

ELCIC GOVERNANCE AND THE MATTER OF SAME-SEX BLESSINGS

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October 2004

This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

By Way of Introduction

In his letter dated September 27, 2004, our National Bishop, Ray Schultz, has asked a variety of persons in our church to provide essays from several perspectives to assist the National Church Council in formulating a process to study a motion passed at the Assembly of the Eastern Synod this past summer. That motion asked for the initiation of a study of the implications of “a parish-based local option to perform same-sex blessings.”

I was one of four persons asked to address how the system of governance in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada might “speak to the matter of blessing same sex couples.” We were asked to explore the matter of governance as it might relate to two specific questions. This brief essay is my response to that request. It is not intended to restrict conversation and study but rather to facilitate dialogue informed by governance issues.

How does ELCIC polity inform the discussion?

The polity of the ELCIC is defined in three constitutional documents: the constitution of the national church, the constitution of the appropriate synod and the model constitution for congregations. In any definition of polity all three documents are relevant and any statement made by one, hopefully, affirms rather than contradicts the other two. In addition to these documents there are rules of conduct for national conventions and synod assemblies that assist in the efficient conduct of the business of the church at these levels. All of these documents give a measure of power to those who are comfortable with and knowledgeable of them. It is very important, therefore, that those who chair and conduct meetings assist those less familiar with these documents and procedural rules not only to express their concerns but also to bring them into the procedural stream. Concerned members need to know the options available to them to impact the decisions of both the national church and their synod. Do members realize, for instance, that congregations have the right to petition their synod and the national church?

In addition to the above identified constitutions and procedures there are also documents that have the weight of tradition and familiar use that need to be not only considered but respected.

These would include the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and the *Occasional Services* (1982) book. Our two predecessor bodies are signatories to the copyright for both. These books provide us with services and appropriate rubrics such as the service for marriage, for ordination, for installations and others. Such services could address pastoral responsibilities and duties as well as gender issues which could impact the proposed study.

Statements adopted by the church in convention, while not having constitutional authority, do indicate the mind of the church and thus also need to be included in the discussion where applicable. Where our church has not addressed a particular subject then relevant statements of the predecessor bodies become appropriate for consideration and study. Statements or positions adopted by synods or congregations would need to be within their own constitutional authority or be in accord with the policies of the national church.

The motion adopted by the Eastern Synod asks for the initiation of “a study of the theological, ecclesiological and pastoral implications of authorizing a parish-based local option to perform same-sex blessings and to bring appropriate recommendations to the 2005 ELCIC National Convention.” Such a policy would have implications for our understanding of national/regional, pastoral, and congregational relationships and ministries. On such an important and clearly controversial matter any decision to allow a local or congregational option would probably require action by both the national convention and synod assemblies. I make this suggestion because guidelines for pastoral ministry while determined nationally are implemented by synods. In addition, congregational constitutions define marriage as one of the functions of their pastors. If national and synod bodies were to approve same sex blessings by a local option would appropriate action at the congregational level also be required? Indeed, would such action anticipate constitutional amendments at all three levels?

Such a policy would also seem to require a full study of human sexuality, marriage, and related issues. Has our church conducted such a study? Each of the three constitutions governing the life of our church identify “the Scriptures... as the inspired Word of God ... and as the only source of the Church’s doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the Church.” Any such study would thus need to be loyal to and informed by the Scriptures as well as embrace the best of available scholarship and study in other relevant disciplines.

Another consideration introduced by the motion of the Eastern Synod is the request that the national church council “bring appropriate recommendations to the 2005 ELCIC National Convention.” Is it possible for such an important issue to be fully discussed within this time frame? Is the national convention of the ELCIC bound by a time-line identified by a synod action?

The national constitution also provides for the national convention to refer “questions of principle or practice...disputed jurisdiction or the interpretation of powers claimed” to the Court of Adjudication. The Court’s decision would be binding “unless reversed by vote of the convention.” Would or should a national convention defer such an important decision to the Court?

The polity of our church would, I believe, significantly inform whatever discussions might take place within our church on this subject. Our polity would also, I believe, assist the national church council in addressing the question of how they respond to the time line identified in the motion of the Eastern Synod.

What can we learn from our ecumenical partners?

Both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Anglican Church of Canada have a special relationship with our church and we need to be in conversation with them on this issue. The positions of our brothers and sisters in the churches of the Lutheran World Federation are also most important to us. Surely we also need to be aware of and sensitive to the positions and studies of church bodies in the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. More and more we are walking with one another in this Christian pilgrimage. Ecclesial courtesy as well as enlightened self-interest require such conversation and communication.

Would such investigations or consultations take too much time? Surely an issue of this importance deserves to be given the fullest possible background information for any decision that might be made.

May the Lord bless our discussions and those of all Christians as we struggle to know the right and to do the right.