

2014

For the past twelve and a half years, I have been serving as the College Chaplain and Director of Religious Life at Coe College, a Presbyterian-related college in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

As the College Chaplain, it is not uncommon for me to be asked to preside over marriage ceremonies for students, alumni, faculty, staff, and other "friends of the college." As you can imagine, many of these folks are not Presbyterian, and they want to have their weddings at Coe in the garden. Iowa state law permits the marriage of same gender couples.

How do the current rules of our denomination apply to me, as a Teaching Elder serving as a College Chaplain, if I am asked by a lesbian faculty member to preside over her marriage ceremony which is to take place in the beautiful college garden?

There is no issue of church property, the law permits the marriage, and I am the Chaplain, the pastor, to the whole community: not just the Presbyterians.

While this is an atypical pastoral dilemma, it points to the question of pastoral duties and fulfillment of the responsibilities that come with our call. I was called to be the Chaplain of one of our 60 Presbyterian-related institutions of higher education, a recognized special ministry of the Presbytery of East Iowa. And with this position comes the responsibility to preside over marriages of our constituents, members of our community. Of course I always retain the discretion as to whether to agree to every request, depending on the couple, their willingness to participate in pre-marital counseling, and their faith commitment and understanding of covenant marriage. But the law in our state has opened the doors for same gender couples. The law in our state has given me the authority to act on its behalf to honor and recognize these loving couples.

This is my personal challenge, but I come representing the shared challenge that many Teaching Elders are experiencing with respect to their Presbyterian church members who have been welcomed into full participation in church membership and leadership – except for the celebration and public witness of their loving life commitment in marriage. We are seeing these (sometimes lifelong) church members leaving their churches, getting married anyhow and elsewhere, and finding other communities (and churches) that will support them, their marriages, and their families. It is so heartbreaking.

Additionally, as someone who has been called to walk alongside young adults as they discern who they are and what matters to them, I am consistently finding myself having to explain away the reality that the church I represent does not recognize the love between people of the same gender. My students simply do not understand how I can say in one breath that I am welcoming and inclusive to all people of all faiths and traditions, but then say, when asked, that I cannot preside over the wedding celebration of those who happen to love someone of the same gender. And so, many of these searching and seeking young adults choose not to affiliate, not to call themselves Christian, and they look for other supportive communities...or they go it alone, thinking that God has abandoned them. And they live their lives without the benefit of the very same church family that raised them. It is so heartbreaking.

I plead with you, please step into my shoes. Please trust me to be discerning. Please allow me to fulfill my ministerial duties and responsibilities as I have been called. Please give me the opportunity to fully serve the people of God in our jurisdiction where we have already felt called to recognize same gender loving, covenantal marriage.