

Deliberative-dialogue forums normally require two hours to thoroughly engage people in discussing a subject. In this one-hour session we will sample the deliberative process by briefly considering the three options described below. In this exercise, you will examine hypothetical actions and consequences of what could be done. Feel free to add specific steps First Lutheran might take or identify additional drawbacks as you discuss each option. Give equal time to each option, perhaps 10-12 minutes, before concluding with the final step of the dialogue called "making choices."

LISTENING TO PERSONAL CONCERNS

Before discussing the three options for action below, go around the room and share brief, one- or two-sentence personal concerns about why ministry with and to same-sex couples feels real for you or for the congregation. For example, "I care deeply about all the members of our church and I know there are differences." Or, "I have a cousin who is gay, and I know he has been hurt by prejudice."

A HYPOTHETICAL ILLUSTRATION

The following case study is based on a compilation of several actual parish scenarios:

First Lutheran is a vibrant congregation in a Midwestern suburb. Pastor Jim recently marked his 25th ordination anniversary. Pastor Jean is the 30-year-old associate pastor in her first call. They have worked together for three years, and both are well-liked. Ruth and Eileen are members of the congregation. Ruth is an English professor at a local university, and Eileen owns an interior design store. As a couple, they have been First Lutheran members for five years and are quietly open about their relationship. Both have served on committees and are valued as active participants in the life of the congregation and are especially committed to social ministry projects. Ruth was a congregation council member for three years.

First Lutheran held several adult forums and used the resources associated with the development of the ELCA social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust." The congregation used the study materials for raising awareness, but since the social statement and affiliated denominational policies were approved in 2009, the congregation has not discussed these matters, although some members quietly left the congregation. Several congregations in the synod left the ELCA in opposition to the social statement a couple years ago. Some other near-by congregations saw new people attending as a result of the adoption of the policies and social statement.

Just before the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in favor of same-gender marriage, the state in which the congregation is located passed a law approving marriage licenses for gay and lesbian applicants. Ruth and Eileen have been partners for 15 years. In light of the state and federal legal actions, they decided to apply for a marriage license and subsequently met with pastors Jim and Jean and requested to be married at First Lutheran. Pastor Jim told them that the congregation had not determined its policy on doing same-gender weddings. He said he was reluctant to move forward unless the parish developed and approved a clear policy. He honestly expressed that he was conflicted about the issue, while Pastor Jean said that she was supportive. Both pastors acknowledged that they had not discussed this issue at length with one another.

All three options below are consistent with ELCA teaching and policy as set forth in "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" and our church's ministry policy.

OPTION 1: REQUEST HELP FROM ANOTHER ELCA CONGREGATION

In this option, pastors Jim and Jean could refer Ruth and Eileen to pastors in another parish. Like most pastors, they would be reluctant to do so, but pastoral care in God's church does not rest entirely on any one individual or any one congregation. Rather, it flows from its participation in the whole body of Christ.⁸ Pastors demonstrate wisdom when they refer parishioners for counseling or other needs that are beyond their personal expertise. Pastors cannot always be "all things to all people," but Christ's church can.

But this approach has its drawbacks. It would mean that Ruth and Eileen would not be able to celebrate their marriage commitment at their church in familiar surroundings. While they could invite their church friends to their marriage ceremony in another parish, they will not feel the embrace of their faith community. Ruth and Eileen will certainly feel disillusioned and are likely to reconsider their relationship to First Lutheran. And what about the next time someone asks? To refer would mean that the pastors and the congregation would miss this opportunity to discern where the Spirit is leading the congregation.

OPTION 2: SEEK CLARITY FROM THE CONGREGATION COUNCIL

In this option, the pastors and the congregation council would assume responsibility for responding to Ruth and Eileen's request to be married. Lutherans respect that the pastor's office holds authority for agreeing, or not, to conduct a marriage ceremony. (This is true for heterosexual couples as well.) At the same time, the congregation council has primary responsibility for how church facilities are used. Therefore, clear and honest communication among the pastor(s) and church leaders is paramount.

The council could appoint a task force to study the issue and bring a formal recommendation to a future council meeting. The council could make a final decision or recommend a proposal that could be voted upon at a congregational meeting. Either is a standard process for decision-making relative to big issues. But what would all this mean for Ruth and Eileen's relationship with their congregation?

If the discussion were left largely to the council on this potentially controversial issue, it would become the responsibility of a small group of congregation leaders without much participation by the congregation, except for perhaps a final vote. Members may well feel left out of participating in a critical decision-making process. In addressing this issue without more time and effort, the pastors and congregation council members might unintentionally create division among parish members or between members and the congregation's leadership.

OPTION 3: ENGAGE CONGREGATION MEMBERS IN DISCERNMENT AND DIALOGUE

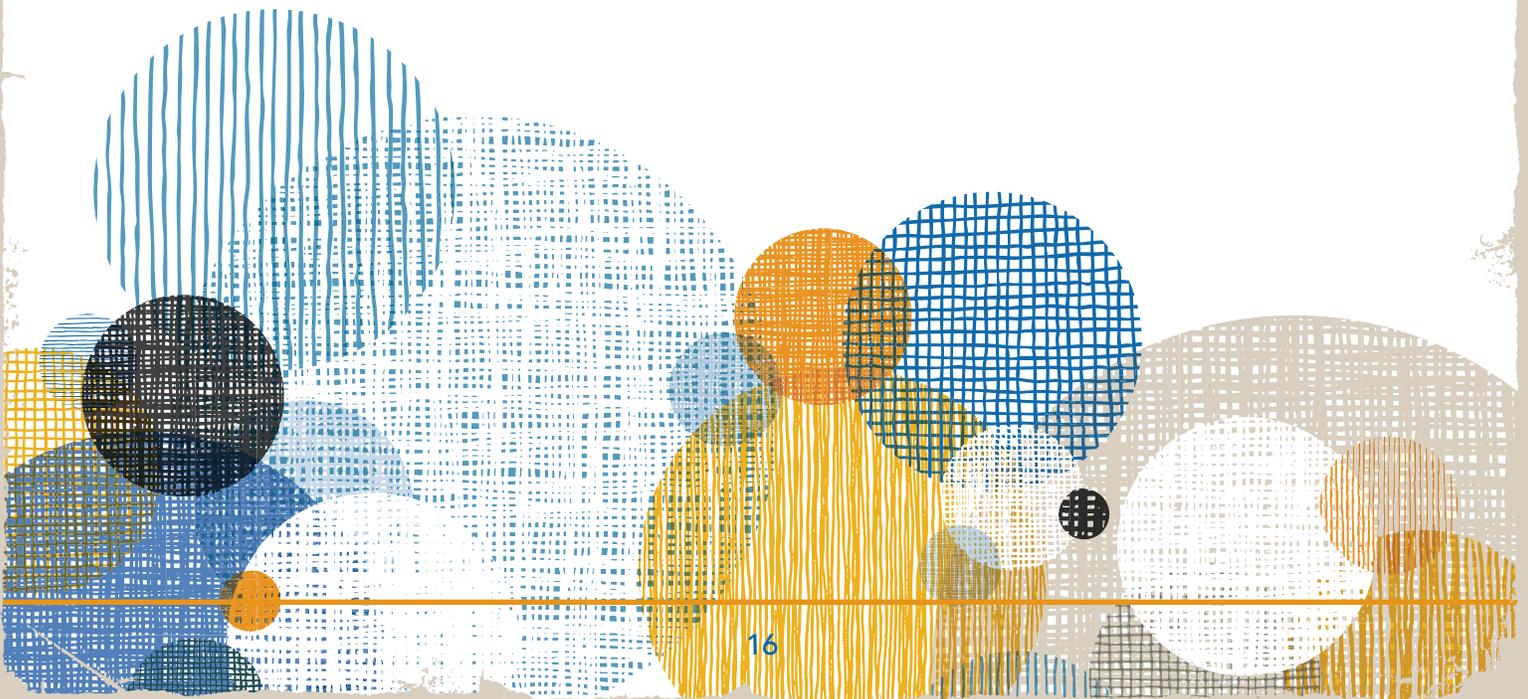
This option would provide for a process inviting as many congregation members as possible to meet in small groups for prayer, study and conversation about conducting same-gender weddings as a congregational policy. Groups would use a discussion guide and seek areas of agreement or common ground. While Ruth and Eileen's request to be married would be the stimulus for the study process, parish members would be asked to articulate their concerns about the issue and make recommendations to the congregation council.

⁸ The practice of referral was recommended by the Working Group on Ministry to and with Same-Gender Couples and Their Families "when personal convictions and ministry needs are dissimilar (including the possible referral to full communion partners)." See Recommendation 2 for more.

But this would take some time. While the process would be deliberate, Ruth and Eileen might have to delay their wedding. What would be the impact on them? They might subsequently feel uneasy about being the subject of the congregation's process and experience stress in their relationship. Another drawback might be that the parish might find it difficult to convene an adequate number of participants and/or not have enough people comfortable facilitating the small group discussions.

REFLECTION ON MAKING CHOICES

1. The three options are framed to address First Lutheran's situation: Request help from another ELCA congregation, seek clarity from the congregation council, or engage congregation members in discernment and dialogue. If you were a First Lutheran member, which of these would you prefer? Why?
2. What are some of the tensions between what could be done in each case and the potential consequences?
3. What other options for good decision-making could you envision?
4. How would you advise First Lutheran to proceed? What would be reasonable next steps?



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