

Briefly noted

News in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

The (Lutheran) Church of Sweden has agreed to establish a blessing in churches for same-sex couples who have signed a civil partnership agreement. The decision came at an October 27 meeting of the denomination's Church Assembly. Though Sweden does not permit same-sex marriage, it recognizes civil partnerships, in which couples enjoy many, but not all, of the rights of a civil marriage. Until now same-sex couples who wanted a church blessing needed to celebrate the ceremony outside church buildings. The ceremony will now become a formal part of church regulations that will be rewritten to replace the word "marriage" with "marriage and actions of blessing." Opponents of the measure argued that it is not consistent with the biblical view of marriage and could jeopardize interchurch links. However, all 13 bishops of the Church of Sweden supported the proposal.

Pope Benedict XVI has called on Italian lawmakers to provide incentives to encourage large families as Europe continues to struggle with sagging fertility rates. "It is my hope that further adequate social and legislative measures be promoted to protect and support more numerous families, which constitute a richness and a hope for the entire nation," the pope said November 2 to pilgrims at the Vatican. The European Union's statistical agency Eurostat recently reported that the 25-nation bloc has slightly improved its fertility rates, climbing from 1.48 children per woman in 2003 to 1.5 in 2004. But the uptick comes amid a decades-long downward trend that has caused Europe to depend on foreign immigration to prop up its shrinking native population. More than 1.9 million foreign immigrants entered the EU in 2004, compensating for the lack of native births, which numbered fewer than half a million.