

PASTORAL ISSUES RELATED TO THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX COUPLES

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This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

The following thoughts on pastoral issues related to blessing same-sex couples derive from my professional experience as a pastoral counsellor who has worked with lesbian/gay male (L/G) couples. Another source relates to presentations by students on being a sexual minority in society. In my Waterloo Lutheran Seminary course on "Marital/Couple Dynamics," several lesbian students in committed couple relationships made class presentations on their sexual orientation, relationship dynamics, and perceptions of the hostile social context of homophobia and heterosexism.

My first observation as a counsellor who has only occasionally worked with L/G clients as individuals or couples is that each couple is unique and that L/G couple relationships cannot be grouped in a class by themselves in contrast to "straight" relationships. My L/G couples generally came with a variety of presenting problems no different from what I heard from other couples: relational problems with no overriding reference to sexual orientation or same-sex issues. Sexual relations also did not constitute an area that distinguished heterosexual from L/G couples in terms of its frequency, prominence, conflict, or satisfaction.

Yet, I also became increasingly aware that there is another dimension that sets L/G radically apart from other couple relationships. It is the hostile North American social context that in a similar fashion afflicts other minority persons and groups, with gay men and lesbian women as "one of the most, if not the most, stigmatized groups" (Laid, 177). Constantly, choices need to be made as to how visible to be, even as a couple living together. There is a psychological and spiritual cost, both in staying "in the closet" and in "coming out." Therapy and support groups, specifically the gay community, have tried to bridge the transition towards a public declaration of who they really are. That is where I see same-sex blessings as a therapeutic ritual of the church in symbolizing a step bridging the gap by incorporating L/G couples into community.

One of my students in a reportedly stable and happy same-sex relationship listed her top ten challenges (in a class in 2001):

- Sadness of not feeling at times like you belong in your family or in your world; dealing with people "not getting" you.

- Working to staying positive and energized when it would be easy to play "the victim" and throw a "pity party."
- Letting go and grieving some of the dreams I had for my life, for example, marriage and a family.
- Seeing the sadness, confusion and disappointment in my parents' eyes as they try to understand who I am and deal with their lost dreams for me.
- Dealing with homophobic comments/actions.
- Living a double life—it's draining and chips away at one's sense of personal integrity.
- Grieving the fact that I will never have a wedding where I can celebrate my love publicly with family and friends (and knowing that even if one day it is legal for gay couples to marry, that many family members would feel incredibly awkward and see it as a mockery of a "real" wedding).
- Living with the fear/insecurity that people would not like me if they knew I was gay.
- Being a member of a religious tradition (that has held a lot of meaning for me throughout my life) that officially teaches that the most treasured relationship in my life is "disordered" and "intrinsically evil."
- Not being able to hold my partner's hand and go for a nice walk without fear or judgment.
- Knowing how much it might hurt my family and partner if I fully come out—wondering if I am being selfish even considering it.

The clinical literature emphasizes that homophobia and heterosexism are not only external forces but also are to some extent internalized as a form of self-loathing and shame, feelings that can lead to depression and substance abuse, manifesting themselves in "subtle and frequently nonconscious ways" (Brown, 275). Therapists and other involved persons need to be aware that all L/G couples live in these two interlocking systems of external and internal harassment.

Studies (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978) report that most L/G couples want to maintain enduring relationships even though there is evidence that some of these relationships turn out to be short term. I believe that a main factor is that there is a vacuum in public validation or support for these couples to stay together. The absence of legal and religious ceremony contributes to L/G's moving rapidly and, possibly, prematurely into a commitment to live together. The sensed insecurity of the relationship probably accounts for the fact that L/G persons/couples use therapy as a resource at a much higher rate than the population in general (Brown, 276). Clinical literature also describes the frequency of feelings of jealousy or possessiveness as the presenting

problem in therapy with L/G persons and couples: "fears of infidelity reflect a sense that no same-sex partner could make a genuine commitment or respect it in the face of temptation, because this relationship is not a `real' (i.e., heterosexually married) relationship, and thus based on only the most flimsy and fleeting of attractions" (Brown, 278).

From the above pastoral counselling experiences and reflections it is obvious that I incline to favoring same-sex blessings. The absence of religious ceremony and community contributes to the vulnerability and risk in same-sex relationships. I also believe that many, if not most, congregations are no exception to the general prevalence of homophobia and assumptions of the natural and moral superiority of heterosexual relationships. In that sense same-sex blessings will remain, for the time being, a mixed blessing for L/G persons and marriages. More than a political or ideological statement, it takes a faith commitment to be a confirming congregation to bless same-sex couples. Then the blessing becomes a shared blessing for both the congregation and the L/G couples—when those who have been invisible to each other face each other and practice community.

References

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