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**Setting a place at the table
for persons of all gender expressions and sexual orientations.**

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Celebrating Equal Marriage

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As more and more states legalize marriages for people of the same gender, many of our pastors and churches are wondering how to ritualize these weddings. Here are some thoughts and suggestions.

Background

Weddings for two people of the same gender are not a different kind of wedding, nor are these relationships a different kind of marriage. These are marriages that happen to be between two people of the same gender, they are not "gay marriages" or "same-sex marriages." They are simply marriages. Our thinking about how to celebrate these marriages should start here.

The task is not to "add gay" to our current wedding ceremonies or "remove straight" from them. I believe that one gift that same gender couples bring to the church is the challenge to remove the last vestiges of sexism from our current wedding rites for all couples.

When one or both members of the couple are transgender, a sexism free equal marriage ceremony obviates the need to define the gender of either party.

Many of our oldest wedding traditions stem from the era in human history, not far behind us and still alive in many parts of the world, when a wedding was a transfer of property. A woman was the property of her father until she was transferred in marriage to her husband's ownership. From this we have the tradition of giving away the bride and wedding vows which require the woman to obey the man.

This understanding of property is why in the past it was impossible to conceive of a marriage between two people of the same gender: a man couldn't be owned as a wife, a woman couldn't own, so ownership in marriage between two people of the same gender was inconceivable.

Instead of ownership, we look today to other Biblical values for our relationships: love, justice, honesty, equality, community, and mutual care and concern.

The challenge today is to remove the last vestiges of sexist ownership from our marriage relationships and from our wedding ceremonies and implement our belief that all marriages, same gender and mixed gender, are relationships between equals. When grounded in Biblical values, these relationships are blessed by God and celebrated by the church.

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Suggestions

Here are some suggestions for planning an equal sexism free wedding for all couples.

Treat all couples the same

If we believe that men and women are equal, then we believe that all couples regardless of the genders involved are equal. Thus, all couples should meet the same requirements for pre-marital counseling, church membership, and other requirements you might have in place. If some of your requirements for mixed gender couples don't work for same gender couples, then those requirements need to be examined for a sexist bias.

Remove sexist elements from all weddings

Many of our churches have already done away with requiring the bride to promise to obey. However, there are other elements of a wedding where sexism still creeps in.

Vows that differ: Even if the word obey has been removed from the woman's vows, sexism may creep in when couples are writing their own vows. If the vows made by the couple are not exactly equivalent, a close reading for sexist differences and other inequalities is called for.

Use of the word "husband": Many of our churches have already moved away from the proclamation of the couple as "man and wife" to a proclamation of "husband and wife." Yet have we noticed where the word "husband" comes from? While "husband" has come to mean the male partner in a marriage, its roots lie in the meaning of one who manages the home and farm. "Husbandry" still retains the meaning of the management of a farm and breeding of livestock. Many couples are turning to the word "spouse": the person to whom one is promised. Using spouse in the vows also enables the vows to remain gender free. When it comes time to proclaim the marriage, rather than "I pronounce them husband and wife" the proclamation might be "I proclaim that they are married."

The processional: When the bride processes into the sanctuary with her father separately from the groom, one of the messages sent is that this woman is a gift being given by her father to her husband. I highly encourage finding a way to remove this message even as the support of parents, family, and friends is retained and celebrated. Many churches today encourage the couple to process into the sanctuary together with the wedding party, choir and minister, or perhaps both members of the couple can be escorted into the sanctuary by parents, family, or attendants. Consider bringing the couple into the sanctuary together and equally.

Giving away the bride: Couples who want this part of the service should be educated as to why it is not considered appropriate. There are, however, alternatives that celebrate the equality of the couple and celebrate Christian values of family and community, such as asking the families and congregation for their support of the couple.

Who's marrying whom, anyway? As an aside, but it is one of my soapboxes, I prefer to keep in mind that in the western Christian tradition, neither the church nor the minister and especially not the state marry the couple. The couple in their promises marry each other, the congregation witnesses the wedding, and the minister pronounces the blessing of God and the church on the relationship. There is no need to mention the state in the proclamation of marriage at a church wedding.

Special Considerations for Same Gender Marriage

After all this discussion of marriage, same gender or mixed, as between equals, there is still room to mention the one difference between a same gender and a mixed gender couple: same gender weddings remain controversial in many places and their legitimacy is still questioned by many. This may include the family members of a same gender couple or other members of the congregation. A careful discussion of differing opinions and levels of support among family members for the marriage and how to manage different people at the wedding may be called for. In some places, especially where same gender marriage is newly legal and still controversial, a plan for managing the press and protesters may be called for.

Samples

Two sample services can be found here:

From the United Church of Christ: [*Order For Marriage: an Inclusive Version*](#)

http://www.ucc.org/worship/pdfs/323_346i_order-for-marriage-inclusive.pdf

From the Episcopal Church: [*The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant*](#)

http://www.integrityusa.org/doc_download/9-rite-for-same-sex-blessings