

General Convention approves marriage equality

By Sharon Sheridan | July 1, 2015 [24 Comments](#) |

[Episcopal News Service – Salt Lake City] In the wake of the June 26 [U.S. Supreme Court ruling](#) legalizing same-sex marriage for all Americans, General Convention followed suit on July 1 with canonical and liturgical changes to provide marriage equality for Episcopalians.

The House of Deputies concurred with the House of Bishops' [approval](#) the day before of a canonical change eliminating language defining marriage as between a man and a woman ([Resolution A036](#)) and authorizing two new marriage rites with language allowing them to be used by same-sex or opposite-sex couples ([Resolution A054](#)).

The resolutions marked the culmination of a conversation launched when the 1976 General Convention said that “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance and pastoral concern and care of the church,” said the Very Rev. Brian Baker, deputy chair of the Special Legislative Committee on Marriage. “That resolution began a 39-year conversation about what that full and equal claim would look like. The conversation has been difficult for many and painful for many.”

Resolutions A054 and A036 represented compromises reached after prayerful consideration and conversation within the legislative committee, and then the House of Bishops to make room for everyone, Baker said. “I know that most of you will find something ... to dislike and to disagree with” in the resolutions, he said, asking deputies to “look through the lens of how this compromise makes room for other people.”

Deputies defeated an attempt to amend each of the resolutions. Following 20 minutes of debate per resolution, each resolution passed in a vote by orders. A054 passed by 94-12 with 2 divided deputations in the clerical order and 90-11-3 in the lay order. A036 passed 85-15-6 in the clerical order and 88-12-6 in the lay order.

Besides authorizing two new marriage liturgies, A054 also approves for continued use “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” from “Liturgical Resources I,” which General Convention approved for provisional use in 2012, “under the direction and with the permission of the bishop exercising ecclesiastical authority.”

Earlier in the week, the bishops divided the portion of A054 dealing with the existing rite from that addressing the new liturgies for the purposes of discussion, ultimately voting to approve both portions. They approved A036 in a roll call vote, with 129 for, 26 against and five abstaining.

“At my first General Convention in 1991, I don’t think I ever dreamed that we would have such a resolution before us,” Atlanta Deputy Bruce Garner said as debate began on A054. “I came to Salt Lake City a second-class citizen in my nation and my church, and I hope to leave here a first-class citizen in both.”

Among the dissenting voices was Holden Holsinger from the Diocese of East Michigan, a member of the Official Youth Presence, who urged defeat “in order to maintain the unity of the church.”

The two new liturgies, “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage” and “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2” from “Liturgical Resources 1: I Will Bless You and You Will be a Blessing, Revised and Expanded 2015” from the supplemental Blue Book materials of the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, are authorized for use beginning this Advent. Those rites offer the option of using “wife,” “husband,” “person” or “spouse,” thus making them applicable for all couples. The liturgies can be found on pages 2-151 [here](#) from the materials provided to convention by the standing commission, including one rejected by bishops in their deliberations.

A054 stipulates: “Bishops exercising ecclesiastical authority or, where appropriate, ecclesiastical supervision, will make provision for all couples asking to be married in this church to have access to these liturgies. Trial use is only to be available under the discretion and with the permission of the diocesan bishop.”

The resolution also says that “bishops may continue to provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this church.” During their house discussion, bishops said this was intended to address bishops’ situations in jurisdictions outside the United States, such as Italy and countries in Province IX, where same-sex marriages remain illegal.

Both resolutions say that clergy retain the canonical right to refuse to officiate at any wedding.

Resolution A036 revises Canon I.18 titled “Of the Solemnization of Holy Matrimony” (page 58 of The Episcopal Church’s canons [here](#)). Among many edits, it removes references to marriage as being between a man and a woman. The revised first section of the canon now says that clergy “shall conform to the laws of the state governing the creation of the civil status of marriage, and also these canons concerning the solemnization of marriage. Members of the clergy may solemnize a marriage using any of the liturgical forms authorized by this church.”

Under the revised canon, couples would sign a declaration of intent, which the legislative committee crafted to respect the needs of couples where only one member is a Christian.

The Rev. Joseph Howard of Tennessee said he voted for A054 “because I thought it was a statement of honesty about where the church is and that it regularized what we have been doing.” But he opposed A036 as “a vote against good order because I believe it assumes a belief that has not yet become clear in our church.”

James Steadman of Northwestern Pennsylvania cited the words of the post-Communion prayer in the Book of Common Prayer, telling deputies: “This is the time. Use the courage that you have prayed for all these years and vote for this resolution.”

In other marriage-related legislation, earlier in the week the House of Deputies approved [Resolution A037](#), after several failed amendments, concurring with bishops on the continued work of the Task Force on the Study of Marriage.

The resolution asks congregations to study resources that were created by the Task Force on Marriage to help understand the theology of marriage and the long history of marriage, which are now available to congregations (beginning on page 9 [here](#)), Baker told the deputies.

It also authorizes continued work of the task force “because the work is not done,” Baker said. It invites exploration of the cultural and theological diversity to move the conversation forward, he said, adding that

too often the study has focused on an Anglo-Western perspective “when we are a church that has people from different nations.”

— *Sharon Sheridan is an ENS correspondent.*