

**Guidance for Pastors and Congregations
of the New England Synod
Regarding Presiding at Same-Gender Marriages**

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

Since the New England Synod Council first adopted its ***Guidance for Pastors and Congregations of the New England Synod Regarding the Blessing of Same-Gender Couples*** in December of 2006, much has changed, both in civil law regarding same-gender marriage in the New England states and in the ELCA with the adoption of the social statement “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” and the approved changes in ministry policies at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, including revisions made in 2010 to the “Vision and Expectations” document for rostered leaders in the ELCA.

In 2010, four of the states that make up the territory of the New England Synod (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont) provide marriage rights to same-gender couples. The states of New York and Rhode Island recognize the marriages of same-gender couples performed elsewhere, but do not provide for such marriages to be solemnized in their states. The state of Maine provides for same-gender domestic partnerships, but not same-gender marriage. These changes in civil law and practice have presented a significant challenge to ELCA pastors and congregations who are seeking the best ways to provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister. Though there are differing and conscience-bound understandings about the place of such relationships within the Christian community, we now have in the congregations of our synod members whose same-gender marriages reflect the same fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect and holy love that we ask God to bless in the marriages of men and women, but whose marriages their pastors, even if they were willing, have not been allowed to solemnize.

With the adoption of the social statement “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, and more recently, “Vision and Expectations for Ordained Ministers in the ELCA” by the ELCA Church Council in April of 2010, we believe that we can now offer better guidance to our pastors and congregations.

“Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” acknowledges that some people in the ELCA conclude that marriage is an appropriate term to use in describing the benefits, protections, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong monogamous relationships. On the basis of conscience-bound belief, many pastors and congregations have committed to including in their mission and ministry the practice of surrounding same-gender couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God. Some in the ELCA believe that same-gender couples should avail themselves of social and legal

support for themselves, their children, and other dependents and seek the highest legal accountability available for their relationships.

Similarly, in “Vision and Expectations,” rostered leaders desiring to live in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous relationships are told that both church and community are part of the public within which he or she is accountable, and that public accountability for a rostered leader includes compliance with state law if available in the state where he or she resides. We should, then, also expect and support the same standard for lay couples. We should acknowledge that congregations may choose to host services of marriage and that ordained ministers of the ELCA may choose to serve as solemnizers on behalf of the state.

Recognizing that our present guidance which allows congregations and pastors to host and/or participate in, but not solemnize same-gender marriages, does not adequately resolve civil or pastoral concerns involved, the New England Synod Council recommends that pastors who choose to do so may, in accordance with the laws of their state, serve as solemnizer for same-gender marriages. Additionally, the Synod Council recommends that congregations which choose to do so may host services where same-gender marriages are solemnized. Since a pastor may already decline to solemnize any marriage, this guidance does not place a requirement on any pastor or congregation to act against conscience. Among this Synod’s congregations and pastors one could find all of the differing understandings and practices one would find elsewhere in the ELCA. In light of these differences, we encourage thoughtful, prayerful, and respectful conversations within congregations prior to their first same-gender wedding.

We continue to support pastors and congregations who wish to bless same-gender unions in the states of the Synod which do not offer same-gender marriage rights (Maine, New York, and Rhode Island). The prayerful support of a church community upon such unions, in the absence of legal recognition, is an invaluable and true gift to couples in these states.

We acknowledge that faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action in response to same-gender couples seeking recognition for their relationships. However, we seek through this guidance to see these differences as a gift to be celebrated as we live out that which unites us: the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ who leads us into mission and ministry in the world.

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