

Guidance for Pastors and Congregations of the New England Synod, ELCA, Regarding the Blessing of Unions of Same-Sex Couples

A Statement by the Synod Council of the New England Synod, ELCA

Whereas, we discern the Holy Spirit's work in the 2005 Churchwide Assembly as: 1) affirming that current disagreements on homosexuality are between people of faith seeking to live in faithful obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ and the call of the Holy Spirit, 2) leading the church to live together amidst disagreements, 3) inviting continued communication, openness, and understanding among all members of this church, and 4) reaffirming the 1993 Statement by the Conference of Bishops that affirmed pastors and congregations in ministry with gay and lesbian persons in "*their desire to explore the best ways to provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister;*" and

Whereas, three states within the New England Synod have legally defined relationships between same-sex persons (Civil Unions in Connecticut and Vermont; Marriage in Massachusetts) and many in our congregations are entering into these relationships; and

Whereas, baptized gay and lesbian persons of our church desire to make public their promises of love and fidelity, seek to invite God into their relationships to help in the fulfillment of their promises, and long for the blessing of their church communities and the fullness of the prayers, encouragement, and consolation that these communities of faith provide; and

Whereas, many congregations in our synod count as leaders and valued members gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships and yearn to respond to same-sex couples who are entering into legally recognized relationships, seeking to make public affirmation of their vows, invite God into their relationships, and ask for the blessing and support of their church families;

Therefore, to support pastors and congregations of the New England Synod desiring to provide pastoral care to same-sex couples seeking the blessing of their unions and the support of their faith communities for the promises made to each other, we offer the following guidance and resources:

- I.** We define "Blessing the Unions of Same-Sex couples" as a prayerful invoking of God's care, mercy, and presence upon a couple to the strengthening of their lifelong promises of love and fidelity.
- II.** Such a Blessing can occur in either private or public settings. The couple may desire a private setting where only the pastor and perhaps a few others are present to offer a prayer of blessing, or they may choose to have the Blessing be part of a public service of worship.
- III. Essential Elements of a Service of Blessing:**
 - a. A mutual exchange of lifelong promises of love and fidelity, or an affirmation of promises previously exchanged in a civil ceremony.

- b. An invocation of the Triune God to be present in the strengthening and the fulfillment of the promises exchanged.
- c. A prayer of blessing offered by the pastor and congregation (when a public blessing is desired) and a pledge to support the couple in the fulfillment of their promises.

IV. Preparation for the Blessing .

We encourage:

- a. consultation between pastors and congregational councils prior to the first occasion for the Service of Blessing for the union of a same -sex couple in order to determine congregational policy for such blessings.
- b. prayerful and intentional preparation by the couple with the pastor before a blessing.
- c. the demonstration of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22 -23) in the life of the couple.

V. Resources

In consultation with the New England Synod Task Force for Gay and Lesbian Understanding, the New England Synod Resource Center invites submissions and will maintain copies of various forms of private and public Services of Blessing for unions of same-sex couples that have been used in this Synod and elsewhere. These forms will represent a variety of options that are available to pastors and couples in the planning of a Service of Blessing.

VI. A suggested outline for a public Service of Blessing

We offer the following outline as a faithful foundation from which to develop a public Service of Blessing:

- a. Gathering – *Entrance, Greeting, Introduction, Declaration of Intention, Prayer of the Day*
- b. Word – *Readings, Responses, Sermon, Hymn of the Day*
- c. Exchange of Promises – *Promises, Exchange of Rings, Prayers of Blessing, Intercessions*
- d. Meal – *Holy Communion (optional)*
- e. Sending – *Blessings, Dismissal, Departure*

VII. Additional Guidance for various settings :

a. Setting A: Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and New York

At present, there is no legal recognition of monogamous, committed same -sex relationships in these states. Same-sex couples in these states may still seek a Service of Blessing upon their relationship.

What happens in a blessing in this setting? A same-sex couple stands before a pastor or pastor and congregation to make promises of lifelong love and fidelity. The pastor or pastor and congregation both invite God’s blessing upon the promises and the couple, and extend their own blessing to the couple through their prayers, support and pledge to help the couple honor their promises.

b. **Setting B: Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont: Blessing previously solemnized Civil Marriages/Unions.**

Monogamous and committed same-sex relationships are legally recognized in these states. A couple is married or joined in a civil union in a civil ceremony, and then seeks a blessing by the pastor or pastor and congregation.

What happens? A same-sex couple enters into a Civil Marriage or Union and does so by an agent of the state. The couple then comes before a pastor or before a pastor and congregation to affirm and make public their promises of lifelong love and fidelity. The pastor or pastor and congregation both invites God's blessing upon the promises and the couple, and extends their own blessing to the couple through their prayers, support, and pledge to help the couple honor their promises.

c. **Setting C: Massachusetts — Same-Sex Marriages Solemnized in the Church.**

Some same-sex couples in Massachusetts may desire to have their marriage solemnized in a setting of public worship in an ELCA congregation. Because the ELCA currently recognizes marriage as between a man and a woman, ELCA pastors are to refrain from solemnizing a same-sex marriage, but may host and participate in such a service.

What happens? A same-sex couple stands before the presiding and assisting pastors or pastors and congregation to make public promises of lifelong love and fidelity. The pastors or pastors and congregation both invite God's blessing upon the promises and the couple, and extend their own blessing to the couple through their prayers, support, and pledge to help the couple honor their promises. Someone other than the ELCA pastor solemnizes the marriage.

d. **Setting D: Connecticut and Vermont — Solemnizing Civil Unions**

Same-sex couples in these states may seek their pastor to solemnize their Civil Union in either a private setting or during a public setting of worship

What happens? A same-sex couple stands before a pastor or before a pastor and congregation to make public their promises of lifelong love and fidelity. The pastor or pastor and congregation both invite God's blessing upon the promises and the couple, and extend their own blessing to the couple through their prayers, support, and pledge to help the couple honor their promises. The pastor then acts as an agent of the state to solemnize the Civil Union.

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