



Vermont Bishop Thomas Ely

# EPISCOPAL BLESSINGS

## VT Diocese First in Nation to Issue Liturgy for Same-Sex 'Holy Unions'

BY EUAN BEAR

**A**s *OITM* went to print, Vermont Bishop Thomas Ely met individually with press representatives in Montpelier to release three proposed rites for blessing same-gender unions. The liturgies are the fruit of more than a year's work by a task force appointed by the progressive Vermont bishop.

The released document is called "A Report to the Bishop and People of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont from the Task Force on the Blessing of Persons Living in Same-Gender Relationships." Ken Poppe, dean of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Burlington, was co-chair of the task force.

Even though clergy in the Vermont Diocese have been blessing civil unions with the bishop's permission for four years, the report is considered groundbreaking "because it gives explicit permission – which will be shared across the country – for the blessing of same-gender relationships," according to an email message from Rev. Tanya Wallace of St. Paul's. The report includes a theological statement, a new diocesan policy, trial liturgies for same-gender blessings,

and resources for congregations and couples.

At last year's national convention, a proposal to create a nationwide liturgy (essentially an approved script) for same-gender marriages or civil unions was tabled. Instead, the question was left up to individual dioceses.

According to an "executive summary" released in advance of the post-press-time news conference, "The task force report offers liturgies *for trial use* that will bring the celebration of Holy Union" – comparable to "Holy Matrimony" – "into the life of common prayer in the Diocese of Vermont." Further, the task force will provide resources for congregations on issues of human sexuality and intimacy, and for clergy and couples preparing for both Holy Matrimony and Holy Union."

The summary cited the Anglican church's approach to applying theology and scripture to issues of current life, an approach that involves "using our human capacity to learn about our world and to bring that learning into conversation with scripture and theological and liturgical tradition. This process," the summary continues, "has led the Church over the centuries to change its practice about issues such as slavery, usury and the ordination of women."

The statement provided a context for interpreting scripture: "We are suspicious of claims that there can be any one right reading, for all readers see through the lenses of their own backgrounds and cultural circumstances. ... We believe the Church should, and will, come to an understanding that the few biblical passages that seem to address same-sex sexual activity do not speak to the reality of faithful, loving relationships between persons of the same gender who identify as gay or lesbian."

### Gay Bishop to Preach on Pride Day

The first openly gay member of the Episcopal clergy to be elected and consecrated as a diocesan bishop, V. Gene Robinson of the diocese of New Hampshire, will preach at an Evensong service at St. Paul's Cathedral on Pride Day, July 10. The service begins at 3:30 p.m. and is open to all, regardless of faith or orientation.

Bishop Robinson, whose consecration was supported by Vermont's Bishop Thomas Ely, is making his first appearance as Bishop at a Vermont Pride Day event. The bishop was away at press time and could not be reached for comment.

St. Paul's Canon Educator Tanya Wallace said that the cathedral staff has received a number of requests for Bishop Robinson to participate or speak at events while he is in Vermont. She said her understanding was that Robinson was turning down events that focused on him in favor of those that focused on God's action and Robinson's mission.

Last year, the first Pride Day evensong featured Integrity founder Louie Crew. Integrity is an organization for lgbt Episcopalians seeking support within their churches.

Wallace noted that in its current "summer seating" arrangement, the cathedral would seat 250 worshippers, which she anticipated would be a mix of parishioners, people from the wider diocese, and Pride festival-goers.

The Cathedral Church of St. Paul marched for the first time in the Pride Day parade two years ago. "There were maybe 8 to 10 people and a dog. This year," Wallace said with pride, "we're ordering St. Paul's hats!"

There will be a reception following the evensong service. ▼