong, John Shelby, Living in Sin. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988.

The controversial Episcopal Bishop of Newark, Spong invites new understandings of human sexuality and human sexual practices as our understanding of Christian ethics evolves.

Sullivan, Andrew. Virtually Normal. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

Roman Catholic layman and former editor of The New Republic, Sullivan addresses the social, moral and ethical questions surrounding homosexuality in all aspects of society from marriage to the military.

Sullivan, Andrew, ed., Same Sex Marriage: Pro and Con. New York, Vintage Books, 1997.

A wide-ranging collection of articles and essays on the subject of same-sex marriage from religious, legal, political, and sociological perspectives. Presents arguments for and against moving ahead with sanctioning same-sex marriage from such varied commentators as Hannah Arendt and William Bennett.

Appendix A: Draft Liturgy

PRESENTATION AND PRAYERS FOR A COUPLE BEGINNING DISCERNMENT TOWARD MARRIAGE/HOLY UNION

The celebrant invites the couple to come forward at an appropriate moment in the Sunday service. The celebrant then says

In the presence of God and this worshiping community, I present N. and N. who are beginning the process of discernment toward a covenant of marriage/holy union. As they seek God to be the center of this process, they now present themselves to God and this community as a couple, asking blessing and support.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, dwell with N. and N. as they begin the process of discernment. Guide them through the questions, answers, thoughts, pains, and joys that are needed in order to bring them to a fuller understanding of their relationship. Bless this couple and this community who support them. Reveal Your will for these Your servants and their future. All this we ask in Jesus Christ's name. **Amen.**

The celebrant addresses the people:

Celebrant As N. and N.'s family in Christ, will you offer your support, friendship and prayers as they seek God's will for their lives?

People We will.

Celebrant N. and N., may the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be with you today, remain with you and uphold you both forever. May you see God in one another, be aware of God in your daily lives, and seek God's will for the future. All this we ask through Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

A RITE FOR THE CELEBRATION AND BLESSING OF A MARRIAGE/HOLY UNION

THE CHURCH'S TEACHING

The Celebrant, facing the people and the two persons to be joined in marriage/holy union, who stand before him/her, shall say:

Dear people of God: we have come together to witness and bless the covenant of love and fidelity which N. and N. have made with each other. A bond and covenant of marriage/holy union was established by God in creation. God made our first parents for each other, and when they had fallen into sin, God created a new household by grace in Abraham and Sarah, through which all people might be blessed. In the fulness of time, Our Lord Jesus Christ, fruit of that household, gathered the Apostles together with himself to create a new family of God. Behold now the mystery of the union between N. and N., called by God to embody in their covenant that union between Christ and His Church.

The union of two people in heart, body and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and that their love may be a source of grace and blessing to all whom they encounter. This solemn covenant is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately and with the commitment to seek God's will for their lives.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

The Celebrant addresses the couple:

Celebrant N1, will you have N2 as your partner in life, to live together in the covenant of marriage/holy union? Will you love him/her, comfort him/her, honor and keep him/her in sickness and in health and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him/her as long as you both shall live?

N1 I will.

Celebrant N2, will you have N1 as your partner in life, to live together in the covenant of marriage/holy union? Will you love him/her, comfort him/her, honor and keep him/her in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him/her as long as you both shall live?

N2 I will.

Celebrant *(To sponsors)* N3 and N4, you have been chosen to accompany N. and N. as they journey towards the fulfillment of their commitment, growing in love and faithfulness. Will you support them in their life together?

Sponsors We will.¹

¹If there are no sponsors, omit this portion.

In the following question to the witnessing congregation, the words “family in God” or “spiritual family” may be substituted if appropriate. The couple may also ask this question directly of the people, e.g., “As our family in Christ, will you share our joys, . . .”

Celebrant *(To the people)* As N. and N.’s family in Christ, will you share their joys, help them to bear their burdens, and do all in your power to uphold them in their marriage/covenant of holy union?

People We will.

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Celebrant The Lord be with you.

People And also with you.

Celebrant Let us pray.

O gracious and everliving God, You have taught us to love one another as Christ loved us. Look with favor on N. and N. who come to You seeking Your blessing. Assist them with Your grace, that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may honor and keep the promises and vows they make. Protect them from all trouble and danger and bring them with us to the heavenly feast of Your eternal kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

READINGS

There shall be readings from Scripture (including a reading from the Gospels if Holy Communion is to follow).

Old Testament:

Ruth 1:16-17
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (New English Bible)
Micah 4:1-3, 6-8
Zephaniah 3; 14-20
Song of Songs 2:10-13, 8:6-7
I Samuel 18:16, 3, 20:16-17, 42a
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

New Testament:

I Corinthians 12:31-13:13
Ephesians 3:14-19
Romans 12: 9-19
I John 4:7-16, 21
II Corinthians 5:17-20
Colossians 3:12b-16a

Psalms:

Ps 67, 65 85, 111, 127, 133: 1-3, 149, 8:10-11

Gospel:

John 15:9-12

John 2:1-11

Matthew 5:14-16

Matthew 7:24-27

Mark 12: 38-34

Luke 6:32-38

Luke 10:21-24

A Homily may follow.

VOWS

After the Homily, the couple are asked to come forward and stand facing one another.

N1 *(taking N2's hands in hers/his):* N2, I join my life with yours, from this day forward. In prosperity and in hardship, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, I will love, protect and support you as long as we both shall live. This I vow before God.

N2 *(taking N1's hands in hers/his):* N1, I join my life with yours, from this day forward. In prosperity and in hardship, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, I will love, protect and support you as long as we both shall live. This I vow before God.

BLESSING OF THE RINGS

Celebrant: Eternal God, bless these rings as symbols of the love and trust between N. and N.

N1: *(Giving ring to N2):* This ring is a token of my faithfulness and love, and a symbol that all I have I share with you.

N2: *(Giving ring to N1):* This ring is a token of my faithfulness and love, and a symbol that all I have I share with you.²

Celebrant: We have witnessed the promises made by N. and N. and now recognize their union in heart, body and mind.

N. and N., you have committed yourselves to one another in love, joy and tenderness. Become one. Fulfill your promises.
And may God's grace be with you for ever. **Amen.**

²Ring blessing and exchange of rings may be omitted.

PRAYERS

The prayers may be led by the celebrant, a deacon, one of the sponsors, or a family member chosen by the couple.

Almighty and Everliving God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, clothe N. and N. with Your Spirit. Cement the bond of their union and create one flesh and one spirit together. **Amen.**

Grant N. and N. the wisdom and vision to see Your image in one another and the courage to honor You in their love for one another. **Amen.**

Grant that all who observe N. and N. in their life together may see Your presence in their love for one another. **Amen.**

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern to others. **Amen.**

[Bestow on them, if it is Your will, the gift and heritage of children, and the grace to bring them up to know You, to love You, and to serve You. **Amen.**]

[Bless N. (and N.), the child(ren) of N. and N., that this newly formed household may be a place of nurture and strength for him/her/them. **Amen.**]

[Guard, guide and protect your Church. Grant that its members and the works that they do may always reflect your presence and will in this world. **Amen.**]

[Be present with the leaders of our nation and the leaders of other nations. Move them to seek peaceful resolution to conflict and help them to govern in a wise and just manner. **Amen.**]

Bless the union of N. and N. Walk with them in joy and in sorrow, sustain them in prosperity and in adversity, guide them in light and in darkness, and center them in their love for one another. **Amen.**

BLESSING

The blessing is pronounced by the celebrant. The couple may stand facing the celebrant or may kneel. The celebrant may place his/her hands on the heads of the couple or hold their joined hands.

O GOD, you have so consecrated the covenant of marriage/holy union that in it is represented the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church: Send therefore Your blessing upon these Your servants, that they may so love, honor, and cherish one another in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

OR

Most gracious God, we give You thanks for Your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, pour out the abundance of Your blessings upon these two people. Defend them from every enemy. Lead them into all peace. Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads. Bless them in their work and in their companionship; in their sleeping and in their waking; in their joys and in their sorrows; in their life and in their death. Finally, in Your mercy, bring them to that table where Your saints feast forever in Your heavenly home; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who with You and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

In conclusion:

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve and keep you; the Lord look upon you with mercy and favor, and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that you may faithfully live together in this life, and in the age to come have life everlasting. Amen.

THE PEACE

Celebrant The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People And also with you.

The couple greet each other and the congregation. The Offertory follows immediately.

HOLY COMMUNION

Preface

Because in the holy covenant of love between two people You have given us an image of the heavenly Jerusalem where we will be finally united with Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who loves us and gave himself for us to make the whole creation new. . . (*the Celebrant continues: Therefore with angels and archangels. . .*).

Postcommunion Prayer

O God, the giver of all that is true and lovely and gracious: We give You thanks for binding us together in these holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of Your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit, N. and N., now joined in marriage/holy union, may become one in heart and soul, live in fidelity and peace, and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love You: for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Appendix B: Discernment Process

ST. THOMAS' PARISH DISCERNMENT PROCESS FOR HOLY UNION/MARRIAGE

In both the marriage rite in the *Book of Common Prayer* and in the rite proposed by St. Thomas' Parish the congregation, and, by extension, the whole Christian Community, is asked if they will support the couple in their life ahead. In St. Thomas' rite, the question is: "As [the couples'] family in Christ, will you share their joys, help them to bear their burdens, and do all in your power to uphold them in their covenant?" As one way of giving this community support, St. Thomas' Vestry has a fundamental requirement that the Parish and the couple engage with one another in the process leading to discernment concerning the couple's readiness to enter into a holy union/marriage. This discernment is meant to be a supportive one in which the couple receives the assistance of fellow parishioners, including some who are in relationships, as they move toward making their own commitment.

For a service of holy union/marriage by a couple at St. Thomas' Parish, at least one member of the couple must be a communicant of this parish. The couple is expected to have participated in the life of the parish for at least a year before the completion of the discernment process and the scheduling of a holy union/marriage service.

The process of discernment will vary with the character of each couple and their particular life situation (age, length of commitment, prior relationships, etc.) but will, at the minimum, contain the following steps:

- 1) To initiate the process, the couple will send a brief letter to the Rector requesting that their marriage/holy union be solemnized at St. Thomas'. This letter is to be a brief introduction saying
 - 1) Who they are,
 - 2) What their relationship to the Episcopal Church and this Parish is,
 - 3) Why they are at the point of seeking a service solemnizing their commitment.

- 2) The Rector or officiating priest will meet with the couple for counseling several times over the course of the discernment process. Topics will include spiritual, liturgical, and practical matters which couples should address before entering into a life-long union. The following are the kinds of questions which will be raised.
 - 4) How and why has God called you to Holy Union/marriage?
 - 5) What is the relationship of the desire for a religious ceremony and the need for civil recognition?
 - 6) How do you as individuals and as a couple view commitment?
 - 7) What is your understanding of the nature and importance of the liturgy?

Other questions specific to each couple will be considered. Examples include the place of children in their relationship, finances, religious background differences.

- 3) The Couple will also meet with members of the parish selected by the officiating priest in consultation with the couple. The role of these persons is to offer support to the couple. They will meet these “Mentors” three to five times spread over a two to four month period, perhaps over dinner, for discussions on the nature of Christian marriage/holy union and the couple’s preparation for this commitment. The Mentors will include persons who are in relationships and who are willing to share their experiences and address a question such as “what do we wish we had thought about before we got married?” Certainly topics discussed with the officiating priest may, if the couple wishes, be discussed in this setting as well.
- 4) The couple’s relationship with the officiating priest and with the Mentors is meant to be an ongoing one, not stopping with the marriage ceremony. Participation in the life of the community and giving and receiving support are ongoing commitments the couple and the community make to one another.
- 5) The parish will develop resources including written reference materials and personnel to assist couples seeking to enter into holy unions and for ongoing support.

Appendix C: Senior Warden's Homily — 27 October 1996

Thoughts on Marriage, A Homily

Sandra C. Kolb, Senior Warden

“To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.”

With these words fifty-five years ago, my parents married each other. Thirty-one years later in this very place, Jim and I exchanged our vows in words modernized but basically the same.

Between my parents’ wedding day and my own attitudes toward marriage and toward sexual relationships in general had changed. The birth control pill removed the fear of unwanted pregnancy from sexual intercourse and made moral absolutes of “saving oneself for marriage” a meaningless abstraction in the lives of many. Justifiable feminist rage over the subordination of women and their social, emotional, and financial entrapment in exploitive and sometimes violent relationships caused couples to question whether marriage was a valuable institution.

And the institutional church, our moral compass, failed to catch up with the times; failed to offer a road map for its members struggling with the reality of their lives. Within the Episcopal church, with its reliance on scripture, tradition and reason, debates on marriage and moral ethics reflected — and continue to reflect — those that consume society at large. We Episcopalians are not of one mind when it comes to matters sexual or marital.

The differences are most obvious when the discussion turns to gay or lesbian relationships. The ecclesiastical court ruling in Bishop Righter’s case earlier this year stated, “The Court is not giving an opinion on the morality of same gender relationships. We are not deciding whether life-long, committed, sexual same gender relationships are or are not a wholesome example with respect to ordination vows.”

Yet that begs the question. A straight clergy person living in an unmarried, though committed and life-long, sexual relationship with a member of the opposite sex would certainly NOT be considered a wholesome example by the church at large. So the church — and we — are immediately confronted with the issue of what constitutes a “wholesome example” of same gender relationships and how that relates to what we understand about marriage.

So today I want to talk about marriage — not as a legal contract because that is a separable issue — but as what I understand it to be in the context of Christian community. Let me acknowledge at the start that marriage is not a state to which everyone is called, but it is a relationship which the church, at least for the past several centuries, has sanctified in sacrament. It is one of the biggest bones of contention in the public square, challenging — even requiring us — to take a stand. And if we can agree on what constitutes a marriage we can, perhaps, back our way into agreement on what constitutes moral behavior in other relationships.

I want to share my own journey in understanding. I speak to you out of my own experience: as a straight married woman, a mother, life-long Episcopalian and member of this congregation. Your experience may be different — in fact the range of experience in this room is probably as diverse as the people gathered here. For some marriage is a bitter memory or a shattered dream, for others a painful reminder of patriarchy's view of women as chattel to be given away. But understanding comes from our unhappy and ambiguous, as well as our joyful, experiences. Through sharing our diverse journeys I hope we can forge a consensus that will help this parish, this diocese, and yes, this institutional church we call ours, reach a new understanding of Christian and committed relationships.

The words of the marriage vows themselves serve as my starting place. I believe these words have changed little since my parents' time because they, in fact, define a Christian marriage. "To have and to hold, to love and to cherish. . ." Marriage is, of course, a love relationship privately entered into and distinguished from other love relationships by sexual intimacy, depth of faithfulness, and life-long nature.

Madeleine L'Engle is an eminent writer of fiction and thoughtful essayist in the Anglican tradition. She has written frequently of her own marriage and much of what she has to say mirrors my own experience. In her book of essays, The Irrational Season, she notes:

If we commit ourselves to one person for life this is not, as many people think, a rejection of freedom; rather, it demands the courage to move into all the risks of freedom, and the risk of love which is permanent, into that love which is not possession but participation.¹

It is this principle of participation which my parents illustrated for me. They were very clear that "to have and to hold" does not mean "to crush." Life in a rectory — my father is an Episcopal clergyman — is a fishbowl, bounded by people's expectations and constant scrutiny. Still, my parents managed to retain their individuality: partners and helpmates, giving each other the freedom to be more than they as individuals might have imagined.

"Until parted by death." "Marriage," my mother said, "doesn't mean that you will never meet someone else you could love. It is your promise that you won't do anything about it." In my parent's day — and for much of my life — the church rigidly enforced these words, refusing to sanctify the marriage of anyone who had been previously divorced. Sometimes the result was to trap people — frequently women — in destructive relationships.

That has changed in the last twenty or thirty years. Bishops may now grant permission for previously divorced individuals to marry again with the church's blessing. The recognition that death can come in ways other than physical is an important admission of humankind's all too fallible nature.

Still, I think the expectation of the life-long nature of marriage should hold true. Although “life-long” is longer than it used to be, I believe that unless there is an expectation of permanence it is difficult to make the relationship last through the hard times. Marriage is “. . . not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately.”

While marriage begins in the heart — as dad always said, “By the time the couple get to the altar they have already married”— Christian marriage takes place in the community. It is a public commitment, a sacrament: the “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”

The new prayer book makes explicit the communal nature of the commitment in a way that the wedding ceremony my parents used did not. The friends and family gathered at Jim’s and my wedding agreed to “support and uphold (the) marriage in the years ahead” with a joyful “We will!” The importance of the public nature of that commitment cannot be underestimated. For if, as the now too often heard African proverb says, “it takes a village to raise a child,” it takes at least a community to nurture a marriage.

A stanza from Madeleine L’Engle’s poem “Lovers Apart” sums up the importance of sacrament.

We may not love in emptiness;
We married in a peopled place.
The vows we made enrich and bless
The smile on every stranger’s face.²

When I was a teenager, one of my friends became pregnant. My father officiated at her wedding at a time when many churches would have turned her away. He and I talked about the situation. “I believe,” he said, “that couple needs all the support we can give them if they are going to make it. They are willing to try, and we must offer them our best.” It was a lovely wedding.

It is in the hard times — the times apart; the times of estrangement; the times of for worse, for poorer, or in sickness — that the strength of the community is needed. Promises made publicly and supported openly are less easy to break, and sometimes that is what gets you through. The casseroles brought to my house while I recuperated from surgery, the rides to the doctor people offered my mother when she became ill, the times when friends have taken the children for a weekend: these have sustained my own marriage.

Marriage is no guarantee of happiness, it is only a promise of companionship in facing life’s vagaries. Keeping a marriage relationship thriving is hard work. Riding in a taxi one day, Madeleine L’Engle mentioned to the driver that she and her husband were celebrating their twenty-ninth anniversary. It must be some kind of record for a writer and an actor she mused. The taxi driver turned to her, “Lady, that’s not a record. That’s a miracle.”³

If I understand marriage as a promise of fidelity and love, pledged in private and declared openly before God and congregation, how do I relate that understanding to life-long, committed gay or lesbian relationships?

That part of my journey began five years ago when St. Thomas' was searching for a new rector, and I chaired the Search Committee. Clergy couples find their relationships scrutinized by Search Committees who want to know just how the spouse will "fit in," and what role the spouse will play in the life of the parish (no Ellen Cooks need apply!). It is difficult enough for Search Committees to handle this issue when dealing with straight married priests, but we had gay priests who were in committed relationships applying as well.

Although the man who served as the assistant and later the interim rector of St. Thomas, was gay, he was not in a life-long, committed relationship. I, frankly, was so naive that I had never even thought about gay couples in this context or how we would — or should — assess their commitment to each other. As the Search Committee and the vestry worked through this issue, it became clear that the common ground we shared was our understanding of the basic characteristics of marriage as illustrated by the marriage vows. If a clergy couple were to be a "wholesome example," then their relationship and their understanding of commitment needed to reflect those characteristics. Standards that applied to straight married couples, we applied to gay couples as well.

In the search process we encountered gay clergy couples living in the closet, with parish and bishop said not to "know" what was going on. I feared for the stability of these relationships if they were free to be lived openly. We interviewed gay priests who found it difficult to be open with us because disclosure seemed so perilous. I had not expected to be so moved by their situations. And we met openly gay couples whose relationships were as stable as any we found among the straight candidates. I marveled at the ability of these couples to establish relationships, in spite of the odds stacked against them, that most straight couples would envy.

I came to understand that these couples reflected in their lives all that I understood marriage to mean. What was missing was the public affirmation of their promises to each other. There was no sacrament to offer.

Thus I have come to believe that we must move in that direction, to develop a sacrament of promise and commitment that allows gay and lesbian couples to affirm their vows before God and community. Is it "marriage?" I think so, though that is a semantic hurdle too high for many people to leap.

The vestry has worked through these issues as well over the past year or so. The discussions have not always been easy, but we have reached consensus that the standards of commitment to life-long, sexual relationships which we honor are the same for all couples, gay or straight. Over the next several months there will be opportunities for you to join the vestry in continuing to explore the communal and sacramental nature of life-long, committed sexual relationships. We seek consensus within the parish as a whole about the nature of these relationships, praying that the Holy Spirit will move the dialogue within our parish and church forward. As we journey I call upon God to guide our steps with these words of petition from the wedding service.

Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where, O Father, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign in perfect unity now and for ever.

Amen.

October 27, 1996
St.Thomas' Episcopal Church
Washington, DC

Notes

¹Madeline L'Engle, The Irrational Season (Harper San Francisco, 1977), p. 47.

²*Ibid.*, p. 51.

³*Ibid.*, p. 41.

Appendix D: Rector's Sermon — 10 November 1996

THE COVENANT

A sermon preached at St. Thomas' Parish, Dupont Circle, Washington, DC, by The Rector, The Reverend James C. Holmes on The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 10 November 1996.

It is something of a stretch to move from the parable of the wise and foolish virgins to pick up on the discussion of marriage begun by Sandy Kolb, but I am sure more tenuous ties have been made than the discussion of the impending marriage feast and the need to be ready for it with the subject of commitment and Christian community. What I want to do this morning is to continue the theme of Sandy's sermon from my own perspective, and in light of the intervening Sunday, a Sunday on which two persons were baptized into the household of God, and those of us witnessing that renewed our own baptismal covenant.

Two weeks ago Sandy preached here on marriage, and suggested, with good reason, that this parish is moving to a broader understanding of marriage, one which includes not only the union of a man and a woman, but the joining of two persons of the same gender as well. One seminary professor described her remarks as brilliant and beautiful, a conclusion with which many here would heartily agree.

It is ironic that on the same Sunday that Sandy was preaching here the December issue of *Penthouse* hit the newsstands, with a scandalous story accusing an Episcopal priest in Brooklyn bringing young adult men to this country with the purpose of keeping them as sexual slaves. The story is lurid and graphic in its account and includes sexual encounters in the church and drug use. It also includes a marriage ceremony between the priest and one of the young men.

The article was about everything except what Sandy was talking about. It was not about loving and cherishing, about commitment, about mutual support and nurture in the midst of "better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health." It was rather about exploitation, one human being using another, about the misuses of religious symbols and space. At its heart, it was about the violation of the baptismal covenant which we renewed here last week in which we committed ourselves once again to respect the dignity of every human being.

As you can imagine, there was a terrible outcry against the events alleged to have taken place in Brooklyn. The priest resigned as rector his parish and renounced his priesthood, the Bishop of Long Island promised a full inquiry, bishops from around the country issued statements deploring the behavior. And, as you can imagine, conservative Episcopalians around the country were outraged. They did not know about Sandy's sermon, but if they had, they would have said, "see, this is what you get if you admit that persons of the same gender might make a godly commitment to one another." One person said,

The scandal is not only that these activities may have occurred, or even where they may have occurred. The deeper scandal is in Episcopal leaders who seriously propose that sexual intercourse between two men or two women is the moral equivalent of lovemaking by a married man and woman.

That is precisely what many leaders are in fact proposing. It is what St. Thomas' Vestry has been talking about for the last year or so, and it is the conversation into which Sandy invited the parish two weeks ago. And, as she said, it arises for her, for the Vestry, for me, from our experience as individual Christians, as a Christian community, and from trying to consider our experience in the light of Anglicanism's three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

It has been a busy two weeks on this particular front. On Friday night ABC presented a segment of *Turning Point* on gay marriage. I did not see it, but I have talked to some of you who did, and who found it a wonderful affirmation of the normality of the coming together of two men or two women. One of the couples profiled had a marriage service in an Episcopal Church in San Francisco, against the wishes of The Bishop of California. He was not against the union *per se*, and in fact believed that the two men were intending a life-long, faithful relationship with one another. Nor did he object to the parish's liturgically affirming the union of these two men. What bothered him was that it would be on national TV, and as such there would not be time to cover the various subtleties and dimensions of the counseling and the liturgy.

Though I believe Bishop Swing is being too defensive in his response to the Episcopal segment on *Turning Point*, he did, in a published statement, make what I think is the most important point in the discussion. He says,

The preeminent covenant in the Church is not marriage or the blessing of a couple. Such rites as these are derivative from the one, ultimate covenant which is baptism. In the Episcopal Church there is simplicity and clarity around baptism. Both orientations, heterosexual and homosexual, are invited into the sacrament of baptism whereby all tarnish of fallenness, all sin is removed, and all baptized people are accepted as adopted daughters and son of God. Spiritually we are alive because of the mercy of God in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, not because of achievement of moral perfection. In the midst of our struggles in the Church to discover the mind of Christ regarding a covenant between same-sex Christian couples, we need to remember that our most important covenant has already been set firmly in place for all of us in baptism.

He reminds us, as it sometimes seems as if we are trying to create a new form of Noah's Ark here at St. Thomas' with everyone in a coupled covenant relationship, that these relationships, and in fact all relationships, are derivative of the relationship with God signified in the baptismal covenant.

That covenant has created a community, the People of God, and I am convinced that the hallmarks of relationships within that community are to be the same, no matter the specific nature of the relationship. That some of those relationships have an appropriate sexual expression is true, but that is not the defining characteristic of the relationship. That which is at the heart of my relationship with Tim should be the same thing which is at the heart of my relationships with each of you, with you as a parish, for it is to be the same thing which is at the heart of my relationship with God, of God's relationship with me.

At the heart is God's love for me, for each of us. In response to that love I am asked, as my part of the covenant, to love God and love all of God's creation, neighbors and self. How I am to do that is shown in the covenant. I am to seek and serve, that is I am to extend myself on behalf of you, not just because I know you, or like you, or even have a particular, intense relationship with you, but because God has made us a part of a community. I am to be honest with you, to forgive you, to teach you, to learn from you, to help you, to comfort you, to receive from you, to seek justice for you; in short, I am to love you. As God has loved me, so I am to love you.

And in loving you, I am to respect your dignity. I have covenanted with God and with you to see in you the image of God. That is hard sometimes when I am not seeing clearly, when I am angry, or hurt, when I am greedy or lustful. I want at times to make of you an object, something that I can strike at, or use, or control. Sometimes I want to make you more than you are; sometimes I want to dismiss you, just get you out of the way. And I may do these things whether I know you, or like you, or even have a particular, intense relationship with you. But, because I am a part of this community, I am to realize that those are sinful ways of being in relationship with you, and I am to turn from them and give to you the respect that is yours as a child of God, whether by your particular actions you deserve it or not.

For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, we belong to a community which has standards of behavior for us in our relationships with each other, whatever their natures. For it is being a part of this covenant community, the baptized, the people of God, which gives us our identity, not our marital status or sexual orientation, not our race or our gender. It is not only a life-long commitment, but one which endures for eternity. And each of us is called to fidelity, that is to be faithful to this covenant, to God and to one another, by the way we live with one another.

In any human relationships, marriage, unions, families, neighborhoods, nations, whatever, there will be failures, there will be betrayals, there will be infidelities. But though these will happen even here at St. Thomas', in the Episcopal Church, in the household which is called the People of God, we must never lose sight of what is at the heart of the covenant, the love of God, and turn and re-turn to it over and over as we seek to build relationships, communities which are signs to the world of the way one lives in response to God's love which we have experienced in Jesus Christ.

The purpose of our having this conversation at St. Thomas' is to look for ways to concretely support one another in this covenant community as we realize that in the myriad particular ways we relate to one another there is one standard for us all: that we love one another. It is in doing that that we in fact respond to the prophetic word of Amos:

let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.