

**Questions and Answers
Concerning the Issue of the Blessing of Same Sex Couples
in the Diocese of Georgia**

The Episcopal Church has been in dialogue for over a generation about human sexuality. We have had commissions, educational resources, and study guides. We have had many opportunities to listen and to share our thoughts and feelings about this subject. Bishop Benhase has only been Diocesan Bishop in the Diocese of Georgia for two years. What is his position on the issue of blessing same sex couples?

The Bishop has been quite clear on his position. During the interview and search process for the 10th Bishop of Georgia, he clearly articulated his support for the Church establishing a rite of blessing for same sex couples. He stated after his consecration, however, that no blessing rite could be used in the Diocese of Georgia until the Church took formal action to authorize such a rite. His interpretation of past General Convention actions led him to conclude that such specific authorization has never truly occurred to date. He also has pointed out that his understanding of Holy Matrimony is that it can only be between a man and woman, regardless of what secular governments do. Any blessing rite the Church might authorize would have to be plainly distinguished from marriage in order to receive his approval.

At the General Convention in 2009, the General Convention tasked the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music with developing theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same sex couples. These liturgical resources will be presented to the 2012 General Convention and voted on for trial use by the Church. If approved for trial use, what would that mean for the Diocese of Georgia?

Bishop Benhase cannot support the current version of the proposed trial rite because he does not believe it is sufficiently distinguished from the rite of marriage found in the Book of Common Prayer. There may be, however, a provision in whatever resolution is approved that would allow alternative rites from the one proposed to also be authorized. If that happens, then there is a good possibility that a rite of blessing may be available that meets the Bishop's criteria. You can find the theological and liturgy information on the proposed rite here:

<http://houseofdeputies.org/blessingexcerpts>

If a rite of blessing is authorized in the Diocese of Georgia by the Bishop, then will that mean every congregation must offer it and every priest must officiate at one?

No. The Bishop in consultation with the Standing Committee and the clergy of the Diocese of Georgia will establish criteria for whatever rite meets his approval, if indeed General Convention authorizes a rite this summer. While such criteria have not been established, at the very least the criteria would insure that no congregation or priest would be required to offer such a rite. The criteria will also require formal consensus between priest and vestry before it could be offered in a particular congregation. That means the bishop will not allow non-parochial priests to preside at such a blessing rite disconnected from a congregation.