



Pastoral Letter...

Bishop S. John Roth

RE: Same-gender Marriages in Illinois

Date: May, 2014

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

God's rich grace be yours in this season celebrating our Lord's Resurrection!

On June 1, 2014, state law will provide for same-gender marriages in Illinois. Quoting from the "Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act" (the Act) the purpose of the Act is "to provide same-sex and different-sex couples and their children equal access to the status, benefits, protections, rights, and responsibilities of civil marriage."

At the same time, the Act does not place requirements or restrictions upon churches regarding same-gender marriage. The Act stipulates "Nothing in this Act is intended to abrogate, limit, or expand the ability of a religious denomination to exercise First Amendment rights protected by the United States Constitution or the Illinois Constitution nor is it intended to abrogate, limit, or expand the Illinois Human Rights Act or the Religious Freedom Restoration Act."

What does this mean for our pastoral practice, that is, the pastoral practice of we who are the Central/Southern Illinois Synod of the ELCA, as this Act takes effect? To answer that question, let me take us back to the social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," which was adopted by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2009. This far-reaching ethical statement on human sexuality guides our consideration of pastoral practice in the ELCA. In what follows, I take up only the question of our pastors conducting same-gender marriage ceremonies; I will address the question of ELCA roster standards for ordained pastors in same-gender relationships at another time.

I drew upon "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" in an earlier Pastoral Letter, written when Civil Union became available to same-gender couples in Illinois, and will do so again here.

The social statement states forthrightly that the people in ELCA pews are not of one mind on same-gender sexual relationships, including marriage.¹ Additionally, the social statement holds that these divergent, even mutually exclusive viewpoints on same-gender relationships are to be respected within the ELCA.

"Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" states, "The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting Mark 10: 6–9: 'But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.'" A key corollary here is reflection on the church's appropriate care for those who are divorced. Turning to the subject of same-gender couples, the social statement later adds, "Recognizing that this conclusion differs from the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions, some people, though not all, in this church and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong, monogamous relationships. They believe that such accountable relationships also provide the necessary foundation that supports trust and familial and community thriving. Other contractual agreements, such as civil unions, also seek to provide some of these protections and to hold those involved in such relationships accountable to one another and to society." It is important to note that the social statement acknowledges a conviction that diverges from the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions, and neither commends nor dismisses that conviction. Carefully worded as it is, the social statement does not advocate for an understanding of marriage other than the understanding recognized by historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions. Still, later in the document, the social statement reflects on the church's appropriate care for those who are in same-gender

monogamous relationships and concludes that “consensus does not exist concerning how to regard same-gender committed relationships, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful study and conversation. We do not have agreement on whether this church should honor these relationships and uplift, shelter, and protect them or on precisely how it is appropriate to do so.”

Consequently, there is no single position on same-gender marriage that can be said, with integrity, to be the position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

To address both the lack of consensus and the desire provide appropriate care, the social statement turns to the Christian community to discern procedures and practices that would be appropriate in a given context: “(the ELCA) encourages all people to live out their faith in the local and global community of the baptized with profound respect for the conscience-bound belief of the neighbor. This church calls for mutual respect in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community.” The key factor here is the central role our social statement envisions for the Christian community in discernment and action.

As Illinois moves to the place where same-gender marriage is consistent with state law, the ELCA social statement provides room for ELCA pastors to perform same-gender marriage ceremonies and for congregations to consider providing for same-gender marriage ceremonies as part of the congregation’s best pastoral care for same-gender couples. However, nothing in the social statement suggests that pastors act independently with regard to conducting same-gender marriage ceremonies. Trying to be as helpful as I can be, my counsel is that the most faithful reading of the ELCA social statement and the most responsible path for pastors wishing to conduct same-gender marriage ceremonies leads to the pastor doing so only when it is in concert with the consensus will of the pastor’s congregation. Let me voice my appreciation for the pastors and congregations of our synod whose regard for the wider body of Christ in the C/SIS and in the ELCA as a whole has led them to choose this measured path. I believe that in doing so we reflect the apostle Paul’s vision: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Whether or not a congregation and pastor choose to include same-gender marriage ceremonies as a part of the congregation’s overall pastoral care, let me encourage you to look at the full range of your wedding policies in light of the church’s identity and mission; i.e. in light of the foundational questions for the congregation: Who are we? Why are we here? What then shall we do? In this light, we ask ourselves specifically: Are our wedding policies and practices evangelical in nature, providing occasion to proclaim the grace of God through Jesus Christ – in the pre-marital counseling, in the planning meetings, and in the worship service itself?

One of my favorite songs continues to be “Speak, O Lord” (words and music by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend). The choir sang it as an anthem at my installation service. I used it as the musical backdrop for the slide presentation portion of my report to the Synod Assembly in 2013. Now I offer the last lines of the song as a concluding affirmation and prayer for us as a synod, as we strive to be one in Christ with each other and with the whole ELCA: “And by grace we’ll stand on your promises and by faith we’ll walk as you walk with us. Speak, O Lord, ‘til your Church is built and the earth is filled with your glory.”

In the peace of Jesus Christ,



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1. From Section IV of "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," numbered rather than bulleted, for easier reference:
 1. On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law. They believe same-gender sexual behavior carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin. They therefore conclude that the neighbor and the community are best served by calling people in same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle. Such decisions are intended to be accompanied by pastoral response and community support.
 2. On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that homosexuality and even lifelong, monogamous, homosexual relationships reflect a broken world in which some relationships do not pattern themselves after the creation God intended. While they acknowledge that such relationships may be lived out with mutuality and care, they do not believe that the neighbor or community are best served by publicly recognizing such relationships as traditional marriage.
 3. On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and lifelong loving and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability, but they do not equate these relationships with marriage. They do, however, affirm the need for community support and the role of pastoral care and may wish to surround lifelong, monogamous relationships or covenant unions with prayer.
 4. On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage. They surround such couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God, find strength for the challenges that will be faced, and serve others. They believe same-gender couples should avail themselves of social and legal support for themselves, their children, and other dependents and seek the highest legal accountability available for their relationships.