

# Bishop's Policy on Same Sex Marriage

The Right Reverend Scott Anson Benhase, Bishop of Georgia  
Feast of St James of Jerusalem, 2015

## Background

For many in the Diocese of Georgia my views on human sexuality and Christian marriage are well known, but I want to offer my thoughts here to provide a context for the *Policy* that follows. That will help everyone who reads this understand how I arrived at my theological and pastoral discernment.

Our Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer reminds us that while our human nature reflects the “image of God,” it also reflects the “misuse of our freedom” and the truth that we have regularly “made wrong choices” in our lives. This “misuse of our freedom” makes us “rebels” against God and leads us to place ourselves “in the place of God” (BCP p. 845). Anyone, then, seeking to discern God’s desire for themselves or for others must recognize that they may choose wrongly and thus sin. Our sin, the Catechism states, “distorts our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation” (BCP p. 848). Such knowledge should humble us all. Still, we must make choices knowing full well we may be rebelling against God as we do.

Long ago, after years of biblical study, the reading of our tradition (especially St Augustine of Hippo), reading scientific and medical studies, and listening to people’s experience, I discerned that human sexuality is amoral, that is, our sexual orientation is neither right nor wrong. It just is. How we behave as sexual beings is what matters. Any sexual behavior that abuses, exploits, or demeans another person is wrong – always. From that discernment, I believe both heterosexual and homosexual persons have the responsibility to exercise their sexuality in a way that is natural to them, taking care not to abuse, exploit, or demean another person, who like them is created in the image of God. This is why I have readily presided at the blessing of same sex relationships for over 10 years. It is why I rejoiced this past summer when the Supreme Court declared civil marriage equality in our country.

For those concerned that the Church has now changed its theology of marriage after our recent General Convention (and that has never been done before) let me remind us all that the Church’s theology of marriage was changed significantly over 50 years ago when the Church sanctioned remarriage after divorce. It is now a common practice in the Church as well as in the culture. Divorce has come to be accepted by many as a good thing in spite of Jesus’ clear teaching. The pervasive practice of divorce among heterosexual persons has weakened the Church’s witness in proclaiming a robust theology of marriage. Divorce is just one of many signs of our sinfulness as human beings. While it is clearly necessary in some circumstances, it should never be seen as a “good” in itself. It is always at best the lesser of two evils.

Also, we should not make the mistake of confusing the civil and Christian “goods” of marriage. They are not the same, even though they share some things in common. The civil understanding is primarily *contractual*, while the Christian understanding is primarily *vocational*. In our tradition, God “calls” the couple into the covenant of marriage. It becomes part of their life’s work together. It has less to do with shared bank accounts or property, legal status, health care rights, or tax benefits and more to do with how God will *deploy* the couple to be a “sign of Christ’s love to this sinful and

broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair” (BCP p. 429).

Our tradition has taught us that the exercise of our sexuality is most properly and faithfully lived out in the covenant of marriage. There are numerous biblical warrants for this, most significantly in the teachings of Jesus. These biblical warrants are all based on heterosexual marriage. There is no biblical warrant for homosexual marriage. Yet, many homosexual couples have been to me a “sign of Christ’s love” and through their gracious lives together they have given me a glimpse of God’s amazing grace for this one particular sinner.

This all has caused a continuing dilemma for me. I can support wholeheartedly the Church’s blessing of homosexual couples. Yet, since there is no biblical warrant for homosexual marriage, I have not been able to support it. In my understanding, the Christian blessing of their relationships is a “good,” and while it is similar, it is still a distinct good from Christian marriage. This has placed me at odds with most of my colleagues in the House of Bishops who are on either side of me. That could mean I am right and most of the other bishops are not, or, I am wrong and have been wrong for some time. I don’t think I am wrong or I would not hold the position I do. Yet, recognizing my own sinfulness and my capacity to rebel regularly against God’s gracious rule over my life, I have to hold that up as a real possibility.

As I have thought about what this *Policy* should be, I had two core concerns. The first is *fairness*. I want the *Policy* that follows to be fair to all who are legally and canonically eligible for marriage in the Church. If people who read the following *Policy* see it as unfair to any person or group, then I will have not achieved what I set out to do. The second concern follows on the first and that is *respect*. My hope is the *Policy* that follows respects all persons even though we may not share the same thoughts, feelings, and positions on marriage. There will be those who disagree with my *Policy*, but I hope they see that our disagreement does not equal a lack of fairness or disrespect toward them.

At our General Convention, the Church approved three (or five, depending on how one counts) “trial” rites for use by this Church over the next triennium. Beginning on page 76 of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music’s Report (SCLM) the following rites are found (the rites are found at <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/13068.pdf>):

1. The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant
2. The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage
3. The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage (2)
  - a. The Blessing of a Civil Marriage
  - b. An Order for Marriage

(Note: the 4<sup>th</sup> rite in the Report was not approved)

*I list these so when I reference them in the following Policy you will know how to access them and differentiate them one from the other.*

Since I am uncertain as to what is, in fact, the right thing to do in the eyes of God (my heart tells me one thing and my head tells me another), I am exercising personal humility and a generosity of spirit trusting in God’s grace and mercy for myself and for the Diocese. Like St Peter in Acts 11:17, I hope I am acting faithfully and not actually “hindering God.” Like all of us, I will one day stand before the Great Judgment Seat of Christ and no longer “know only in part,” but “then I will know fully” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

So, in the *Policy* that follows I am making provision for same sex marriage within the Diocese.

## The Policy

1. Beginning Advent 1, 2015, and for the next three years, the following rites may be used by the presbyters of this Diocese with all persons who are legally and canonically eligible for marriage: *The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage (2)*, which begins on Page 97 of the SCLM Report; and, if the couple has already been married civilly, *The Blessing of a Civil Marriage*, which begins on Page 103 of the SCLM Report. *The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage* (BCP, p. 423 ff) and *The Blessing of a Civil Marriage* (BCP, p. 433ff) are Prayer Book rites and thus should continue to be used as appropriate.

2. I am not authorizing the use in this Diocese of the following: *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*, *The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage*, and *An Order for Marriage* found in the SCLM Report referenced above. I could write many pages about why I found these inadequate, but for the sake of brevity here: These three liturgies failed in my estimation to live up to theological standards in terms of Christology, the truth of human sinfulness, and the Church's tradition of sacramental theology.

3. All Presbyters canonically resident or licensed to officiate (LTO) **may** preside at the liturgies authorized above in (1). None will ever be required to do so by me.

4. Since presbyters do not now seek the permission of their respective vestries when presiding at the marriage of heterosexual couples, I will not require them to do so with the marriage of homosexual couples. Nevertheless, I strongly encourage presbyters to consult and receive feedback from their lay leadership before deciding how to proceed. Rectors, Vicars, and Priests-in-Charge have pastoral oversight of the whole congregation and thus should make their decisions based on the ordinal and their responsibility to lead and serve all the people of the congregation.

5. The congregation's Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge must approve the use of the rites authorized above in (1) before they are offered on her or his congregation's property. Assisting presbyters, whatever their title or stipendiary status, must conform to the direction of the Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge in this matter. For presiding at marriages using one of the rites authorized in (1) above at a place other than church property, I cannot require conformity to the direction of the Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge (see 3 above). Nevertheless, I am requiring assisting presbyters to consult with the Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge where they serve prior to such presiding so the presbyter desiring to preside may better understand the larger pastoral issues at work in the congregation where they both serve.

6. Since the canons on marriage give wide latitude to a presbyter's decision to preside or not to preside at any given marriage, I strongly encourage, but do not require, that presbyters maintain whatever current policies they have in place for presiding at marriages. For example, if it is the policy of a presbyter to preside only at marriages of couples who are already members of the Church or who are relatives of members, then I encourage presbyters to maintain such policies. The SCLM Report has some helpful *Model Congregational Guidelines* (see the Report pp. 74-75) for presbyters to use for marriage in the Church. I urge all presbyters to be clear about what their policies are and practice them consistently in the congregation. This is about good pastoral leadership and its relationship to the practice of marriage in the Church.

7. Presbyters, retired or otherwise, who are not connected to a congregation (stipendiary or otherwise), must consult with my office before presiding at a marriage using one of the trial liturgies authorized above in (1).