

Episcopal dioceses vary on same-sex rite policies: Decisions to make in California

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As California clerks began issuing civil marriage licenses to same-sex couples in mid-June, Episcopal bishops in the state took a variety of stances on whether their dioceses would provide religious rites for newly married gays and lesbians.

In San Francisco, Bishop Marc Handley Andrus asked his flock to serve as deputy marriage commissioners to help handle the expected flood of marriage applications.

“There are over 4,000 civil same-sex marriages planned in a short period of time in the city of San Francisco alone, and the city is asking for help in meeting demand,” Andrus wrote in a June 9 pastoral letter. “I intend to volunteer for this at my earliest opportunity. . . . By city requirement, clergy will not be allowed to wear collars when presiding at secular marriages.”

The Episcopal Church is arguably involved in the most quarrelsome of the public battles in mainline denominations that struggle with gay-marriage issues. Like most other church bodies, it has no official rite for same-sex marriages. But some Episcopal bishops allow clergy to bless same-sex unions.

Bishop Jon Bruno of Los Angeles said his diocese in 2003 approved blessings of same-sex unions if pastors determined that such unions are “pastorally necessary.” That policy now will be followed for gay and lesbian couples who have state marriage licenses.

“If it’s a pastoral necessity, they [pastors] can go ahead,” Bruno said in an interview, adding, “I would really, in all honesty, wish that we weren’t in the marriage business, that we blessed unions and the state took care of the legality.”

Following Bruno’s allowance for pastoral leeway, the cofounders of the national gay activist organization Soulforce—Mel White and Gary Nixon—were the first same-

gender couple to be married at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena in a noontime wedding June 18. White and Nixon first met at the large-congregation church 27 years ago.

Zelda Kennedy, associate for pastoral care, said All Saints planned to have rites for at least two dozen more couples.

Bishop Barry Beisner of Sacramento told his clergy in May that “this change in civil law does not change our policy or practice in the church . . . there has been no authorization—from me or from my predecessors—for same-sex blessings in this diocese.”

In San Diego, Bishop James Mathes said he supports the California Supreme Court’s ruling but added, “I am mindful that our church has not yet made the decision to bless same-sex unions.”

The Monterey-based Diocese of El Camino Real, after seeking guidance from clergy in Massachusetts, the only other state allowing same-sex marriages, decided that priests can bless same-sex unions on a case-by-case basis but cannot recognize them as marriages. *—Religion News Service*