

A LOOK AT SOME OF THE PASTORAL ISSUES RELATED TO THE BLESSINGS OF SAME-SEX COUPLES

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This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

1. How are the issues the same/different for same-sex and heterosexual relationships?

Weddings are still popular in Canada. However, trends show that fewer couples than before choose to have a ceremony within the walls of our churches. One only needs to check out the photos on the announcement pages of our paper to notice that many couples opt to formalize their permanent relationship at an exotic location or else forgo the involvement of the church altogether and have a civil ceremony only. Even more couples live together without church involvement at all.

Others do wish to have a blessing, want to belong and be welcome and accepted as members in the church. They look to God to bless their union. They look to the church for some guidance. Even while the church continues to reflect on the issue of same-sex unions, pastors and parishes will do well to consider what their responses might be on same-sex blessing. There is an increasing likelihood that we have had or will receive requests for such acts of ministry.

A wide diversity of contextual and cultural variations is to be found within our Canadian Lutheran congregations and there are various interpretations of just how much autonomy rests in individual congregations. It is good to know ahead of time what kind of policies are already in place regarding wedding services for non-members, members of other denominations, re-marriages after divorce, same-sex blessings, etc. Even a “no” needs to be carefully thought through.

All couples whether heterosexual or same-sex have things to sort out around their intimate relationships. The question is: Can they get supportive care and counselling from the church in the midst of their struggles? All look for a sense of belonging. People who come looking for pastoral support are quick to know when a response is not caring. They have their radar out and they soon know whether or not their stories are being heard and respected. An authentic, empathic pastoral presence is what is called for. As pastoral caregivers, part of our task is to offer care, warmth, and an authentic welcome to those to whom we minister. We take seriously

the couple's experiences and feelings. We take a non-judgmental stance. The pastor as well as congregation members are to bring the Gospel to bear in times of joy and in times of pain.

Family-systems approaches teach that adult children who enter into a committed relationship create a major shift in the system even far in advance of the ritual event itself. As the time for the wedding approaches, these transitions in the family can create discomfort for parents and siblings alike, on both sides of the family. Tension rises and it takes a steady hand to guide any family gently through their changing familial structure. Sensitivity on the part of the pastor is called for if there are former partners and/or children from a previous marriage or relationship. A couple on their own, in a strange place, needs to have access to a variety of caring supportive contacts.

With same-sex relationships family issues may tend to become more complex as members work to stay connected. Indeed, for some same-sex partners and their families, severing of ties, isolation and alienation may well intensify, particularly as plans for uniting with their chosen partner proceed and the date approaches. Again, such changes within families are eased in the presence of a warm, non-anxious clergyperson and congregation. Such pastoral guidance and leadership can go a long way to ease stresses and strains.

Pre-marital counselling is usually a requirement set by the congregation. Pastors or others trained in this area often expect to have four to six sessions with a couple. Approaches to counselling vary. Some make use of psychological testing. Others have the couple work together and explore various areas of their relationship. Couples talk together about common hopes and dreams for the future, sexuality (for all couples sexuality is part of the committed relationship), plans for parenting, the sharing of money and expenses. Additional key areas to explore in pre-marital counselling include family of origin, work, the handling of conflict, loss, and closure of prior relationships. Same-sex couples need this sort of examination of their relationship perhaps even more than do heterosexual couples.

Pre-marital counselling does not protect any couple from difficulties later on, nor from separation and divorce either, but pre-marital work can be a connecting link to the pastoral counsellor. If the couple does run into hard times down the road, it helps a great deal if they already have an relationship with an understanding pastoral counsellor, one who knows them and who will be there for them at a critical time.

2. What process needs to be pursued by parish and pastor in deciding on blessing a same-sex couple?

Most of us mark our lives with rituals. We have birthdays and anniversaries, baptisms and confirmations. Often congregations join with us to recognize these transitions along the path of life. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples may want to include congregational members as well as family members in their celebration.

By the time a couple present themselves to clergy, they will usually have made their decision to go through with a ceremony of one kind or another. Neither family members nor clergy will

change their minds at this point. All couples will need to put some details in place before the ceremony can proceed. A government's registration form/license has to be completed with the necessary details. Provincial legislation determines the territory where same-sex couples can formalize their blessing. Matters such as pension benefits, wills, etc. also need to be checked out ahead of time.

Clergy seldom blink when they notice that both parties share the same address on pre-marital forms. Few reject couples on this basis alone. Many more clergy become uncomfortable when testing and discussions with a couple suggest that physical, emotional or sexual abuse may well be present. In these cases is not easy to know what route to pursue: Go ahead and perform a marriage knowing full well that one is going out on a limb? Live with the fallout? Many things in ministry are not always straightforward or clearly defined. Some may choose to refer a particular couple to other parties when they find that they are out of their comfort zone. Referral is also an option if faced with same-sex couples who request a blessing in a church setting.

Our commonly used worship resources are designed to offer a couple variations for their service. For example, *The Lutheran Book of Worship* is open to the exploring of various options that will help to meet the needs of our people. Couples meeting with a pastor regarding the wedding service are encouraged to make the service relevant for themselves and family and friends. They are encouraged to write their own vows. And they often do so with relish. Parents may give blessings to their children. The clergyperson is a witness to the exchange of vows and offers scripture and homily and, in many cases, the eucharist in which all share.

If anything, same-sex couples need such a ritual even more than heterosexual couples. For example, words that announce that two are now one in the eyes of God. Or joyful words to celebrate the coming together of a loving couple: "It is with joy we come together to celebrate the wedding of _____ and _____." Friends and family gather to worship, to pray and offer support, to encourage and affirm. The family/congregation witness the couple's desire to bind themselves to each other. They may share with the couple in the eucharist. The couple is assured that they will not be left on their own. God's caring support is offered, and appropriate assistance and follow-up by those assembled is promised to them as well.

Issues such as these involve generational differences; the voices of youth and of the older generations in the church ask to be heard. Education is needed, much discussion, and an open flow of information and exchange of views, to help to bring about pastoral and congregational understanding and change. Objective mediation helps to reduce conflict around controversial issues. We also need to examine, pray, and reflect on our own stance on issues like same-sex relationships—our biases, fears, and transference issues.

Hurting people are in need of compassion. Most same-sex couples have experienced much pain and struggle. Rejection on the part of the church is likely to drive same-sex couples into isolation or hostility. Healing then becomes more difficult or impossible. The church can be a place of wholeness, welcome, and inclusion.

For Further Reading

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