

# Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



Let the Church Be the First to Issue an Emancipation Proclamation  
– The Rt. Rev. Mary Adelia McLeod, Episcopal Bishop of Vermont

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## THE BISHOP'S FEBRUARY MESSAGE

The Rt. Rev. Mary Adelia McLeod, Bishop of Vermont  
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### The True Purpose of the Union of Two People

The union of two human beings in mind, body and heart is one of God's greatest gifts. Heterosexual and homosexual people are equally capable of entering into life-long unions of love, mutual support and fidelity. In the marriage vows in The Book of Common Prayer, two people promise to "...love, honor, and be faithful to each other for as long as they both shall live." The Prayer Book defines marriage as intended for: "...mutual joy, help and comfort given to one another in prosperity and adversity; and when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture..." Contrary to what is often thought, the purpose of the union of two people is not procreation. The true purpose of the union is for love and mutual support. Children blessing a union may or may not be "God's will" for the couple.

It is no secret among Vermont Episcopalians that I believe homosexual persons choosing to live together in a life-long union are not committing a sin. I believe some persons are born homosexual and are not made/chosen as a result of trauma, rebellion, psychological difficulties or for any other reason. God creates diversity in human beings. God creates many skin colors, left and right handed people, tall and short, blue and brown eyed, brilliant and average, disabled and able bodied, sighted and non-sighted, hearing and non-hearing, extroverts and introverts, homosexual and heterosexual. God also creates within us the urge to seek mates with whom to walk throughout our lives. God's great gift of love and expressing that love cannot and should not be denied for those among us who happen to be homosexual.

### Expanding the Definition: The Emancipation Proclamation

The Anglican tradition understands marriage as the life-long union between a man and a woman. I have no quarrel with that understanding, but suggest the Church might consider expanding what we mean or may want to mean by the union of two human beings committed to each other in a life-long relationship. The Supreme Court of Vermont directed the State legislature to study the same question. Should not the Church do the same?

If we appreciate history and precedent, we need not look very far. Not so long ago in our country, slaves could not obtain licenses to marry, as their white owners certainly were required to do. Nor would the Anglican Church permit slaves to marry. In essence, slaves were not allowed to marry. However, slaves committed to one another liturgically celebrated their relationship by "jumping the broom" at a ceremony in the slave quarters. It is repugnant to note that the expression of love within the union was considered beneficial rather than sinful because the birth of children was lucrative for the slave owner. The unions were tacitly recognized by the slave owners, though not by the State or Church. It was not until after the Emancipation Proclamation that African Americans were permitted to form unions just as any other American citizens.

It is time for Christians to issue our Emancipation Proclamation for our homosexual sisters and brothers. We must emancipate them from the "Catch 22" that traps Christians who are homosex-

ual. The “catch” is that even though they love the Lord and each other, at this time they cannot receive God’s blessing from their Church.

#### Separating the State from the Church in Marriage

What exactly is the role of the Church in the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage? In Sacramental Theology there are four signs of a Sacrament. By that is meant, four elements must be present in order for a Sacrament to be valid. The four signs are: Proper Intent, Proper Person, Proper Minister and Proper Matter.

For instance, in the Sacrament of Baptism, the Proper Person is the candidate for baptism; the Proper Matter is water; the Proper Minister is any baptized person; and the Proper Intent is to incorporate the person into the Body of Christ.

In marriage, the Proper Person(s), the couple; Proper Minister, again the couple; Proper Intent is to unite two people who are committing their lives to each other for as long as they both shall live; the Proper Matter is the symbolic ring(s) representing the commitment of mind, body and heart. The role the priest plays in the union of two people is conveying God’s blessing on the union. People come to the church to have their union blessed, the priest does not “marry” the couple. One might say the priest prompts the marriage vows as they are spoken by the couple, but a priest is not necessary for the vows. The priest is necessary to convey God’s blessing on the union.

In our country, as an ordained person, I act as an agent of the State at the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage. In European countries, priests are not agents of the State. When my niece married in France, she and her fiancé went to a municipal building to be married by an officer of the State. The following day, she had a lovely wedding at the American Cathedral in Paris for the Celebration and Blessing of a civil marriage. There is such a service in the Book of Common Prayer.

#### Clergy Should Be Agents of God and Not the State

If we speak of a priest’s role as an agent of the State in joining two people together then we must also consider the divorce of two people. The State is the sole legal agent for the dissolution of the union. The Church does not act as a State agent in that action. If the Church is to be an agent of the State in the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, then for me, the Church should also act as an agent of the State in the dissolution of the union and have requirements for that action just as the Church has requirements for uniting two people. Perhaps divorce would not be as rampant if the Church were involved in both actions.

I would like to see some consistency in the action of the Church concerning unions. The Church should decide if it wishes to be an agent of the State in the joining and dissolution of the union of two people. If the State will not relinquish its sole right to be involved in divorce, then the Church should consider relinquishing its role as an agent of the State in joining two people together. However, I strongly believe Christians should still come to the Church for the Celebration and Blessing of the union. The clergy of our Church should be agents of God’s blessing and not agents of the State.

### Do not deny God's Blessing to Homosexuals

Please, read carefully and understand that I am not saying people entering a union do not need the Church to participate in that union. Every Christian couple who love each other and are committed to living together for as long as they both shall live need God's blessing and also need their commitment to be publicly affirmed and supported by the Christian community. Episcopalians need a priest to convey God's blessing and need their commitment affirmed within a liturgical context as outlined in the Book of Common Prayer.

I realize I repeat myself, but I cannot say it often enough: God's great gift of love and the expression of that love cannot and should not be denied to those among us who happen to be homosexual. Let the Church be the first to issue an Emancipation Proclamation.

When two people promise to "...love, honor, and be faithful to each other for as long as they both shall live," let us also love, honor and be faithful to them.