

Distinctions among marriage, the blessing of a civil marriage, and the blessing of a union:

a preliminary resource for discussion and development

Below are excerpts from a work in progress within the Faith Worship and Ministry Committee of General Synod. Further work will continue to develop the meaning of “blessing”. This future work on these matters will be informed by a process that invites further reflection by theologians and elders of very different views to continue to work on a statement of how Anglicans understand blessing.

1. There is a generally held conviction that a distinction does exist between civil marriage and Christian marriage within the Anglican Church of Canada. For example, marriage in the church requires all of the criteria of civil marriage, but not all civil marriages qualify as for marriage in our churches.
2. In any marriage the following criteria must be met: (i) two persons legally qualified to marry; (ii) the free consent of the participants; (iii) at least two witnesses; (iv) a licensed agent of the state; (v) the exchange of unconditional life-long vows and (vi) the consummation of the marriage. Christian communions, including the Anglican Church of Canada, have reserved the right to add further conditions regarding the marriages at which a minister of the church will officiate such as (a) kindred and affinity, (b) gender (c) baptism (of at least one member of the couple), and (d) the previous marital status of the participants. There is also an expectation that there be a commitment to the divine purposes and intentions for marriage. These are variously stated in our liturgies but consist in mutual fellowship, support and comfort, and the procreation (if any may be) and nurture of children, and the creation of a relationship in which sexuality may serve personal fulfillment in a community of faithful love. The context here also includes a lifelong union in faithful love, and that marriage vows are a commitment to this union, for better and for worse, to the exclusion of all others. (Canon XXI)
3. The matter of blessing civil marriages depends entirely upon the conditions regarded as constitutive of the divine purposes and intentions for such marriages. When considering either marriage or the blessing of a civil marriage these purposes are foundational. As well, Anglican clergy may only bless those civil marriages that conform to the criteria set by the church for marriage in Canon law such as kindred and affinity prohibitions; baptism; notice; marriage preparation; civil requirements.

4. There is a possibility of blessing a union without considering it a marriage. This could apply to human relationships other than marriage. Defining such relationships, and the criteria by which one would assess how they address the purposes of God in the world - their participation in creation, redemption and sanctification - would need clarification. The challenge of same-sex unions is that the St Michael's Report has identified them as analogous to marriage so confusion is likely. It would be problematic to identify civilly married same-sex couples seeking blessing as something other than married.

5. However, the difficulty comes in addressing the blessing of a union at all. As for legally recognized civil unions, the church has not developed any policy regarding such arrangements. The Anglican Church of Canada has already indicated that a nuptial blessing may not be extended to common-law marriages and, prior to the revision of the federal marriage statute, did not extend a nuptial blessing to couples in a civil union in those provinces where such unions existed. The blessing of civil unions constitute a distinct category for which a theological rationale would need to identify how such unions differ from marriage and how such unions can be understood as a means of participating in God's creative, redemptive and sanctifying purposes. Perhaps the blessing of a civil union is of a second order – not as things should be or should have been – yet redeemed or recapitulated as blessed?