



**North/West Lower Michigan Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

29 June 2015

Beloved in Christ,

The peace of Christ be with you!

I write to you to begin to address questions I know that many in our synod are asking regarding the United States Supreme Court ruling on same-gender marriage.

As you are aware, the United States Supreme Court has held that state laws banning same-gender marriage violate the Constitution of the United States and that same-gender marriages solemnized in another state must be upheld by all fifty states. This ruling means that for the first time in its history, the State of Michigan must recognize same-gender marriage. What does this mean for us as Christ's Church?

In 2009, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a resolution that resolved that, 'the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.' Since that time, many congregations have begun the process to 'recognize and support' same-gender relationships, while others have not. Some congregations and pastors may now wish to perform same-gender marriage ceremonies, while others may not.

As Lutheran Christians, we receive the court's ruling with varying feelings. We are not of one mind on this issue. As a church, we continue to discern and struggle with how we can best relate to same-gender couples and families.

We are, however, Christ's church together, regardless of our feelings on this or any issue. We are united by 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism.' (Ephesians 4:5). The crucified and risen Christ frees, empowers, and calls us to live in love of one another, to bear one another's burdens, and to show that love to the world as a witness to God's love for us (John 15:12-17). Jesus' call makes the way we as a church handle our varying understandings of relating to same-gendered partners a gospel issue.

In response to the Supreme Court decision, I refer you to the ELCA Social Statement: *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009), which acknowledges our varying understandings on this matter, <http://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Sexuality>. In particular, the social statement commends to us the understanding of 'bound conscience' as a way forward in the midst of disagreement.



**North/West Lower Michigan Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Lutheran Christians understand marriage as both God's gift that brings strength and joy to individuals and promotes the welfare of humanity, and a human estate that signifies a change in social status. The Christian community surrounds those who enter into marriage with the gifts of the presence and support of the Christian community, the promise of God's word proclaimed from Scripture, and prayers of blessing and intercession.

Since the Christian community figures so prominently in our understanding of marriage, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* provides that all decisions regarding the recognition, support, and accountability of same-gender relationships are entrusted to congregations. This means that pastors are not to solemnize or preside over same-gendered marriages without conversation, discernment, agreement, and partnership with the congregations who have called them. This is true regardless of where a ceremony may be held, or who the parties to be married may be. To borrow a phrase from my colleague Bishop Bill Gafkjen of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, 'pastors are not freelancers when it comes to stewarding the rites and ministries entrusted to their office.' This guidance from *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* flows directly from our common understanding that the ministry of pastors and the ministry of congregations are interdependent, and are sources of mutual accountability and oversight. (See, for example, Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Section **7.44.A13**).

Congregations and pastors who wish to embrace this change in practice will engage in deep, prayerful, and sometimes difficult, conversation—listening as well as speaking—among their congregation council, members, and pastor(s). The consciences of all, including that of the pastor, should be respected as the congregation discerns how best to respond to this new legal environment.

Please note that at this time the ELCA does not have an official rite or liturgy for same-gender marriage, blessings or unions, but there are such liturgies available that are appropriate for use in congregations. Again, this is a decision for congregations and pastors to make together.

In all of this, we need to understand that under no circumstance will a pastor be obligated to solemnize the marriage of any couple, regardless of their gender, when the pastor cannot in good conscience do so. All churches and ministers still enjoy First Amendment protection of freedom of speech and religion, regardless of where they fall on this issue. The decision is up to the pastor and the congregation. The decision should be made prayerfully and only after open, honest, respectful discussion.

In our synod, a group calling itself "Open Hands, Open Church" has been meeting to



**North/West Lower Michigan Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

develop a structured process that supports and encourages discussion and sharing of resources that would be most helpful for all of us wishing to minister to/with and support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and couples and their families. Among those resources, the ELCA provides a helpful resource for such conversations: *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues*, [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talking\\_Together\\_as\\_Christians\\_About\\_Tough\\_Social\\_Issues.pdf?\\_ga=1.136711536.1746451647.1411744860](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Talking_Together_as_Christians_About_Tough_Social_Issues.pdf?_ga=1.136711536.1746451647.1411744860). I encourage you to review this resource, and to contact Pastor Sarah Friesen-Carper who can connect you with "Open Hands, Open Church," as you move forward together in conversation.

As we live together as church for the sake of the world, we cling to the good news that in all things Christ remains central. Jesus Christ is the light of the world; he is the Lord of the church. 'He is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). This is Jesus' promise and witness to us.

You remain in my constant prayers as together we prayerfully participate in Christ's own work of reconciling the world to God's very Self!

Peace,

The Rev. Craig Alan Satterlee. Ph.D., Bishop