Same-Sex Marriage in the Montana Synod.

Wyoming and Montana are in transition in terms of the legality of same-sex marriage. We are encouraging congregations and pastors to be in conversation. Many states have lived with same-sex marriage and unions longer than Wyoming and Montana. Bishops in those states have given helpful advice to their congregations and pastors, and have shared with those of us in states that are just now offering same-sex marriage. This document is borrowed heavily from Bishop Martin Wells and the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod, with permission and with thanks.

A. Some observations:

1. The social statement Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust (hereafter HS:GT), adopted by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, states: “Marriage is a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by God. The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting Mark 10:6-9:.…” (see HS:GT, p. 15)

2. The social statement also acknowledges that consensus does not exist in this church concerning how to regard same-gender committed relationships. It describes four stances held with conviction and integrity by members of the ELCA. (see HS:GT, p. 20).

3. The 2009 Churchwide Assembly adopted actions on ministry policies, including the following: “Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”

4. The ELCA does not have a rite or liturgy for marriage, blessing, or union of same-gender persons.

5. Ordained ministers in congregations have authority to marry as part of their calls, when authorized by state law, but Churchwide policy does not determine whom a pastor may marry. The decision whether and how to recognize, support, and hold accountable same-gender relationships is entrusted to congregations. The decision should be addressed prayerfully in the context of the congregation’s ministry. Consultation among congregational leaders and the synodical bishop is appropriate as needed.

6. Actions taken in 2009 to permit gay pastors to enter into life-long, publicly accountable, monogamous relationships ask that such persons seek the highest public recognition available to them in their place of residency. In several jurisdictions, this recognition would now be “marriage.”

B. Lutherans and Weddings:

 1. Lutheran wedding/marriage traditions have evolved over time, often mirroring

 cultural trends. See “Marriage,” Chapter Nine in “The Christian Life: Baptism and Life

 Passages; Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Volume 2. Dennis Bushkofsky and Craig

 Satterlee, Augsburg Fortress, 2008.

 2. Pastors are often confused/confounded by their role when signing marriage

 documents on behalf of the state. (“In reality, in the formal and legal making of the

 marriage, the pastor…functions as a magistrate for the state.”) P. 188 “Marriage” above.

 3. So, in what sense do Lutheran pastors “do” weddings? The parties, in their exchange of

 promises, bind themselves to one another and create the civil marriage contract. “The

 proclamation of the word of God and the prayer for God’s blessing on the couple and

 their household are considered the universal Christian additions to the human process

 of marriage. By this nuptial blessing, the church acknowledges the union “in Christ”

 of husband and wife. The church’s essential role in marriage is defined by this blessing.

 The church neither marries people nor determines whether they can be married; these

 are functions of the state, though often carried out by representatives of the church. The

 church proclaims God’s unconditional love and faithfulness and asks God to bless this

 couple in their life together.” P. 187 “Marriage” above.

 4. Some Lutherans observe an older tradition whereby the action of affecting

 a marriage contract is done before civil authorities and then the marriage party comes to

 the church for congregational support, prayer, and a form of blessing which invokes

 God’s support for the marriage. See Prayer and Blessing after a Civil Marriage, p. 373,

 “Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Occasional Services for the Assembly,” Augsburg Fortress,

 2009.

C. Congregational wedding policies:

1. Congregations regularly employ “Wedding Policy” documents that assist the

congregation and pastor in determining whom and how and when weddings are done in

the congregation. These are usually documents drawn up with the pastor’s standards and

preferences embedded and are sometimes reviewed by the congregation council.

2. These policies often express guidelines or firm policy decisions concerning whom may

 be married in the building; under what conditions (fees; pre-marital counseling, etc);

 cooperation with a “wedding coordinator,” building use, reception protocols; alcohol

policy; catering; security deposits, cleaning fees and other matters.

3. Such a policy may require congregational approval but most often does not.

 4. It is rare for such policies to set standards for the pastor to observe if the church property

 is not involved. Most pastors regard decisions concerning marriage requests off

 church property and on non-church time to be decisions they make for themselves. Some

 pastors will record these weddings in the congregational records and others will not.

D. Going forward:

 1. Some MT Synod congregations may desire to make hosting same gender marriage

 ceremonies an explicit provision of their mission.

 2. Other MT Synod congregations may have taken the opportunity of the 2009 decisions to

 file with the synod a statement of their intent not to consider or call a gay and partnered

 pastor. These congregations and others may want to use the state exemption and exclude

 same-gender marriage ceremonies.

 3. Other MT Synod congregations might be willing to allow same gender weddings but don’t

 want to make it a big deal or be identified with either of the more polar positions.

E. What are a congregation’s options?

 1. Do nothing and hope that the question of hosting a wedding for gay persons does not

 come to the pastor or congregation.

 2. Agree that when the question comes, the council or pastor will consider each request on a

 case-by-case basis.

 3. Welcome each request on the basis of informal standards currently in practice i.e. the

 pastor usually decides whether to take a wedding based on interest, time available,

 counseling needs and whether it is a member or a non-member requesting the service.

1. Include a line like this in the congregation’s wedding policy: “The religious

convictions of this congregation lead us to believe that a marriage is between a man and a woman. This congregation does not host marriage ceremonies other than for a man and a woman, and then only according to the standards included in this policy.”

1. Or: “This congregation will recognize gay marriage promises made elsewhere and

 offer recognition, support and accountability for the couple.”

1. Or: “This congregation is a Reconciling in Christ

congregation] and we welcome requests from all persons who desire to be married here. Each request will be considered according to the regular wedding policy.”

1. Or: “This congregation follows an older tradition in Lutheran churches: Each couple is

asked to secure the legal marriage from government officials. This congregation will then participate, according to its policy, by hosting a service of worship recognizing the public exchange of vows and accompany this recognition with prayers, Holy Communion and support for the couple’s life together.”

F. Pastoral considerations:

My prayer is that the congregations and pastors of the synod will work together in their respective congregations to respond to these new questions. It will involve both deep respect for the congregation’s traditions and the desire of some pastors and members to embrace all who desire to make public promises of life-long fidelity in the context of prayers, song, and the sacrament of Holy Communion. The bishop will honor the decisions made in congregations. The pastors and congregations who choose to participate in same-gender services, and the pastors and congregations who choose not to participate in such services will not, by their decision, be subject to discipline from the synod office. I ask that you be in touch with the Bishop as your conversations unfold and you discern your responses.

 The hardest questions may come when pastor and congregation are of differing minds on

 these matters. As with any call, such differing opinions need to be worked out in

 conversation and prayer. God bless you and keep you as you traverse this new territory

 together.

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