

Frequently Asked Questions about Same Sex Blessings in the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania

If a same-sex couple has already had their relationship blessed in another diocese, will the diocese of Central Pennsylvania recognize their relationship? Yes. Currently same-sex couples and their children attend and are members of parishes in the diocese. The congregations of the diocese welcome all people and recognize each as a beloved child of God.

What is the biblical warrant for the Church's decision to bless same-sex relationships? The Standing Commission for Liturgy and Music of The Episcopal Church has prepared a report that may be found in its entirety on the diocesan website. A summary of that report will also appear on the website.

Why are we doing this now? As articulated by Bishop Baxter at the 2012 Diocesan convention, the diocese in general, has indicated that faithfulness to the Good News of Salvation and the unique Gospel proclamation of God in Christ Jesus demands unity and peace for the sake of mission. The matter was submitted, debated, and approved by the 2012 General Convention of the Episcopal Church. It is hoped that our response to this issue and others that may emerge may bring us closer rather than divide us and thus safeguard the mission and ministry of the Church.

What is the specific role of the vestry in implementing this policy? Each vestry is asked to “take the temperature” of the people of the parish concerning the use of the rite approved by General Convention. It should not be a matter of a “vote” but rather an intentional process of reaching consensus among the members of the vestry so that they may advise the rector accordingly.

Why does the policy support the blessing of same-sex covenants and not same-sex marriages? Pennsylvania law prohibits a clergy person from performing a “marriage” for a same-sex couple since such a “marriage” would not be recognized by civil law in the Commonwealth.

Does this policy diminish the Church's theological understanding of marriage? No. *The Book of Common Prayer's* definition of marriage as the union between a man and a woman is not affected by this development within The Episcopal Church.

Why are some Episcopal dioceses allowing clergy to perform same-sex “marriages?” Some dioceses within The Episcopal Church are allowed to “marry” same-sex couples because their mission context is one that exists within a state where same-sex marriages are legal and recognized by the state.

Will any priest or parish be forced to bless a same-sex relationship? No. The Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church protects the right of every individual clergy person to choose which rites they will perform, and for whom they will perform them.

Is a parish required to hold such services? No. A parish may not be required to do any service authorized by The Episcopal Church. Each Episcopal priest with pastoral authority alone chooses (in relationship with the people of the parish) what services are offered: Eucharist, Morning/Evening Prayer or any of the pastoral services (Marriage, Burial, etc.)

Will there be blessings of same-sex couples at my church? Your rector or priest-in-charge will have the opportunity to decide in accordance with the pastoral guidance of Bishop Baxter and in conversation with the people of the parish as represented in the vestry.

What is the difference between a blessing ceremony and a wedding? The liturgy is different. Moreover, marriage has legal standing in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. At this time, a blessing of a same-sex partnership does not. When a priest performs a marriage, he or she acts as an agent of the Commonwealth as well as of the Church. This does not occur in the case of same-sex partnerships since there is no state involvement.

What are the options for same-sex couples in a parish that does not allow such blessings? The rector or priest-in-charge may refer them to clergy licensed to serve in the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania who are willing to do such blessings in parishes approved by the bishop.

What preparation does a same-sex couple have to receive? The bishop expects that like pre-marital guidance offered by the clergy at the time of planning for marriage will similarly be offered to those same-sex couples seeking a blessing, since the covenantal aspects of the relationships are similar.

What guidance will be provided to parishes about how to opt out or opt in? Each rector or priest-in-charge will seek the guidance of the parish's vestry on the matter. Once the rector has made his decision, he/she will request permission from the bishop's office to celebrate same-sex blessing in the parish. If a parish opts not to participate, it can revisit that decision and seek permission at any time.

What happens if the clergy and vestry in a parish are "not on the same page?" Nothing happens within the parish and sanctuary. Diocesan policy seeks to promote consensus and pastoral harmony among the priest, vestry leadership and the congregation.

Will the bishop have to approve each blessing? No. Once the parish has requested and received the bishop's permission, its clergy are free to exercise the same kind of pastoral discretion that would be exercised for any other rite of the church.

Can a rector conduct such services off-site? Yes, but only with the permission of the bishop.

Can a rector conduct services in another diocese? Yes, but only with the mutual agreement of the priest's diocese and the diocese where the rite will be celebrated.