

Premarital wisdom: How pastors are counseling same-sex couples

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue



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When Stephanie and Robin came to see Episcopal priest Ali Lufkin, they were not thinking about arranging a commitment ceremony. They simply wanted Lufkin to help them work through the difficulties that their very different backgrounds and histories brought to their relationship.

Stephanie had been married to a man and raised three children. Robin had struggled for years with living out her sexual orientation while belonging to a religious community that disapproved of it. “We wanted to draw wise people around us,” Stephanie said, “who might help us to see what we might not be able to see.”

Eventually, however, the two decided they wanted a covenant ceremony, and this led to a new set of questions: What would the ceremony look like? What would their vows say? How did they each interpret the meaning of a covenantal relationship? How would friends and family respond to their relationship and this public witness to it? There wasn’t a script already written for them.

While accompanying Stephanie and Robin as they explored these questions, Lufkin prepared her congregation for what would be its first-ever same-sex ceremony. She held a series of meetings before the Sunday evening service in which she handed out copies of the Episcopal Church’s newly minted service, “Witnessing and Blessing

of a Lifelong Covenant.” She asked what it would mean for the community to be offering this blessing.

The discussions between Stephanie, Robin, Lufkin and the church community required much more of each participant than the usual wedding preparation. This was partly because Stephanie and Robin, like many same-sex couples, had a history and a set of concerns that needed attention in ways different from opposite-sex couples. It was also because the community was in the process of reevaluating and reconfiguring what it meant to bless a couple in its midst.

Nancy Wiener, a professor at Hebrew Theological Union and author of *Beyond Breaking the Glass* (a guide for same-sex and opposite-sex Jewish couples), says clergy frequently need to expand the way they think and talk about marriage and commitment when they are working with same-sex couples. Clergy are often unprepared, she says, for the openness with which gay and lesbian couples talk about their prior relationships and the complexity of those relationships. Same-sex couples may have been in prior heterosexual relationships, or they may have former partners who are now closer than family members. Wiener says that lesbian and gay couples can often be more practiced at talking about sex and sexuality than clergy are. And in addition to these dynamics, they often need and want to talk about the social and family pressures that shaped their coming-out process.

Wiener has been offering union ceremonies as part of her work as a Reform rabbi for several decades. Neil Thomas, pastor at the Metropolitan Community Church in Los Angeles, has also walked many couples through this process, and he thinks that the additional complexities make premarital counseling a challenge for clergy, who mainly have encountered opposite-sex couples.

Among the complexities: a partner in a couple may or may not identify as “lesbian” or “gay.” One partner may consider herself bisexual or transgendered or may have developed a personalized vocabulary for her sexuality. Couples also bring questions about monogamy and the presence or absence of children in the relationship that have different meanings for same-sex couples. Ministers need to respect these particularities in order to “set up a dynamic where people can have an honest conversation and make it safe,” Thomas said.

Same-sex couples often come to clergy with a history of grappling with discrimination. Elaine Casquarelli, a professor in counselor education at the College

at Brockport, part of the State University of New York, notes that this history can leave its mark on people in different ways. How has each experienced and dealt with discrimination? What wounds does he or she carry from the past? How did church-related institutions help to inflict these wounds? This is important—and often painful—territory to cover in counseling a couple.

Same-sex couples also face the question of visibility in a way that is not shared with opposite-sex couples. Not all want to be public in exactly the same way. Questions arise, such as: Is each person in the couple comfortable with public displays of affection? Are they going to dance at the company Christmas party together or hold hands at the park? How does each perceive the readiness of their communities to receive them as a couple?

The issue of visibility also comes into play when the couple plans the ceremony itself. Getting married can be a new process of coming out. It may involve announcing one's relationship to a broader community of family and friends. Hiring a caterer and having invitations printed raise questions about who knows what and who needs to know.

Robin found this out for herself when she prepared invitations to the ceremony. She hesitated a few minutes before sending the wording of the ceremony to a local print shop. She had been acquainted with the owner for years and attended church with him, and she knew he was an outspoken, conservative Christian. She was not sure she wanted to expose herself or Stephanie to his criticism or perhaps his refusal to print the invitations. But she went ahead and sent him her e-mail. "I've been hiding my whole life. I just decided I wasn't going to do it anymore." She received the printed invitations the next day without incident.

Many ministers who work with same-sex couples say this work has illuminated their understanding of marriage generally and changed the counseling they do with all couples. "My counseling with gay couples has transformed the way I think about what makes a marriage," said Rabbi Denise Eger of the Kol Ami Congregation in Hollywood. "It undoes some of my assumptions—assumptions I didn't even know were there."

Many of these assumptions are hidden in the traditional wedding ceremony. When the couple being joined is a man and a woman, traditional practices may be followed unconsciously, but with a same-sex couple everyone will notice the implied gender

roles. Who walks whom down the aisle? Where and how are the couples' parents seated?

In workshops as well as in premarital counseling, Wiener takes couples and clergy through each step of the traditional Jewish ritual, discussing its symbolic and historical significance. "Who arrives at the ceremony first? Who breaks the glass? Who says the first vow? Each act communicates something about how the couple imagines its life in community and how it interprets the personal and social history that brought them to this moment." She reminds her listeners that the ceremony that has been passed down comes from its own particular historical and geographic moment. It isn't a timeless document; it is an enshrinement of medieval and European Judaism.

Even if the couple does not ascribe particular gendered meaning to each ritual act, Wiener points out, the gathered community might. "People watching a ritual take away far more than what is happening on the surface. We can't let that dictate what we do. It is important not to get overly concerned about what people think. But the couple needs to act intentionally if they want to help people interpret the meaning of the ritual."

The ritual enacted at a ceremony can be a precursor to how a particular power dynamic plays out amid the basic tasks of everyday life. What does it mean that one person in the partnership ends up being the bill payer or the cook or the person who mows the lawn? With opposite-sex couples, these assumptions can remain below the surface for decades. With same-sex couples, the issues are likely to surface more quickly. Eger says that working with same-sex couples has taught her to raise these questions with all couples.

Thomas sees the potential depth of these new conversations as a gift not only to the couple but to clergy. Same-sex couples who come to him for premarital counseling have often "done a lot of soul searching" about what it means to get married in a church, he said. "These are folks who are giving God a second or a 93rd chance. . . . When a gay couple comes to a church, there is often a deeper spiritual significance to it because, through struggle, it has become a part of who they are in a different way."

Eger has observed how these conversations and ceremonies can have a profound impact on couples' families. "Often the wedding ceremony provides an opportunity

for families to be healed,” she said. Parents who have become alienated from their children, with religious issues playing a large role, are often transformed by watching their children make a covenantal commitment to another person.

Thomas has seen the relationship between same-sex couples and their families change dramatically over the past 20 years. “We used to worry that family members would show up” at union celebrations, he said—show up and be unpleasant. Now most families stand in support of the couple. He is even starting to see signs of families putting pressure on same-sex couples to get married.

Eger perceives that same-sex ceremonies—whether they are called weddings or not—tend to have greater emotional and spiritual intensity than opposite-sex weddings. In her experience, when an opposite-sex couple sends out invitations, about 20 percent of those invited attend. For same-sex couples, the guest attendance rate is more like 95 percent. She believes that people rally to these ceremonies, seeing them as an opportunity to make a social and a spiritual statement not only about same-sex relationships but about the idea of marital commitment and fidelity.

When the Episcopal Church surveyed clergy in advance of a 2012 report on same-sex blessings, it found that clergy overwhelmingly wanted a more specific template for conducting same-sex premarital counseling, said Thad Bennett, a member of the survey committee. They did not want generalities like, “Ask about families of origin.” They wanted specific questions to ask and rich resources to draw from. Perhaps that desire reflects their feeling underprepared to provide premarital counseling of any kind, Bennett said. “We often heard from clergy that they had very little preparation from seminaries.”

The church responded with a booklet titled “I Will Bless You and You Will Be a Blessing: Resources for the Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant in a Same-Sex Relationship.” In this booklet, Bennett and others lay out a five-session template for preparing same-sex couples.

Session One tackles church background and theology concerning the rite that will be performed. Sessions Two and Three look at families of origin, conflict resolution, money and sex. Session Four addresses the couple’s desires for their future together. Session Five begins the work of talking through the ceremony.

Despite the specificity of the document, Bennett hopes that clergy will use it as an outline and a resource, not as a script. Echoing Thomas, he points to the importance of treating each couple as a unique pair with a particular history. Already, traditional preparatory materials used by clergy are changing to reflect the fact that couples come in many different forms—including couples entering their second marriage or couples who bring children into a relationship or couples who are getting married after many years of living together. This flexibility requires new skills from clergy, but it deepens and broadens the conversation for everyone—for those who bless and for those who will be blessed.