

THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX COUPLES

A PASTORAL JOURNEY

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I am a parish pastor in the community of Trinity Lutheran Church, New Hamburg, Ontario. I have served this parish for over 21 years and ministered in this township for 25. I know my parishioners well and I love them very, very much. We have made an interesting, continuing journey together and I would like to tell you a little of our story.

1. A Request for Blessing

Early in 1998, I was invited by a parishioner to bless her relationship with a woman partner.¹ It seemed to her a natural request, one that an active parishioner might reasonably make of her pastor. Trinity had supported this young woman in overseas medical missions work and our community deeply respected her Christian witness. In those days, the matter of same-sex unions was not on the national radar screen and certainly not on the agenda of the church. And it was *not* on my agenda. What to do? I agonized over the request. I consulted parish leaders and other important and considered voices. I met with my spiritual director and confessor. At length, however, I declined to offer the blessing. It was my pastoral judgement that Trinity was simply not there. As far as I was concerned, at Trinity the door was closed to the blessing of same-sex couples.

On October 31, 1998 —Reformation Day and the Eve of All Saints, as it happened—the blessing proceeded in another venue and under the hands of a pastor of another denomination. I was deeply chagrined and upset, and, in that context I pledged myself to lead our congregation in some sort of process of discernment and conversation with gays and lesbians in our community. As I saw it, our parish had an ethical and moral obligation to take up the difficult questions born of this real-world request for pastoral care. That was seven years ago.

2. Caring Conversations at Trinity Church

Shortly thereafter, because of my involvement in national church work, I learned that NCC was looking at the matter of how the church welcomes gays and lesbians. This was late in 1998 and early in 1999. A process dubbed a "Caring Conversation" was being contemplated and, in the summer of 1999, a Caring Conversation was modelled at the ELCIC's National Convention.

I was moved —as were many others— as we experienced this single, short session. At the same time, it seemed to me that, for use in the parish, a fuller, several-session process would be necessary. I felt that the "Caring Conversation" itself needed to be located in a larger process of study, conversation and discernment. I still hold to that view. At Trinity, we elected to lead into the Conversation proper with several sessions of Bible-study and to follow up with a debriefing and "whereto from here" session.² All this was in the planning stages in late 1999 yielding our own ground-breaking, formative and deeply moving Caring Conversations series in 2000. In fact, all this

was transpiring even before the publication in 2001 of Erwin Buck's extremely helpful *Studies on Homosexuality and the Church*³ which served to popularize the Caring Conversation model.⁴ In any event, following our work at Trinity, other communities adopted and adapted our several-week format using a variety of kinds of sessions to lead into the Caring Conversation proper.

In 2005, Trinity initiated a second parish-based Caring Conversations series, the fruit of which was the adoption, at length, of Trinity's own *Affirmation of Welcome*.⁵ This effort grew in part out of the Eastern Synod's adoption of a welcoming statement in 2004 although our work was already well under way as a result of a notice of motion at the 2002 Eastern Synod Assembly that such a statement would be presented to the 2004 Assembly.

3. Caring Conversations in the Wider Community

For several years now, Trinity has played a significant role in informing the larger-church conversation around matters related to the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the church. In this regard, Trinity maintains a "Caring Conversations" page at our congregational website (www.telc.ca). Since 2002, we have helped to plan a Kitchener/Waterloo Conference series of Caring Conversations events: from a time when we were simply involved in describing the Caring Conversation process as it had unfolded at Trinity (CC1 and CC2); to a time when an actual Caring Conversation was modelled for the wider community (CC3); to later days when the Conference addressed a (then) proposed Eastern Synod "welcoming" motion (CC4) and still later addressed the motion that was ultimately passed at the 2004 Synod Assembly (CC5). At the time of writing (March, 2005), a sixth event is scheduled for April 16, 2005 (CC6). We plan to explore the matter of the blessing of same-sex couples with a focus on NCC's direction and on how we can live together with compassion and grace in community and society.⁶

4. The Blessing of Same-Sex Couples in the ELCIC

In the summer of 2004, the Eastern Synod passed a motion requesting "*National Church Council to initiate a study of the theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral implications of authorizing a parish based local option to perform same-sex blessings and bring appropriate recommendations to the 2005 ELCIC National Convention.*" The motion introduced both the matter of same-sex blessings and the possibility of a "local option" on such blessings. In response, NCC commissioned a substantial collection of essays by ELCIC scholars. A helpful *Study Guide* followed as did an invitation to people across the church to contribute additional essays.⁷ In March, 2005, NCC referred the matter to the 2005 national convention. The NCC resolution reads in part "*That the ELCIC allow pastors to perform blessings for same-sex couples who want to make a life-long commitment to one another in the presence of God and their community of faith.*"

I am persuaded that this motion represents a significant *via media* for the church and the best way forward given the alternatives: no action; blanket approval; a study of sexuality... The Lutheran Church has the theological tools with which to take up the hard issues of our time. Moreover, the ELCIC is blessed with fine theologians who are able to use these tools with deftness and with a great measure of pastoral insight. They have provided us with some excellent papers which, taken together, admit or confirm a helpful way forward. They offer elements of a theological framework

for embracing God's homosexual people with love and compassion and for blessing their committed relationships by the same standards with which we would bless those of heterosexual people.

5. Some Helpful Lutheran Theology

- **God's word is a living word.** Our Trinity Lutheran community began its earliest work around the question of homosexuality by looking at the scriptures. We began our journey with the Bible. We have come to the view that God's word is a *living* word. As such, while we are called to contend seriously with the scriptures, we are not compelled to accept every word as authoritative in all matters and in all circumstances for all time. We are admitting openly what Lutherans have long held tacitly. Some of our scriptures speak compellingly to the issues of our time and some do not. Thus, we have largely abandoned the proscriptions and penalties of the Levitical Code even as we have come to set aside some of the views of Paul.
- **The Gospel calls us to love.** We have come to believe that we must ask ourselves "How is God's love made manifest here?" The answers take us in often challenging yet life-affirming directions. We part company with Paul, for example, around the role of women in the church and the place of slaves in society. God's love sees us offer women full access to all orders of ministry and we reject the ownership of one human being by another. By similar reasoning, we hear the Gospel calling us to extend God's love to homosexual people without qualification and the blessing of the church to people in committed same-sex relationships.⁸
- ***Sola Gratia* trumps *Sola Scriptura*** We are persuaded by those who hold that the principle of *Sola Scriptura* is to be governed by the principle of *Sola Gratia*. We understand *Sola Gratia* to be preeminent. Thus, we look at the scriptures through the lens of grace and love. The result is that we do not accord every individual text the same weight as every other. (Thus Luther could hold Paul in high regard but speak very critically of James.) We seek, as best we are able, to look through the lens of love when we take up any contemporary question. When we ask "How is God's love to be made manifest in response to this couple's request?" we must decide what weight to accord those few passages of scripture which are advanced on the matter and especially the words of Paul in Romans 1. It is this process that allows God's word to be a *living word* and which may lead us to respectfully disagree with Paul.⁹
- **Homosexual behaviour is not implicitly sinful.** Many in my community, and I among them, do not hold that homosexual behaviour is sinful in a relationship where parallel heterosexual behaviour would not be. Clearly, the gift of sexuality may be misused. But that is true whatever the sexual orientation of the people involved. To single out same-sex behaviour for special consideration strikes one as gazing through a logjam in search of specks.
- **Local options abound.** Local options have been around from the days of the early church. Moreover, they were put forward for the good of the church by the Lutheran Reformers and are part and parcel of church life today.¹⁰ In my former travels for the national church, I was astonished at how often pastors and communities reserved the right to exercise a "local option" as to their choice of worship book; whether or not they offered communion every Lord's Day, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (XXIV.1) notwithstanding; who should be baptised

or communed; and more. The point is that *de facto* local options abound.

- **Matters of sexuality do not have confessional status.** Any issue before the church may invite the questions “Does this issue have confessional status. Is it therefore beyond consideration as a matter for local option.” I am persuaded that blessing has no bearing on the matter of salvation and it does not, therefore, qualify for “confessional status.”¹¹ The blessing of same-sex couples may be fairly considered as a local option in the same way as, say, the weekly availability of holy communion or the decision to use one form of the Creed or Lord’s Prayer over another.¹²

6. A Few Thoughts and Concerns

- A reminder: While for some the matter of same-sex blessings is a theoretical issue, for my community—and for some others—it has been a real issue of pastoral concern for years and one which we can reasonably predict will surface and resurface in the near term.
- A mission truth: A local option addresses the fact that different communities have different needs and the church must respond to local realities with a measure of *appropriate* grace.
- A concern: Any true local option must work both ways. It must be an option to bless if that seems right to parish and pastor and not to bless if it does not seem right.
- An observation: The notion that practice must be uniform across the church has little merit and, apparently, little currency among Lutherans. We manage to live together despite a broad range of practices around parish organization, congregational life, communion matters, etc.
- A worry: The demographics on questions related to homosexuality would indicate that our church’s older members and younger members are increasingly out of sync.
- A word of thanks: I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Harold Remus and the Rev. Dr. David Jacobsen, among others, for their gentle reminder as to the power of language to work good and ill.¹³ I would encourage delegates to read their papers—indeed, all of the NCC papers on the www.elcic.ca website—in preparation for our national convention.
- A small number: I think the number of same-sex blessings to happen any time soon will be small. Where people do not feel overly welcome, they are unlikely to request a blessing. And, if and when they do make such a request, parish and pastor will still have to decide.
- A Lutheran thing: I like the paradigm advanced by our bishops in July, 2003 and restated in the March, 2005 NCC resolution: the state marries and the church blesses. Very Lutheran.¹⁴
- An imponderable: It is of some wonder to me—though heartening—that gay folks are seeking the church’s blessing *at all* given the dismal witness of straight folks. We have not done a very good job at our own blessed relationships...

7. Conclusion: Let’s Open the Door

While there is a sense in which the community of Trinity Church has travelled a long way since the request for a same-sex blessing in 1998, the fact is that we are not yet fully resolved on the issue. We have opened the door to gays and lesbians in our community and we have expressed as carefully and forthrightly as we might a sense of welcome and inclusion. Nevertheless, we have not had occasion to take up a real-world request for the blessing of a same-sex relationship *in recent times*. The couple mentioned above received their blessing elsewhere, years ago. The blessing of a same-sex couple is, therefore, a threshold we have yet to cross since beginning our journey of study and discernment.

However, it is my view that, for us, that time is coming and the church would do well to open the door to a considered “local option.” As a parish pastor I am in favour of making the blessing of same-sex couples a *local* possibility. Our scholars have done their work. Study materials abound and are readily available. People can take advantage of them or not as they see fit. And, in July, whether we proceed or not, the sun will still come up on the morning after.

At such time as a gay or lesbian couple presents themselves at Trinity for God’s blessing, I, together with my partner-in-ministry and the people of the parish, will cross the threshold together—or not. But please, let *us* decide. My hope is that we will decide to bless. And, in doing so, if we err, indeed, if we sin, we shall have sinned boldly.

Endnotes

1. The first paragraphs of this essay are adapted and substantially revised from material originally published on the website of Trinity Lutheran Church, New Hamburg (www.telc.ca). Look for the Caring Conversations page.
2. Our congregation owes a significant debt to The Rev. Dr. Tim Hegedus, who led our Bible study, and to Pastor Loretta Jaunzarins, Sherri Keller and John Stiefelmeyer who assisted in Trinity’s Caring Conversation process.
3. Pastor Buck’s complete volume is available at www.elcic.ca/docs/buck/01buck.html.
4. It should be noted that Caring Conversation-like events had been transpiring in various places as early as c. 1990 as, for example, in Edmonton, Alberta.
5. The process is detailed in the “Affirmation of Welcome” section of the Caring Conversations page at www.telc.ca.
6. Over the years, the “Caring Conversations” name was maintained for the entire K/W Conference series although we could not have foreseen its longevity or direction in early days. Each event grew naturally out of the previous one(s) and/or took up related matters on the synodical or national agenda of the church. Participants were frequently polled as to future possibilities and the direction of subsequent events. For example, the clergy participants at CC1 asked for a similar event for clergy and laity *both*. CC2 was born. Participants at both CC1 and CC2 requested that an actual Caring Conversation be modelled. CC3 was born. And so on. Our work seemed to us to be part of a larger, continuing, Conference-wide and church-wide Caring Conversation.
7. All of this material is available in the “Considering the Matter of Same-Sex Blessings” section of the ELCIC website at www.elcic.ca/docs/2005/blessings.html.
8. The hermeneutic at work here is one of two described by Erwin Buck and Tim Hegedus in *A Lutheran Approach to the New Testament—A Hermeneutic of Grace* available on the ELCIC website.
9. Matthew Anderson offers some helpful insights in *The Three Reformation Solas and Twenty-First Century Ethical Issues*. available on the ELCIC website. An earlier piece by Oscar Cole Arnal called *Toward a Reformation Welcome: Law, Gospel and the Three Solas* makes a similar case. It is available in the “Resources” section of the Caring Conversations page at www.telc.ca.
10. See Oscar Cole Arnal’s *“Local Option” in First Century Christianity and the Lutheran Reformation* available on the ELCIC website.
11. See Robert Kelly’s *Toward a Lutheran Theology of Marriage* available on the ELCIC website.
12. See, as well, Lawrence Deneff and William Hordern in *Adiaphora, the Article By Which the Church Stands or Falls, and the Blessing of Same-Sex Relationships* available on the ELCIC website.
13. See Harold Remus’ *Words, Words, Words—On the Role of Language in Current ELCIC Discussions* and David Jacobsen’s *The Role of Language in Considering the Matter of Same-Sex Blessings* available on the ELCIC website.
14. On Luther and marriage, see Kelly, *op. cit.*, pages 3-4. The bishops’ letter “Regarding Same-Sex Marriage” is available at www.telc.ca/pdf/ELCIC_bishops_letter.pdf.