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Risking on the Side of Compassion

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In September 1996, President Clinton signed national legislation into law refusing recognition of gay marriages and denying legal standing and all attendant benefits to such relationships. This national legislative action was a preemptive strike to protect states from the confusion that would arise after Hawaii takes the likely step of legalizing gay marriages. Traditionally, legal marriages in any state are recognized throughout the fifty states. So that if a gay couple was married in Hawaii, states would need separate legislation to specifically deny such status to this special category of married couples.

To my knowledge, none of the thirty-three member communions of the National Council of Churches have affirmed the legitimacy of gay love in a broad enough fashion to pass as denominational policy, though many communions are painfully divided on the issue. In the San Francisco Bay Area two Lutheran and two American Baptist congregations were recently expelled from their national affiliations for openly celebrating gay “wedding” celebrations.

In the summer of 1992, at the ministers' urging, our local church council at the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church sent a letter to the full membership asking for feedback on the question of - at the discretion of the ministers - celebrating in our sanctuary ceremonies whose fundamental purpose would be to bless the commitment in fidelity of two people of the same sex. With the response divided but a clear majority supporting such a ministry initiative, we proceeded on the pastoral staff to work out parameters and definitions which we felt were consonant with our theology and our pastoral judgment. I'll always remember one of the fence-sitters in the beginning of our consideration saying after we had processed the issue more fully: “I feel like I am taking a risk either way, and if I'm going to take a risk, I would rather take my risk on the side of compassion.”

Since that time, we have celebrated perhaps twenty such ceremonies in our church, and I think it is fair to say that it has been a strongly positive personal experience from a ministry point-of-view. One poignant encounter crystallizes why my belief in the fundamental goodness in this ministry has grown since 1992. I was puttering around the sanctuary one afternoon when I noticed an older couple lingering about the church and garden. Finally my tasks caused me to pass near them, and so I said hello and asked if I could be of any assistance to them. They then shared with me that their lesbian daughter had been married in a ceremony a couple of months before in our church (I remembered instantly the couple, though I did not officiate for that occasion). They had just returned again from North Carolina and had dropped by to spend some time in the church that had so deeply impressed them.

As we talked, they shared with me in voices full of emotion how their lives had been so enriched as they tried to understand their daughter better. Their friends were incapable of extending any support, and the type of ceremony shared in our church, one that honored their daughter's life and love commitment, would have been impossible in any of the churches where they live. I doubt I can adequately convey in print the feeling that rose up in me during that conversation, but it was one of two particular “epiphanies” in which I felt an overwhelming presence of the Lord confirming what we were doing.

Especially for the benefit of my more conservative brothers and sisters in the Swedenborgian Church, I want to share, that I labored considerably over some hard-to-resolve reservations about going forward with this back in 1992. Understanding gay love has been a specialty interest of mine dating to the years before I became a Swedenborgian when I was still in training for ministry at a Disciples of Christ seminary. I have gone out of my way to study the academic literature on the subject for fifteen years, and it is true that many years ago I became emotionally committed to supporting gay people in the face of what I felt was blatant discrimination. This bias has inspired me to find a higher theological basis that would help me understand my passionate feeling that somehow gay love “works” in the subtler byways of divine order.

But still, I could not rid myself of what I told the church council was “the final 5 percent”—a certain hard reluctance to create new “policy” in religion. I entertained images of myself officiating in the church sanctuary with two men or two women standing before me, and I felt an anxiety that I was being somehow naive and foolishly sentimental, that I was in fact allowing myself to be recruited into a spiritually bogus sham and was actively creating an abomination in the Lord’s sanctuary. This somewhat hardened “final 5 percent” was no minor matter, but going with the congregation’s provisional support and the ardent commitment of my colleague, the Rev. Dr. Rachel Rivers, I took my “95 percent” conviction into the arena of actual ministry for the first time.

My two epiphany experiences, as well as the overall experience, has only strengthened one of my two fundamental reasons for advocating church-sanctioned gay blessings. That is, the first reason is a “pastoral truth” in the feeling-state of extending the church’s support and blessing to people who do not experience their love as evil. I have found an almost comical similarity to heterosexual couples in the interior life of gay couples that I have been able to glimpse. In such a confusing and subtle area that is human attraction, I feel the church should take its risks on the side of compassion.

My second reason is theological. Only a tiny few biblical passages seem to condemn homoerotic relations, and for a Swedenborgian there are big problems with all of them on the literal level. None of them are to me persuasive or in any way compellingly authoritative. I believe the more powerful biblical witness lies upon deeper principles of truth that emerge within larger themes of theology in the inner sense of scripture, and it is here that I am discovering confidence in a growing support for the possibility of gay love being rooted in divine love.

In our explicit theology, Swedenborg describes conjugal love as the universal and mysterious power of attraction that always encompasses a complementarity between masculine and feminine principles (and, of course, it is abundantly clear in *Conjugal Love* that every person has both principles active within themselves). In the gay community, this complementarity is not absent but widespread—perhaps even universal. It is certainly common in gay community fora to refer to one or the other as “the husband” or “the wife” in both lesbian and gay male relationships. The conjugal principle, as in the rest of nature, seems to be abidingly present doing its magic in homoerotic attractions everywhere. Since both masculine and feminine principles already exist within our individual psychic structure as a necessary inner soil for merging with another person, the possibilities within the conjugal attraction dynamic is considerably wider than the broad center (heterosexuality) has frequently assumed.

In real life I can find no genuinely persuasive difference in the spiritual conjugality in gay relationships compared to that of heterosexual relationships. When you add the dramatic factor that the vast majority of gays have never had any other attraction dynamic within them, even as small children, and when you witness time and again gay relationships as being creative, giving, and supportive of the larger social fabric, then for me a very secure platform exists for conducting a ministry both supporting, affirming, and journeying with the gay community.

Conjugal relationships are a most mysterious matter, even when dealing solely with heterosexuality. I profess no final answers. By request of the editor, I am simply sharing my journey with this complex but extremely important issue. I continue to pray for guidance as we all together seek insight and wisdom into the full nature of conjugal love.