

Episcopalians in Bay State to seek church rites for gay weddings: Study clergy role in civil marriage ceremonies

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Massachusetts Episcopalians will seek authorization from their denomination to use the church's official marriage rites in same-sex marriage ceremonies. Delegates in the diocese favored that step, 324 to 43, at a late October convention in Boston.

On another hot issue, delegates called for a task force to study "the nature of Christian marriage and civil marriage" in light of a tabled proposal for clergy to stop officiating at civil marriage ceremonies.

Massachusetts Episcopalians have wrestled with the issue of same-sex marriage since May 2004, when the Bay State became the first state in the nation to make the practice legal.

The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts is on record as supporting same-sex marriage, but priests can't perform same-sex weddings unless the national church changes rules for the use of rites in the Book of Common Prayer. Those rites are currently limited to heterosexual couples.

"This change would give same-sex couples the same access to the church's marriage rites as heterosexual couples," said a written explanation from the resolution's sponsors, "and end this disturbing exclusion of same-sex couples from the church's sacramental life."

The soonest the Episcopal Church could act on the Massachusetts request would be at its next General Convention in 2009. If approved, the resolution would permit adjustments to marriage rites in order to reflect a couple's common gender. The policy would be applicable in all jurisdictions where same-sex marriage is legal.

On the question of whether clergy should continue to officiate at civil marriage ceremonies, same-sex marriage was again an underlying issue. Supporters of the original resolution had argued that the best way to treat all couples equally would be merely to administer blessings, which the Diocese of Massachusetts permits for same-sex couples, once the couple has been married by a civil authority.

Though that proposal received no decisive action, at least one sponsor welcomed the October 28 decision to study the topic. "This substitute resolution will provide opportunity for reflection and dialogue on the issue," said Margaret (Mally) Lloyd, rector of Christ Church in Plymouth. *-Religion News Service*