The Society of the Holy Trinity
Pastoral Guidance Concerning The Estate of Marriage and Same-Sex Unions

The question of whether it is permissible or proper for the Church to bless same-sex unions has been debated in the assemblies of various Lutheran bodies in North America, as well as in churches of other denominational traditions. Some pastors have undertaken to preside at such blessings on their own or with the tacit approval of synods to do so. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that both Canada and the United States have expanded the legal definition of marriage to encompass same-sex unions, and pastors are now authorized by the state to officiate at same-sex weddings. In the face of these developments, the leadership of the Society of the Holy Trinity provides this guidance to its members concerning pastoral practice in this matter.

1. Our worship books have taught that "Marriage is a holy estate, ordained of God, and to be held in honor by all" (*Service Book and Hymnal*, p. 270).

2. Marriage is understood by Lutherans to be an order of creation, that is, intrinsically a part of God's good created order. "The Lord God in his goodness created us male and female, and by the gift of marriage, founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the age to come" (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 203).

3. Marriage therefore is not a mere human construct, a social arrangement that has emerged within and among human cultures. It is of divine institution.

4. The structure and constituency of marriage is a man and a woman joined for life, according to God in creation and according to our Lord Jesus Christ.

5. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26-28).

6. "The Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him.' ...So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one

flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:18, 21-25).

7. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:4-6).

8. According to natural law, as affirmed by St. Paul, teaching under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Law of God is written upon the human heart (Romans 2:14-15). The Lord God's intended purpose for marriage has been understood in human societies: husbands and wives are helpers "meet" (appropriate) for each other, and marriage is the God-ordained setting for the procreation and the nurturing of children.

9. "And although, by reason of sin, many a cross has been laid thereon, nevertheless our gracious Father in heaven does not forsake his children in an estate so holy and acceptable to him, but is ever present with his abundant blessing" (*Service Book and Hymnal*, p. 271).

10. Blessing derives from God. It is the divinely given power for life, security, fertility, prosperity, and fulfillment in plants, animals, and human beings, which is normally communicated through right order in the natural world and through right relationships in the social world. It is clearly the Lord God's intention to put His blessing on marriage as a union of man and woman.

11. It is part and parcel of the calling of the ordained pastor to counsel and to officiate at the marriage of a man and a woman who so announce their intentions and seek the blessing of the Lord God through the Church. As a minister of the word and the sacraments, the pastor acts in behalf of the Church and in the stead of Christ, to pronounce the blessing of the Lord God upon the man and the woman. The rite of blessing a marriage includes the proclamation of the promises of God concerning this holy estate and a prayer for the Lord God's blessing on this couple with appropriate gestures.

12. The pastor is also empowered by the civil authorities to solemnize the marriage, giving public venue and announcement of the marriage thus constituted by spoken vows and signed marriage certificate, properly and publicly witnessed.

13. Over the last few decades, there has developed an advocacy for the Church, the culture, and the civil law to pronounce or otherwise afford legal status to same-sex couples: first in the form of same-sex civil unions, then with the name of marriage itself. Under the rubric of civil rights, both Canada and the United States have now legitimized same-sex marriage as federal law.

14. Pastors in these countries may thus be asked to participate in or preside over weddings solemnizing such unions on behalf of the civil authorities. Because they are also ordained by the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, pastors who do so presume to pronounce the blessing of the Lord God and the approval of the Church on such unions and thus offer the legitimacy of the Church to same-sex marriage.

15. The alleged scriptural legitimacy for this expansion of the nature of marriage proceeds, according to this advocacy, from an understanding that "the Holy Spirit is doing a new thing."

16. The evidence of this "new thing" lacks the authority or persuasion to counter the plain teaching of the Word of God, the structure of marriage as an order of creation, and the teaching and practice of the Church across the centuries.

17. The Holy Spirit does not teach against Himself. The Spirit testifies to Christ, and Christ testifies to the Father. The unity of the One in Three and Three in One embraces truth as to its coherence. The Three do not teach against each other.

18. Pastors who have subscribed to *The Rule of the Society of the Holy Trinity* affirm and embrace that "Since the great biblical, creedal and confessional witness is a treasure belonging to the whole church and not just to her ministers, we will make use of that same tradition in our parish both in primary and ongoing catechesis and in the norming of our preaching and other pastoral practice" (*The Rule*, Chapter VI, #6).

19. Thus as members of the Society of the Holy Trinity, we advise and admonish one another that officiating at a wedding or ceremony to solemnize a same-sex relationship is a contravention of our ordination vows. Such an action is inconsistent with Holy Scripture and the catholic teaching of the Church and is thus a clear departure from the Rule of the Society, which mirrors both.

20. Our capacity as pastors to serve as officiants compromises the distinction between ecclesiastical and civil weddings in this matter. Pastors bear the divine office of their call and represent the Body of Christ in their persons. Their officiating at wedding ceremonies thus conveys the implicit blessing of the Church, whether or not these ceremonies occur in a church setting or employ traditional liturgical language, and we can claim no authority of the Lord God to put His blessing on conditions which lack a command and the promise of God. In both the pastoral office and the priesthood of all believers, one cannot dichotomize life in the two kingdoms so as to compromise the universal lordship of Christ.

21. It is conceivable that refusal to perform or otherwise to participate in a ceremony to solemnize a same-sex union could be locally understood as an act of civil or ecclesiastical disobedience. But in such a situation we invoke the testimony of the Apostle St. Peter that "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts

5:29).

Revisions of the 2008 statement approved by the STS Leadership Council, February 22, 2017.