

Married or not: Standards for gay clergy

by [Jesse James DeConto](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue



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Last summer, the churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America decided that synods could ordain homosexual clergy. Gays in the ELCA no longer need to be celibate in order to be ordained. The ELCA was specific in its formulation: it would allow ordination of persons who were in "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous" same-gender relationships.

Since legal matrimony remains unavailable in most states, the ELCA was in effect declaring that it would recognize gay partnerships even if the state didn't. That was welcome news for pastors like Mary Albing in Minnesota, who otherwise was barred from being on the ELCA clergy roster.

At the same time, the decision sets up new issues for the church's bishops: how will they hold gay pastors who aren't married accountable to the standard of monogamy and lifelong commitment? Do same-sex couples have to prove what is taken for granted in the case of married heterosexual couples? Is there a double standard now at work in the case of evaluating gay partners?

Pastors like Albing can point to the Christmas cards addressed to her and her partner, Jane Lien; to the bank accounts and mortgage she shares with Lien; to their joint nurture of her teenaged children from a previous marriage, and to their lives of prominence among Minneapolis Lutherans. Families, congregations and church officials can provide the relationship with "public accountability."

"If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck," said Albing. "There's nothing that's hidden and nothing really to prove."

Nevertheless, the new rules demand vows of lifelong monogamy without prescribing who will hear and enforce those vows. That situation has "caused some anxiety," acknowledged Stanley Olson, the ELCA's director of vocation and education, who drafted the church's social statement on sexuality: "We really couldn't have a satisfactorily detailed description of the same-sex commitment because of the complexities of relationships, because of the changing laws in these arenas," said Olson. "Legal status can be useful in recognizing public accountability, but it isn't sufficient in and of itself to show it. If it's not available, we will look for evidence that people are behaving responsibly toward their spouses and their children."

The United Church of Christ has been ordaining avowed homosexuals for longer than any other U.S. church body—for nearly 40 years. The UCC demands no specific sexual ethic from its clergy. If congregations and regional associations want to require lifelong monogamy for gay or straight clergy, they have to mandate it. The UCC's ministerial code requires only that pastors agree to "live a life that honors my commitments to my family." Since the UCC affirms gay marriage, this standard applies equally to homosexual and heterosexual partners.

"Who gets to decide what's a healthy same-sex relationship?" asked Leanne Tigert, a lesbian UCC minister and professor of pastoral counseling professor at Andover Newton Theological School near Boston. If same-sex couples were being treated with equality, she said, questions about same-sex partners wouldn't even be asked. "People are talking about same-sex relationships without having done adequate talk about heterosexual relationships."

But Tigert conceded that the current situation may be the best denominations can manage given that they are under pressure to recognize gay and lesbian clergy already serving in some congregations while also facing resistance by some church members and congregations to accepting noncelibate gays.

"If we could orchestrate this in a nice neat way, the marriage issue would have been settled first," she said. "It would have been easier, but life isn't like that."

Olson agreed.

"We are in a situation as a society and as a church where these things are not pinned down," he said. "That does create some inequity."

Bradley Schmeling of Atlanta knows something about having a relationship put on trial. In 2007 he was dismissed from the ELCA clergy roster after the bishop of the Southeastern Synod filed charges against him for being in a relationship with Darin Easler.

"We were called to testify about the validity of our relationship," he recalled. "Some people have a big wedding so that everybody knows they're in love. We had a trial, but there was no gift registry."

Schmeling, the first partnered homosexual reinstated by the ELCA after last year's decision, questions his denomination's insistence on public accountability, not because he wants to hide his relationship but because he wants to protect gay and lesbian clergy from the harassment that the demand for publicity might bring.

"It's easy for the church to wax eloquent about being publicly accountable and forget that there are still contexts within the church where it's dangerous for a relationship to be public," he said. "There are places where you can be killed because you're gay. I don't think the church can ask gay couples to take risks that straight couples aren't asked to take. The church doesn't ask a heterosexual couple to prove that they're married. The church accepts and trusts married people to speak the truth about their relationship. I would hope that the church would demonstrate the same kind of trust for gay people."

Albing says she understands that parishioners need to know something about their ministers' personal lives. She thinks demonstrating her lifelong, monogamous commitment in public can help to ease acceptance of the new policy.

"What else would you do?" she said. People are "looking for something that looks like a marriage."

This current unwieldy situation carries what Tigert calls a "holy insecurity"—and a chance to redefine marriage in more faithful ways. The church is being called to

disentangle legal marriage from Christian marriage.

"In ten years, I have never asked to see the marriage certificate of any of our pastors," said Bishop Craig Johnson of Minneapolis, who reinstated Albing to the synod's roster earlier this year. "I know each of them personally, and I know that they've been in relationships for years. Some of them have children; some of them have adopted children. Those kinds of things speak highly in terms of people's longtime commitment to each other."

In 2008, during a brief window when gay marriage was legal in California, Episcopal Bishop Marc Andrus of San Francisco urged gay members of his diocese to get married at City Hall and then celebrate their weddings with their parishes. But, he says, "it's not a simple legal definition that makes them married. It's the quality and the commitment of their relationships in their communities. Despite the fact that gay and lesbian people are unjustly barred from legal marriage here, the church can treat them the same."

Andrus and others see their churches taking on a prophetic role, confronting discriminatory laws in the secular world.

But Episcopalians and Lutherans as a whole haven't gone that far. Both the Episcopal Church—which last summer passed a resolution opening all ordained positions to gays—and the ELCA allow synods and dioceses to ordain gays and lesbians, but no local bodies are forced to do so. The Episcopal resolution affirms that "Christians of good conscience disagree." The Lutheran statement on sexuality recognizes four different perspectives within the denomination, ranging from seeing homosexual behavior as sin to equating same-sex partnerships with marriage.

"There's no implication there that one side is right and the others will come to that opinion," said Olson. "The old consensus has broken down, and no new consensus has emerged."

In the meantime, he says, "We will continue to work together despite differences. Someone who does think that same-gender sexual relationships are sinful could still say that a gay sinner like other sinners can be God's tool for speaking the gospel. We can't say as Lutherans that any sin disqualifies a pastor because all of us are sinful."

For some people, agreeing to disagree on this issue is not sufficient. They want denomination-wide rituals for blessing same-sex unions in order to normalize those partnerships and erase the double standard.

"The real sin, as I see it, is the denial for them to live in a marriage," said Andrus, the Episcopal bishop. "Pastorally and psychologically, we should be asking questions about what's the appropriate kind of support for same-sex couples."

"I would like for the ELCA to speak more clearly about the sinfulness of homophobia," said Schmeling. "We have enshrined discrimination into our system. . . . I think discrimination is never a valid theological perspective."

Tigert worries that the ELCA and the Episcopal Church won't take the next step in affirming same-sex marriage.

"You risk that people will get comfortable and not move any further," she said. "But it's also a risk if you force it on a community," she noted. "If we're going to be in the same body, then we do need to learn to talk to each other."

Tigert, a psychotherapist, said Episcopalians and Lutherans have to embrace the conflict as a learning experience.

"If someone has never felt on the outside or exiled or oppressed, it's really hard to understand what that experience is like for someone else," she said. "That place of insecurity is a place where God's justice can break through."

Albing hopes for that breakthrough, but she also empathizes with those Lutherans who are disturbed by the changes and are threatening to secede from the ELCA.

"I think everybody ought to leave the issue alone for a while and let things sort out," she said. "I think most people are sensible and good-willed in the church. They hear the gospel and they're under the sway of God's grace. I think they might be able to make some space for me. I have high hopes."

"I grew up in a little church literally surrounded by cornfields," she said. "Things have changed remarkably fast—too slowly for many people, but really quickly, I think, for a church. It feels, for so many people, like the rug is being pulled out from under them. In urban areas, we're elbow to elbow with people who are different from us, but in a lot of rural areas, that's not true."

Albing said many Lutherans are still grappling with new gender roles and greater awareness of different cultures.

"Life has changed a lot. People's values have changed a lot," she said. "I just feel sad about people leaving the church. These are just like the people I grew up with. This is my tribe, and even the people who don't like me or don't understand me—they're my tribe."