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\$400K donated for Episcopal gay liturgies

by Kevin Eckstrom by Religion News Service

A Michigan-based gay rights foundation has given more than \$400,000 to a California seminary to help craft formal liturgies for the Episcopal Church to bless gay and lesbian relationships.

The Episcopal Church still officially considers marriage between a man and a woman, reflected in the marriage rite of its Book of Common Prayer. Many dioceses, however, unofficially allow priests to bless same-sex relationships and even marriages.

Because the church puts a high value on scripted liturgies, many same-sex couples want their own marriage/blessing rite since many bishops are reluctant to use the traditional husband-wife marriage liturgy for same-sex unions.

The church's 2009 General Convention gave the green light to collecting "theological and liturgical resources" that would form the basis of an official same-sex rite that could be added to the list of approved ceremonies.

Many observers expect the church, when it gathers again in 2012, to approve rites for same-sex unions, or at least give official approval to start the process, which can take several years.

The \$404,000 grant from the Arcus Foundation to the Church Divinity School of the Pacific will help facilitate the process; the church's official Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music has only \$25,000 designated for the project.

A major part of the grant will go to funding a conference next March where two representatives from each of the church's 110 dioceses will be able to offer suggestions and share work that's already been done.

"Developing liturgical resources for blessing same-sex unions is a once-in-a-lifetime generation change,

and we want to do it well," said the Rev. Ruth Myers, a professor of liturgy at the seminary in Berkeley, Calif.

Though ultimate decisions and recommendations will be left to the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, the seminary hopes the grant will help keep the process going, with the necessary funds to match.

Tom Kam, the foundation's deputy director of gay programming, said Arcus is committed to assisting the church in its "continued progress toward moral equality for (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender) people."

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