

The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage
The Blessing of a Civil Marriage
The Episcopal Diocese of Rochester

An Alternative Rite
which conforms to the “Order for Marriage”
in *The Book of Common Prayer*

September 2011

Concerning the Service

Marriage is a sacred covenant between two persons who make vows to one another of fidelity, mutuality and exclusivity. As a part of the Christian Life it is a way in which two people chose to live out their Baptismal Covenant. Marriage is a vocation and also an icon of God's steadfast love for the Creation, Christ's relationship of unconditional grace with the Church, and the gift of the Holy Spirit which is sealed in each Christian person.

This rite is appropriately celebrated in the context of The Holy Eucharist.

A bishop or priest presides at the liturgy. In the Diocese of Rochester, deacons do not preside at weddings without the express permission of the Bishop. The term "presider" is used in this liturgy in place of the term "celebrant" found in *the Book of Common Prayer*.

At least two persons, but any number, drawn from the local assembly, at least one of whom is baptized, and the friends and families of the couple, may present them to the presider and the assembly. This may follow a period of mentoring as part of the couple's preparation for Marriage.

Parallel texts from *Enriching Our Worship I* may always be substituted for elements of this rite.

Except in the places where proper texts are provided, this rite presumes the use of the texts and the observance of the rubrics of other authorized liturgical documents.

The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage

The Word of God

Gathering

The couple to be blessed joins the assembly. A hymn, Psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.

The presider says the following, the people standing:

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
People: And blessed be God's kingdom, now and for ever.
Amen.

In place of the above, from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost

Presider Alleluia. Christ is risen.
People The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Then may said:

Presider: Beloved, let us love one another,
People: For love is of God
Presider: Whoever does not love does not know God;
People: For God is love.
Presider: Since God so loves us;
People: Let us love one another.

The presider may address the assembly in these words:

Dear friends in Christ,
we have gathered together today
to witness *N.N.* and *N.N.* publically committing themselves to one another
and, in the name of the Church, to bless the union into which they enter,
in a relationship of mutual fidelity and steadfast love,
forsaking all others
and holding one another in tenderness and respect,
in strength and bravery,
come what may,
as long as they live.

Ahead of them is a life of joy and sorrow,
of blessing and struggle,

of gain and loss,
demanding of them the kind of selflessness and self-giving
manifest to us above all in the life of Jesus,
who stands among us today
to call N. and N. always to witness in their life together
the generosity he lives for the world
and in which he calls us all to share.

Let us pray, then, that they may be strengthened for the promises they
make this day
And that we will have the grace to support them in what they undertake
And the wisdom to see God at work in their life together.

The Gloria or another Hymn of Praise may be said or sung.

Collect of the Day

Presider: The Lord be with you.
People: And also with you.
Presider: Let us pray.

*The presider says one of the following collects. The two collects for
specific situations do not have to be used in those situations. They are
offered as alternatives only.*

Gracious and everliving God, assist by your grace N. and N.,
whose lifelong commitment of love and fidelity we witness this day.
Grant them your blessing, that, with firm resolve
they may honor and keep the covenant they make,
through Jesus Christ our Savior,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Or this

Almighty and everliving God,
look tenderly upon N. and N,
who stand before you in the company of your Church.
Lift them up in joy in their life together.
Grant them so to love selflessly,
To live humbly,
That they may be to one another and to the world
A witness and a sign of your never-failing care.
Through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

One God to the ages of ages. *Amen.*

Or this

For those who have shared a life together for some time prior to the marriage

O God, ever faithful and ever true,
whose steadfast love endures for ever
we give you thanks for sustaining *N.* and *N.* in their common life
and bringing them to this day.

Complete the good work you have begun in them,
and grant us, with them, a dwelling place eternal in the heavens
where all will share the joy of perfect love,
and where you, with the Son and the Spirit live and reign,
one God now and for ever. *Amen.*

Or this

For those who bring children to the marriage

Holy Trinity, One God,
three persons perfect in unity and equal in majesty:
Draw together with bonds of love and affection
N. and *N.* who with *their families*
seek to live in harmony and forbearance all their days,
that their joining together will be to us
a reflection of that unbounded communion,
which is your very essence and life,
O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
for you live and reign in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

The Readings

The people sit. One or more of the following passages of Scripture is read. A passage from the Gospels always concludes the Readings when Communion is to be celebrated.

From the Old Testament

Genesis 1:26-28 (Male and female they are created)

Genesis 2:4-9, 15-24 (They become one flesh)

1 Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a;

or 1 Samuel 18:1-4 (David and Jonathan's Covenant)

Ruth 1:16-17 (Ruth 7 Naomi's Covenant)

Song of Solomon 2:10-13, 8:6-7 (Many waters cannot quench love)

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (Two are better than one)
Tobit 4:7-16 (That we may grow old together)

From the Epistles

Romans 12:9-18 (Let love be genuine)
1 Corinthians 12:31—13:13 (The greatest of these is love)
Galatians 5:14, 22-26 (the fruits of the spirit)
Ephesians 3:14-21 (The Father from whom every family is named)
Philippians 2:1-4 (be of the same mind)
Colossians 3:12-17 (love which binds everything together)
1 John 3:18-24 (let us love...in truth and action)
1 John 4:7-16, 21 (love is of God)

When one of the above Biblical passages is read, the Reader announces it:

Reader: A Reading (Lesson) from _____.

After the Reading, the Reader says The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

*Between the Readings, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said.
Appropriate Psalms are:*

Psalm 23	Psalm 112
Psalm 65	Psalm 126
Psalm 67	Psalm 127
Psalm 85:7-13	Psalm 133
Psalm 98	Psalm 148
Psalm 100	Psalm 149:1-5

From the Gospels

Matthew 5:1-10 (the beatitudes)
Matthew 5:13-16 (You are the light of the world)
Mark 10:6-9, (13-16) (no longer two but one)
Mark 12:28-34 (the greatest commandment)
John 15:9-17 (love one another as I have loved you)
John 17:1, 18-26 (that they may be one)

All standing, the Deacon or Priest reads the Gospel, first saying:

 The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to

People: _____
 Glory to you, Lord Christ.

After the Gospel, the Reader says:

People: The Gospel of the Lord.
 Praise to you, Lord Christ.

The Sermon

The Making of Vows

The Presentation

The couple, with any who will present them, stand before the assembly, and the Presider says one of the following:

Presider Who presents *N.* and *N.* to be married?
Presenters We do.

Or this

Presenters We present *N.* and *N.*,
 and we affirm that we have seen in their relationship
 the presence and the work of God.

The Presider says to the couple

You have come before God and the church to make public
your commitment to one another and to ask God's blessing
on your marriage. *N.*, do you freely and unreservedly offer
yourself to *N.* seeking to live together in faithfulness and
holiness of life as long as you both shall live?

Individual: I do.

The Affirmation of the Assembly

The Assembly stands, the couple faces them, and the Presider addresses the People, saying:

Presider: Will all of you here gathered uphold and honor this *couple*
 in their marriage?

People: We will.

Presider: Will you pray for them in times of trouble and celebrate
 with them in times of joy?

People: We will.

The Prayers

Presider: Then let us pray for *N.* and *N.* in their life together and for the concerns of this community.

A deacon or another leader bids prayers for the church and for the world, the concerns of the local community, those who suffer and those in trouble, and for the departed. Prayers are made for the couple in particular. Adaptations or insertions to the prayers suitable to the occasion may be made.

Leader: For those who seek justice and peace among nations and in our own communities: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For those among us who are sick or suffering, those who are homeless or poor, and for the victims of violence or greed: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For those who lead and serve in communities of faith and for this parish and diocese: Lord, in your goodness
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For strengthening of the vows and commitments we have made in your name: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For *N.* and *N.*, seeking your blessing of God and the blessing of your holy people: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For a spirit of loving-kindness to shelter them all their days: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For friends to support them and communities to enfold them: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For peace in their home and love in their *family*: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer.

Leader: For communion with all who have died in the hope of the
resurrection: Lord, in your goodness:
People: hear our prayer

*After a time of silence, during which the assembly voices its
additional petitions, the presider concludes the Prayers with the
following or another appropriate collect, unless the Eucharist is
not to follow, when the Lord's Prayer is said by all.*

Hear our prayer, gracious God, for you sustain the whole creation
with your love and faithfulness:
by the power of your Holy Spirit
may we be your reconciling presence in the world,
through our Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

And now, as our Savior
Christ has taught us,
we are bold to say,

As our Savior Christ
has taught us,
we now pray,

People and Presider:

People and Presider:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

Vows

The couple joins hands and, first one and then the other, they say:

In the name of God,
I, *N.*, give myself to you, *N.*
I will support you and care for you
By the grace of God,
Enduring all things, bearing all things;
I will hold you and cherish you
In the love of Christ,
In times of plenty and times of want;
I will honor you and keep you,
With the Spirit's help,
forsaking all others,
As long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.

Or this

In the Name of God,
I, *N.*, take you, *N.*, to be my *wife/husband/spouse*,
To have and to hold from this day forward,
For better, for worse,
For richer, for poorer,
In sickness and in health,
O love and to cherish,
Until we are parted by death.
This is my solemn vow.

The Giving of Symbols

If rings or other symbols, are to be exchanged, they are brought before the presider, who prays using the following words:

Let us pray.

Bless, O God, these *rings*
as an enduring sign of the covenant *N.* and *N.* have made
and keep them in the bond of love, through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The two people place the rings on the fingers of one another, first the one, then the other, saying:

N., I give myself to you body and soul. Receive this ring as a symbol of my love and the esteem in which I hold you today and for ever, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [in the Name of God].

Or this:

If the two have previously given and worn rings as a symbol of their commitment, the rings may be blessed on the hands of the couple, the priest saying:

Let us pray.

By these rings *N.* and *N.* have shown to one another and the world their love and faithfulness:

Let them now also be a sign of the vows they have made
and the blessing that you, and your Church
bestow upon their union, O God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Pronouncement

The presider says:

Now that *N.* and *N.* have exchanged vows of love and fidelity, in the presence of God and the church, I now pronounce that they are married as long as they both shall live. *Amen.*

The Prayers of the People may be inserted here.

Blessing of the Couple

The presider blesses the couple, who kneel or stand before the Altar, saying:

Presider The Lord be with you.

People And also with you.

Presider Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People It is right to give God thanks and praise.

It is right, most gracious God,
to praise you for the tender mercy and unfailing care
you have revealed to us in Jesus the Christ
and for the great joy and comfort bestowed upon us
in the gift of human love.
We give you thanks for *N.* and *N.*,
and the covenant of faithfulness they have made.
Pour out the abundance of your Holy Spirit upon them.
Keep them in your steadfast love;
protect them from all danger;
fill them with your wisdom and peace;
lead them in holy service to each other and the world;
and, finally, bring them to that table where all your saints feast for ever.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit
bless, preserve, and keep you,
and mercifully grant you rich and boundless grace,
that you may please God in body and soul
living together in faith and love.
God make you a sign of the and loving kindness and steadfast fidelity
manifest in the life, death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus our Savior,
And bring you at last to the delight of the heavenly banquet,
where he lives and reigns forever and ever. *Amen.*

The Peace

Presider The Peace of the Lord be always with you.
People And also with you.

The liturgy continues with The Holy Communion. On occasion when the Eucharist is not celebrated, the presider may bless the assembly. The deacon, or in the absence of a deacon, the priest, dismisses them.

The Holy Communion

The Great Thanksgiving

The following proper preface may be used. The Preface of Baptism is also appropriate, or of the Season.

Because in the giving of two persons to each other in faithful love
you reveal the mutual joy and abundant life
you share with your Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Postcommunion Prayer

The following Postcommunion Prayer may be used.

God our strength and joy,
we thank you for our life together,
and for the example of holy love you give to us in *N.* and *N.*,
We thank you for your presence
in the Body and Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ.
Grant that this Sacrament may renew our hope
and nourish us for the work you set before us,
to witness to the presence of Christ in the world,
through the power of your Spirit,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

The Presider may bless the people.

The Deacon, or the Presider, or an assisting priest, dismisses the people.

The Blessing of a Civil Marriage

The Rite begins as prescribed for celebrations of a Holy Eucharist using the Collect and Readings appointed in the Marriage service. The material between the Opening Acclamation and the Collect for the Day may be inserted.

After the Sermon, the couple stands before the Presider, who addresses them in these or similar words

You have come before God and the church to ask God's blessing on your marriage. *N.*, do you freely and unreservedly offer yourself to *N.* seeking to live together in faithfulness and holiness of life as long as you both shall live?

Individual: I do.

The Affirmation of the Assembly

The assembly stands, the couple faces them, and the Presider addresses the people, saying:

Presider: Will all of you here gathered uphold and honor this *couple* in their marriage?

People: We will.

Presider: Will you pray for them in times of trouble and celebrate with them in times of joy?

People: We will.

The Blessing of Rings or Other Tokens

If rings, or some other tokens, are to be blessed, the couple extends their hands with the signs toward the Presider, who says

Let us pray.

By these rings *N.* and *N.* have shown to one another and the world their love and faithfulness:

Let them now also be a sign of the vows they have made
and the blessing that you, and your Church
bestow upon their union, O God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Pronouncement

The presider says:

Now that *N.* and *N.* have exchanged vows of love and fidelity, in the presence of God and the church, I now pronounce that they are married as long as they both shall live. *Amen.*

The Service continues with the Blessing of the Couple on page 11, above.

A Commentary on the Rite

1. These rites conform to the outline “An Order for Marriage” on page 435 of *The Book of Common Prayer*. In order to so conform, however, the vows that begin “In the Name of God...” must be used.
2. The gathering rite is meant to function more as the gathering rite of the Holy Eucharist, hence the opening acclamation and a series of versicles and responses as in the rite of Holy Baptism. An opening address is provided but may be omitted. The rubric concerning the couple entering the assembly is deliberately meant to allow for different options from the more traditional option of a bride’s procession to a regular procession as it would appear in the parish, which includes at least the couple to be married, and perhaps their witnesses and sponsors as well.
3. The versicles and responses in the gathering rite are from 1 John 4:7-8, 11. Their use underscores the larger context of the love that is being celebrated in this rite.
4. Four options are given for the Collect of the Day. The content of the first is similar to that of the Marriage rite in *The Book of Common Prayer*, emphasizing fidelity. The second asks that the fidelity of this couple be a sign to the world. The third is written for those situation where a couple has been together many years and desire for that to be acknowledged. The fourth may be appropriate where children are already a part of the household.
5. The readings provide some additional options to those in *the Book of Common Prayer*. In the list of readings from the Old Testament, the stories of David and Jonathan and Ruth and Naomi are included. Some will find this inclusion provocative. Their use, however, does not indicate that we know that either of their relationships was sexually oriented. There is no way we can know that, and given the cultural context it is highly unlikely if not impossible. Yet these readings do lift up and inform the nature of a covenant between two people, and they have become an example in the lesbian and gay community of persons of the same sex pledging fidelity.
6. Presenters are a part of this rite, which is a difference from the optional “giving away” or “presenting” in *The Book of Common Prayer*. The intention of this is to increase participation of others in the Rite and potentially bring others into the preparation of the couple. Presenters might include parents, the designated witnesses, all those who are standing up with the couple, or mentors who have participated in the preparation process.
7. The affirmation of the Assembly is more extensive than in *The Book of Common Prayer* as well. Again, this is to increase participation and the sense of the importance of this support.

8. The Prayers of the People are placed prior to the vows to tie in with the second question to the Assembly, and to emphasize prayer before the vow taking. If preferred, they may take place in the more usual place after the vows, rings and pronouncement. They are a full set of Prayers praying not only for the couple but for the world. It is important that the concerns of the world be allowed to “intrude” on this moment. They, of course, may be modified.
9. The first of the vow formulas is Trinitarian in structure, explicitly mentioning God where the traditional formula does not. The traditional formula is provided as an option.
10. The blessing of rings or other symbols is given with the option of blessing rings that have already been worn, which may very well be the case for a same sex couple.
11. The blessing of the couple begins in the way significant blessing prayers begin in *The Book of Common Prayer* (see the blessing of Palms and the blessing of the water in the baptismal rite, for example).
12. A proper preface and post-communion prayer are provided as options when the Eucharist is celebrated. The Rite assumes that a celebration of the Eucharist is the norm.

Preparing Couples for Marriage

With special resources for Same-sex couples

Available Resources: Assessment Instruments for Pastoral Counseling

***All Whom God Has Joined: Resources for Clergy and Same-gender Loving Couples* (Leanne McCall Tigert and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2010)**

• *Forward by the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson*

• *Positives:* New collection of pastoral-care tools, insights and liturgical resources for same-gender couples highlights unique pastoral needs, uses language of covenant

• *Negatives:* Book too new to be widely used or reviewed

Prepare/Enrich (Life Innovations, Inc.) <https://www.prepare-enrich.com>

• *Couples' inventory assessment tool (requires counselor training and cost of materials – see website for current rates)*

• *Positives:* newly revised (2008) customized version easily used with same-gender couples; uses “partner” language; most comprehensive tool to address personality, conflict resolution, family, health, financial and spiritual issues; assesses goals, strengths, and growth areas; large national norm base (over 500,000 couples).

• *Negatives:* currently, research results are only standardized for heterosexual couples; this statement released (2011): “Because our database is primarily heterosexual couples, national norms and research studies are based on heterosexual couples... Some facilitators choose to use the inventories with same-sex couples and they report the program is helpful for them.”

Pre-marriage Awareness Inventory (Logos Productions)

<http://www3.logosproductions.com>

• *Positives:* three customized formats that include those living together or previously married; thorough personality assessment; covers major areas such as faith, finances, family of origin, children, power issues, life goals

• *Negatives:* standardized for heterosexual couples only, but author indicates that he will be implementing a same-sex version of PAI (no target date given)

***The Marriage Journey: Preparation and Provisions for Life Together* (Linda Grenz and Delbert Glover; Church Publishing, 2003)**

• *Positives:* Uses “partner” instead of specifying gender; includes material for couples living together and those with children; clear, direct language; ideal for the technologically challenged couple

• *Negatives:* no personality assessment included

Particular Issues Affecting Same-Gender Couples

Clergy who feel they cannot marry same-sex couples may wish to provide a pastoral response to couples seeking to have their relationship known and to be married. A pastoral response can involve:

- Affirming and supporting their desire for God's blessing upon their relationship.
- Attending a marriage conducted by a civil authority.
- Referring the couple to another Episcopal clergyperson or clergy of other denomination who would be willing to conduct a marriage.
- Acknowledging the relationship within the congregation.

Another issue is responding to couples seeking a blessing who are members of another Christian denomination but whose faith tradition does not affirm or permit the blessing of same-sex couples. Very few denominations authorize their clergy to conduct same-sex unions or marriages, so an Episcopal clergyperson may find a number of couples looking for a blessing or marriage simply because it is not an option for them within their own denomination. It is important that you have thought through beforehand what your response will be.

Gender Identity Issues

Late bloomers: Some gay and lesbian persons recognized their orientation from a very young age. For others, it may have been a growing realization that did not fully become clear until much later in life. A "late bloomer" who has only recently recognized his/her orientation may need some time to begin to live into his/her gender identity or explore with a counselor this core change in one's self-perception before entering into a life-long commitment.

Gay/Straight/Bisexual/Transgender: Clergy need not be surprised if one or both members of the couple have been in previous heterosexual relationships. While some individuals may have been in previous heterosexual relationships in an attempt to conform to family, societal, and religious expectations, others may have a more bi-sexual orientation and been in previously satisfactory heterosexual relationships. Despite studies since the 1940s, it is still a common perception that a person is either gay/lesbian or heterosexual with nothing in-between. However, sexual orientation is a spectrum with many gradations and can vary at different times in one's life.

Transgender is a whole subject in and of itself. Basically, a transgender person is one whose gender identity does not match the person's biological sex. Hormonal and surgical adjustments may or may not have been pursued. Transgender persons, regardless of the state of their physical sex, can have either a homosexual or a heterosexual orientation.

Internalized homophobia: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have been subjected to a continual societal onslaught of negative or stereotypical messages. It is unusual for some of that to have been internalized. Should a clergyperson perceive that a person is uncomfortable with her/his orientation, referral for counseling from a trained therapist would be of great help.

Myth busting:

Long-term relationships: It is a myth that LGBT couples do not have long-term relationships. Remember that you may be working with people who have been together for many years or have had previous long-term, monogamous relationships. A wedding for a couple that has considered themselves married in every sense of the word but legal may want a very different marriage serve than a couple relatively new in their experience of each other.

Higher level of hurt:

Wounds: One of both members of a gay and lesbian couple may have experienced wounds related to exclusion, marginalization, or experiences or the feelings of being “other” or “less than.” All too often one or both members of the couple may have a history of exclusion from the various benefits heterosexual persons receive from the church and the state. Sadly LGBT people are at greater risk in their teen years of being victims of abuse or exploitation. Clergy and lay people conducting pre-blessing counseling need to be sensitive to these experiences or possibilities.

In or Out?

Despite the fact that the couple is seeking a union, there may be areas in their individual lives where one or the other may need to remain “closeted.” For instance, one person may be employed in a particular workplace or profession where being “out” could jeopardize the ability to function at work or jeopardize the employment itself. Unfortunately a prime example is the church. There are gay and lesbian clergy in many denominations where “coming out,” especially when in relationship, can result in being stripped of the ability to function as ordained persons or hold any position of leadership in the church. There are secular places of employment, where even though a LGBT person might be protected by law, nevertheless their orientation or relationship could affect their ability to be hired or result in a tense and unfriendly work environment. Being “out” could have a negative impact on seeking or maintaining a position in public office. LGBT persons serving in the military currently must remain closeted. And there are many places and communities where any public visible displays of affection could literally put one’s life at risk.

As a result, couples need to discuss each other’s comfort level and various needs regarding making their relationship known. There can be tension in a couple when one person is fully out and comfortable with some public, visible displays of affection while the other is not. There may be work situations where one person in the relationship has to be careful as to how he or she identifies when making a call to the partner at the workplace or taking messages at home. Has the couple discussed when, where, and with whom it is okay to be out and open about the relationship, and when the relationship needs to be kept less visible?

Relational History and Resolution of Previous Relationships

This is a topic common to both gay and non-gay couples. Couples can be free to move into the new relationship when they have processed what one has learned from previous relationships and resolved financial, material, and child custody and responsibility matters. However, with gay and lesbian couples, there is less likely to be legal dissolution of relationships since only recently have such relationships been able to be legally recognized.

Families of Origin

Most clergy inquire about the individual's family of origin when preparing for a marriage. It can provide the couple with insights regarding their understanding of what a healthy or unhealthy relationship looks like, attitudes towards finances, parenting practices, and identifying unresolved issues that could affect the relationship. But one area which may be unique to gay couples is their families' responses to their orientation and to life together as a couple.

Have the individuals "come out" to their own families? How has that been for them? Are the families informed of the intended union? Are they supportive or hostile or grieving? Will they respond to one's partner as a spouse and consider him/her to now be a part of the family, or tend to treat one's partner as they would a friend or a roommate? In other words, has the couple discussed what they anticipate their relationship with the in-laws to look like as they enter into a union?

Children

As with any heterosexual couple preparing for marriage who do not yet have children, gay couples should also have discussed with each other whether one or the other desires at some point to have children. Discussion might include when to have children, the impact on finances and employment, care-giving and disciplinary understandings, etc. Similarly, those entering the relationship with children should discuss how to help the child adjust and integrate into the new family constellation.

However, gay and lesbian couples, especially those having children from a previous heterosexual relationship, also need to be aware of and support their children in their various stages of development as they relate to their friends who may have no understanding, and possibly even a hostile reaction, to a peer with same-gender parents.

On Choosing Sponsors

The liturgy above provides for sponsors: people chosen by the couple to support and present them during the blessing liturgy. They can also serve an important role before and after the rite. The couple, together with the clergyperson, should engage in conversation early on about selecting sponsors, so that the prayerful work of the sponsors can begin.

About Sponsors – For the Couple

At St. [N] parish, we consider a blessing ceremony a celebration supported by the congregation, much as candidates for baptism are supported by the congregation. Just as the baptized are initiated into the full life of the church, those who receive the church's blessing upon their relationship are initiated in a new way into the faith community. It is appropriate to invite one or more sponsors from the parish to take part in the blessing liturgy by serving as presenters, along with family members or friends.

There are a variety of possibilities for choosing sponsors who will stand with you and present you at the liturgy. It is helpful to choose at least one member of this faith community to walk with you

through this process. If you are new to the congregation, the priest [or other person designated] can help you discern who might be considered.

Sponsors can pray for you during the period of preparation before your ceremony, keep you connected to the congregation, and continue to support you in your ongoing covenanted life together. Often, couples will choose their own parents, children, or other family members who have been supportive throughout their life together.

Finally, in making your choice, remember that these people will stand with you during the liturgy and present you at this rite. And, immediately afterward, the entire congregation will vow to support you as you in turn become a blessing and bear grace to the entire congregation. This is a wonderful thing for you to remember when things get tough, and when there is cause for celebration!

On Choosing Sponsors: Sponsors chosen by the couple to support and present them during the liturgy also serve an important role before and after the ceremony. The couple, together with the clergy person, should engage in conversation early on about selecting sponsors, so that the prayerful work of the sponsors can begin.

Information for Sponsors

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As sponsors, your role is wider than simply serving as presenters, and begins even before the rite. We encourage that you pray for the couple aloud (perhaps during the Prayers of the People at Sunday services) during their period of preparation, keep them connected to others in the congregation, continue to support their ongoing life by acknowledging the anniversary of their liturgy, and offering your presence if their household experiences times of difficulty or celebrates occasions of joy.

As sponsors, you vow to support the couple as they become a blessing and bear grace to their families and friends, the church, and the world. In this role, then, you are witnesses to the blessing given and received in the liturgy and that the couple carries forward into the world.