

Some Resources and Suggestions for Discussing Same-Gender Marriage in Councils and Congregations

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In response to my October 7 pastoral letter about the need to discuss the possibility of same-gender marriages with your congregation council, several pastors and council members have asked me for resources and suggestions for discussing the possibility of same gender marriages with your leadership. I offer the following as the beginning of a list of resources and suggestions for this conversation. Because I know that some of you are way ahead of me on the discussion of this issue in your local contexts, I would invite you to share the resources and ideas you have found to be helpful so we can pass them along to others.

Here are a few thoughts and suggestions...

1. Study Philippians 2 which encourages us to "...look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others." And to "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." I have always found this passage extremely helpful in anchoring conversations where there is the potential for conflict and disagreement.

2. Begin the conversation by reviewing the current marriage policies and practices of your congregation. In my opinion, any decision about same-gender marriages should be made in light of the current practices and policies and be consistent with them.

- Are the current policies written? If not, do they need to be?
- Who currently decides whether or not a couple is married in your congregation? What is the basis for that decision? Are there concerns about the current practice that need addressing?
- What is the current practice/policy about the pastor performing marriages outside the congregation? Outside the church building? For non-members? For non-Christians? Are there concerns about the current practice that need addressing?
- What is the current practice/policy for pre-marriage counseling?

2. I would strongly suggest approaching this as a matter of pastoral concern – both for same-gender couples and others in the community -- rather than an argument about a "hot button" issue where positions need to be debated and defended.

- List and then discuss possible concerns and issues that may arise in working with same-gender couples preparing for marriage and for presiding at those marriages. This is different than asking "should we do this or not?"
- Try to get behind the various "positions" people may take to understand the underlying convictions, values, fears, questions, needs, and emotions behind the positions in an effort to identify common ground around which to have further discussion.
- Explore and discuss ways of addressing those common concerns within the congregation.

3. Review and discuss the ELCA Social Statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," downloadable at <http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/SexualitySS.pdf> . Pages 15-21 are particularly helpful. These pages discuss marriage and also ministry to and with same-gendered couples. The 2009 Churchwide Assembly also adopted actions on ministry policies, including the following: "Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow *congregations that choose to do so*

to recognize, support, and hold accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” (Emphasis added).

4. Study *Journey Together Faithfully* available through the ELCA website. In particular, Part 2 has a session which examines same-gender blessings.

5. One of my colleagues sent me the following reference for discussing how Lutheran marriage/wedding traditions have changed over time, often mirroring cultural trends: See “Marriage,” Chapter Nine in “The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages; Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Volume 2. Dennis Bushkofsky and Craig Satterlee, Augsburg Fortress, 2008.

It would be my hope and prayer that this can be a conversation about the way we minister to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and to one another in the context of congregational life. I continue to be open to participating in, facilitating or mediating those conversations if you would find that helpful.

Peace,
Bishop Mike