

## *The Blessing of Same-Sex Couples: A Pastor's Concern*

I am thankful for the wealth of scholarly articles provided for us by our National Church Council, and for the contributions of the authors. One of the benefits of the current conversation is the growth in dialogue about weighty matters - although, I must confess, I wish that it did not cause so much pain for some. For me, the discussion is a sign that God's Spirit is still at work in the world and, indeed, the church.

I share in the pain, however. One of my seminary classmates has left the ELCIC, and other friends are forced to live hidden lives. I write from the perspective of a pastor. I have not, as yet, been asked to offer a blessing to the marriage of a same-sex couple, although I did write my bishop to tell him that, should I be asked, I would find it difficult to say, "no". Let me tell why.

Between the years 1994 and 1997 I had the great privilege of being "on leave from call" to study voice. In that time, I got to know several gay and lesbian people, none of whom were to impact me more than the female couple I lived with for 7 months in Indianapolis (I was working with the Indianapolis Opera Company).

I will not divulge the stories of pain I heard. Suffice it to say that here was a couple, one with deep Christian roots, who would have nothing to do with the church any longer. Their pain was too deep.

However, during that seven months I witnessed the warmth of their relationship. These two truly cared for each other. Not only did they live together, they worked together, and in a home office! Why, they even attended basketball games together, cheering on their Indiana Pacers. Never once did I hear their voices raised in argument. Always, I saw their mutual care and consolation.

They were honest and discreet, as any couple might be. When I was interviewed for the "room for rent", they told me up front about their sexuality. They offered me a room and the use of their house. While we lived under the same roof, I knew them to share a bedroom, but that was always a private affair.

Their relationship also extended beyond themselves. I saw their care for children from the neighbourhood whom they "adopted" (so to speak) who seemed to find a home within the safety and stability of their relationship. I was "without car" and the bus was not convenient to our location, and on more than one occasion, they lent me their car so that I could get groceries. They allowed my family, with three young children, to camp out in their house when making their visits from Richmond Hill, Ontario.

I was honoured to stay with this fine couple. Who would not call their relationship blessed, and a gift of God's creating? Indeed, their relationship was a blessing to me. Before I had the privilege of living under their roof, like so many, I had misconceptions of gay and lesbian persons. Really, I had never known any the way I got to know these two. In those seven months, walls of misunderstanding came down for me as they offered

grace upon grace to me. They knew me to be a pastor. I only wished that I could have offered them grace in return as a leader in the church. But my position as a minister of the gospel was compromised because of a church policy that could not speak a word of blessing to their relationship.

You see, how can I not offer blessing to these two who were such a blessing to me? How can I not offer blessing to such a mature love, one so self-giving to each other and so caring for the others around them?

And now, the weightier matter! How can I refuse if one of my three parishioners whom I know to be gay or lesbian were to come to me with a partner some day and plans to be married (for they can do so now in Ontario without the permission of the church), and asking for the blessing of God? God would already have blessed them in finding someone they love. Why can we not then say “God bless you” to them in their mutual commitment and promise? Can we not celebrate with joy what they have found in each other? Would they not want their relationship to be named blessed, if that means pronounced good and part of God’s creation in all of its meaningfulness?

And now my sarcastic side will show, for I have been asked to bless sterling silver cross necklaces at a baptism and at confirmation, and have done so. Worship furnishings, too, and banners, communion-ware and pews have been blessed. I have heard of the blessings of animals in church (there is a photo of such in the December 2004 Canada Lutheran). And can I not offer the church’s blessing to the mutual love of two human beings?

And let us speak of the church’s witness. I have heard it said, and I agree, that the disunity of the church is a great stumbling block to those outside of the church. Well, is it not the same for the many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons who feel the uncaring of a church that confesses the love of God in Christ as its very centre as they experience closed doors and blocked entranceways when their most meaningful relationships cannot be named good? For these, the Christian institution becomes sadly irrelevant.

Back to my two friends in Indianapolis: you see, my knowing them is a weighty matter. I cannot dismiss them, or their blessed love for each other. And should they ever request a blessing from me as a pastor, I would find myself between the proverbial “rock and a hard place” of my church’s policy that would have me say “no” and my pastoral desire to communicate the gospel “yes” of God.

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