

Proposed Statement Providing Guidance For Faithful Pastoral Care At St. Luke's, A Reconciling In Christ Congregation

Introduction

The Congregation Council (CC) recommends that the congregation discuss a proposed statement related to St. Luke's participating in an invitation to God to be present in a committed relationship of a same sex couple. This document provides background and the proposed statement to be discussed by the congregation and later voted upon at a special meeting of the congregation in Spring, 2008.

The RIC Task Team will provide opportunities for all members of the congregation to discuss the proposed statement over the coming year and all members are invited to join in the discussions. After the discussions, some of us may agree with the proposed statement and others disagree with the proposed statement. However, as members of God's family, we can agree to disagree and maintain the wholeness of God's family. St Luke's remains committed to provide faithful pastoral care to all of its members.

Background

St. Luke's Reconciling in Christ (RIC) journey began in November 2003 with a resolution brought to the CC by the Education and Learning Cabinet that St. Luke's consider becoming an RIC congregation. The CC "approved the formation of a task group to evaluate the disposition of St. Luke's towards developing a statement of welcome and affirmation for people of all sexual orientation."

Following several months of educational opportunities, congregational dialog and meetings, a Congregational Meeting was called for June 13, 2004. At that meeting, with an 82% vote in favor (125 yes, 23 no, 3 abstain, 1 spoiled ballot), St. Luke's adopted a statement of welcome and became an RIC congregation.

The RIC Task Team has continued to provide several opportunities for discussion and dialog within the congregation, including facilitation of St. Luke's participation in the ELCA Sexuality Study, *Journey Together Faithfully*.

On August 12, 2005, the ELCA Church wide Assembly passed two resolutions that have implications for St. Luke's and all ELCA congregations:

- *Recommendation I was approved by a vote of 851 in favor and 127 against. The action urges this church to "concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements, recognizing the God-given mission and communion we share as members of the body of Christ."*
- *Recommendation II was approved by a vote of 670 in favor and 323 against. The action asks that this church "continue to respect the guidance of the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops," which found no basis for the establishment of an official ceremony for the blessing of a homosexual relationship. The assembly reiterated this church's welcome to gay and lesbian*

persons and its trust in pastors and congregations as they "discern ways to provide faithful pastoral care to all to whom they minister."

At the January 13, 2006 CC meeting Pastor Larson asked the council to begin deliberations on what the August 2005 ELCA Assembly resolutions mean for St. Luke's and to provide guidance to "discern ways to provide faithful pastoral care to all to whom St. Luke's ministers". To that end, on April 2, 2006, the CC met with Bishop Paul Landahl, LSTC Old Testament Professor Dr. Ralph Klein, and ELCA church wide staff Dr. Rebecca Larson and Dr. Stan Olson, to consider the implications of the ELCA church wide assembly resolutions. The RIC Task Team also provided additional opportunities to discuss St. Luke's response in conversation with other ELCA congregations in our synod.

At its March 2007 meeting, the CC reviewed an earlier draft of this document and commended it for discussion within the congregation. At its March 31 and April 14 meetings, the RIC Task Team further edited this document by adding an introduction and plans to take it for presentation and discussion to groups and meetings throughout our congregation. It is planned that a recommendation of faithful pastoral care will be brought to a congregational meeting in the spring of 2008.

Proposed Statement Providing Guidance For Faithful Pastoral Care

As a congregation of the ELCA, St. Luke's Lutheran Church commits itself to find ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements and recognizes the God-given mission and communion we share with all the baptized people of God as members of the body of Christ.

As a congregation of the ELCA, St. Luke's Lutheran Church shall discern ways to provide faithful pastoral care to all to whom they minister.

St. Luke's affirms its statement of welcome to all people.

St. Luke's shall provide faithful pastoral care to all the baptized people of God and to all who come to St. Luke's seeking a relationship with Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

St. Luke's recognizes that within our congregation are baptized members who are gay or lesbian persons, both as individuals and as partners in committed relationships. While civil unions are not presently legally recognized in Illinois, St. Luke's pledges to accompany these persons with faithful pastoral care and prayerful support.

St. Luke's recognizes that there may be baptized gay and lesbian persons in the congregation who desire to make public their promises of love and fidelity with another person and who seek to invite God into their relationship to help in the fulfillment of their promises, and who long for the blessing of God, the prayers of the church, congregational encouragement and accompaniment.

St. Luke's defines the blessing of same-sex couples as a prayerful invoking of God's care, mercy and presence upon a couple to strengthen their lifelong promises of love and fidelity to each other, their love of God and their ability to share God's love through the Church.

Services of Blessing

St. Luke's may provide such a blessing in either private or public settings. The couple may desire a private setting where only the pastor and perhaps a few others are present to offer a prayer of blessing, or they may choose to have the blessing be part of a public service of worship.

St. Luke's identifies several essential elements for such a Service of Blessing:

- A mutual exchange of lifelong promises of love and fidelity, or an affirmation of promises previously exchanged in a civil ceremony.
- An invocation of the Triune God to be present in the strengthening and the fulfillment of the promises exchanged.
- A prayer of blessing offered by the pastor and congregation (when a public blessing is desired) and a pledge to support the couple in the fulfillment of their promises.

In preparation for such a blessing, St. Luke's encourages:

- Consultation between pastors and the Congregation Council prior to the first occasion for the Service of Blessing for a same-sex couple in order to affirm congregational policy for such blessings.
- A Congregational meeting shall also be called to affirm congregational policy for such blessings.
- Prayerful and intentional preparation by the couple and pre-blessing counseling with the pastor.
- Active participation by the couple in the life of the congregation.

In the case of public Services of Blessing, St. Luke's affirms the structure of worship within **Evangelical Lutheran Worship**:

- Gathering – *Entrance, Greeting, Introduction, Declarations of Intention, Prayer of the Day*
- Word – *Readings, Responses, Sermon, Hymn of the Day*
- Exchange of Promises – *Promises, Exchange of Rings, Prayers of Blessing, Intercessions*
- Meal – *Holy Communion (optional)*
- Sending – *Blessings, Dismissal, Departure*

At present, there is no legal recognition of monogamous, committed same-sex relationships in Illinois. Same-sex couples who are involved in the life of St. Luke's may still seek a Service of Blessing upon their relationship. One day the legal aspects may change and civil unions (or a similar term) may become legal. At present, a same-sex couple could obtain a legal civil union in another state or country and come to St. Luke's to seek a blessing on their union.

Conclusion

The proposed statement provides guidance for faithful pastoral care. The statement enables our pastors to conduct a service in which a same-sex couple stands before the

pastor, or stands before the pastor and the congregation, to prayerfully invoke God's care, mercy and presence upon the couple to strengthen their lifelong promises of love and fidelity to each other, their love of God and their ability to share God's love through the Church. As part of this service, the pastor, or the pastor and the congregation, extend their own prayers for the couple and their pledge to help the couple honor their promises and to live out their life of faith together.