

## **Words and Deeds: Putting ‘fully welcome’ into action**

A gay couple’s response to the ELCIC’s legacy of discrimination and the National Church Council’s recommendation on same-sex blessings.

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Words...

It is 6:30 am and our eyes have not yet opened as Steve and I drive into the city for another day of work. Our morning coffee has barely circulated through our sleepy brains when Steve sees it. He reads the sign in front of the Anglican church nearest our home:

**“LORD I BELIEVE IN  
YOUR DEFINITION OF MARRIAGE”.**

We shake our heads, wondering aloud about how many gay youth will come out in these parishes, only to realize that for the sake of their emotional safety they must leave the intolerance of their churches—and even families—behind. Or how many gay youth will prepare for college or university, sensing a calling to ordained ministry, only to sadly discover that their Anglican and Lutheran churches forbid the ordination of openly gay clergy. Or how many lesbian and gay couples will leave their churches, refusing to invest any more time, energy or money in institutions which are unwilling to recognize and bless something so central to our lives as our committed, loving, relationships.

& Deeds

We are on the subways train in Toronto. School is out, spring has sprung, and heterosexual youth are kissing on the subway everywhere.

That evening, Steve and I walk down the streets of the gay village, holding hands, looking for a place to eat supper. Now that we’ve moved up north—out of the relative safety of downtown Toronto—the chance to hold hands feels like a rare treat. Public displays of affection don’t lend themselves well to our northern home community. Not many heterosexual couples have had to consider the possibility of being verbally harassed or worse—being physically harmed—for the simple act of holding hands. As a gay couple we have learned that there is a clear and direct connection between the church’s homophobic teachings and deeds of anti-gay discrimination and anti-gay violence.

Words...

**“You are welcome here”**

& Deeds

*Dear God, why did that gay couple in front of us have to kiss each other during the peace... I feel sick to my stomach... I hope they don’t turn around to share the peace with us... Maybe, if I avoid making eye contact with them, they won’t see us...*

Words...

We are at Eastern Synod convention—we are probably the only married gay couple in the entire room, but—heywho knows... We watch as delegates begin the process of making decisions about *our* lives, while we sit in the sidelines—no say, no vote. We are registered as *visitors*.

A motion comes to the floor requesting National Church Council (NCC) undertake a study process concerning same-sex blessings, for approval at the 2005 national convention. The chair invites delegates to begin floor discussions regarding the motion.

A delegate approaches the microphone: *‘I think homosexuality is wrong... the Bible says so... but if our pastors or seminary professors think differently about this—if they’ve learned something new about this—why aren’t they teaching us?’* (My paraphrase).

& Deeds

All right, I figure, fair enough, a request to learn more. So I decide to approach this person during a coffee break. I choose to give her the benefit of the doubt, and to assume her stated desire “to learn more” is sincere.

So I introduce myself, telling her that I am at synod assembly with my husband Steve. The delegate’s immediate response: A sarcastic: *“You are not married! That’s not a real marriage!”*

Clearly the dismissive comment was indicating I was wrong. This delegate was *not* interested in listening or learning. Certainly not from the lesbian and gay people in her very midst.

Which leaves me to ask the obvious question: is this the best my church can offer us as a gay couple? If my church is not willing to bless our relationships or marry us, or ordain us, why bother? Why accept second-class status and a lifetime of discrimination any longer?

Only the complete removal of all barriers to ordination, and the blessing of our relationships—basic acts of sexual justice—can keep the ELCIC from experiencing an exodus of any remaining gay and lesbian people from its pews, acts of ecclesial disobedience by congregations tired of endless waiting for permission to bless our relationships and ordain us, and what’s more, the creation of entirely new Lutheran synods and denominations in North America which are more earnestly committed to embodying justice, compassion and Gospel.

Words...

“We need more study. We’re not ready.”

& Deeds

It is July 2004. I am one of hundreds in the packed sanctuary of a Minneapolis church. A Lutheran congregation of the ELCA has decided that *it* is ready. Ready to add its name to the growing number of ELCA parishes risking ecclesial disobedience by irregularly calling and ordaining openly gay and lesbian pastors, despite the ELCA’s ban on this.

These congregations have decided that waiting any longer will just mean losing more good pastors to other denominations.

Two retired ELCA bishops conduct the rite of ordination for the openly gay man. The moment arrives. Silence falls upon the sanctuary as a circle of over 60 clergy surrounds Jay Wiesner, praying: “Send now your Holy Spirit...”

The presider walks the newly ordained into the midst of the congregation. We all gather around him. We all stretch out our hands. The presider announces: “*Let it be acclaimed that Jay Wiesner is an ordained minister in the Church of Christ ...*” A powerful, thunderous “*Amen. Thanks be to God.*” is followed by five minutes of continuous applause. Today, we have prayed for the Spirit’s presence. Today, the Spirit has led this Lutheran congregation—and all of us with them—to this courageous moment in which “word and deed” are finally reconciled—in a bold act of Gospel.

Words...

Walking along Bloor Street in downtown Toronto, the sign on a United Church building catches my eye. It displays the church’s name, worship times, and the following message:

**WE SUPPORT  
SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

& Deeds

It’s the afternoon of Pentecost Sunday. My husband Steve and I have joined friends for an ordination service of the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada. The liturgy is conducted under an enormous cross, painted with all of the colours of the rainbow, the rainbow being a well-known symbol of the gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community. The cross is displayed prominently over the altar, signalling the United Church’s strong commitment to queer justice. I notice something about this particular rainbow cross. This welcoming symbol has been used for *so many years* that it actually has *dents* in it. Talk about a well-worn Gospel of radical love.

We are there to support a close friend and gifted pastor who was removed from the ELCIC’s clergy roster because he is gay. His name is called, he walks towards the presiding minister, a stole is laid on his shoulders, and is warmly welcomed into the Order of Ministry within the United Church. It is this same friend—some months later—who performs the legal marriage ceremony for my husband and I on New Years’ Eve, as a United Church pastor.

Words...

It is July 12, 2002, and the Ontario Superior Court has released its decision, legally changing the definition of marriage in Ontario to include same-sex couples.

Two days later my boyfriend and I are in our home Anglican parish. A cradle Lutheran, I hold membership both in a parish of the ELCIC and also in our Anglican home church. Indeed, we are the Waterloo Declaration in action!

The mood is jubilant and celebratory. Following the greeting, and opening liturgy, it is our custom to share community announcements. A long line of parishioners gather at the microphone. We have never been known for our brevity. But this morning is different.

Friends of ours—three lesbian couples—have approached the microphone first. By the look on their faces, something’s up...

Couple number one steps into the microphone: “We’re getting married”. The sanctuary erupts into celebratory applause. Couple number two: “We’re getting married!!” More applause. Couple number three grins into the microphone: “We’re pregnant!” Joyful laughter and applause fill the space. Joy is added to joy that morning in our Anglican church.

As the three couples—all smiles now—head back to their pews, we hear a whisper directed our way, coming from behind us: “Hey... Steve and Lionel... isn’t it your turn next?” Within the weeks and months that follow, those joyous celebrations would take place. And several months later we would welcome the arrival of the newborn daughter of two proud moms.

### & Deeds

It is New Year’s Day, and Steve and I are in a ‘high-brow’ restaurant with dark wooden panelling and spiffy waiters. We munch on appetizers, enjoy good wine, and laugh throughout a decidedly ‘low brow’ game of cards: crazy eights. Our server brings us a bottle of champagne. We have made it. We are wearing the rings that were blessed one year ago by a United Church pastor. We are celebrating our first wedding anniversary.

### Words...

A woman once threw a grand wedding banquet and invited many, saying: “Come, share my joy! My son and his boyfriend will be joined in marriage!” And as the time of the wedding banquet approached, she sent her maid to gather everyone saying: “Come, for all things are ready!”

### & Deeds

However, one by one, *they all alike began to make excuses*. “I’ve just bought a new car, and I need to take it for a spin!” “I’ve just won a free trip, and I need get some sunscreen!” “I’ve just bought a new pressure washer, and I can’t wait to spray down my house!” Truly, her friends were a sad lot.

Her guests were either too engrossed in on their own little worlds—or too afraid—to realize that *even more joys* might exist beyond the realm of their own limited experience.

She was furious! No one was going to spoil her son’s wedding day. So she wastes no time. A skilled event planner, she invites pretty near everyone—I mean everyone—the pet sitter, the postal worker, the passersby, even the girls at coffee time! And *she fills that place* with a great party. And joy *is* added to joy. And her new son-in-law thanks her for it.

(Based on Luke’s Parable of the Wedding Feast, Luke 14:16–24)