

ELCIC GOVERNANCE AND THE MATTER OF SAME-SEX BLESSINGS

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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.

The Eastern Synod has put before the ELCIC the question of whether “a parish-based local option to perform same-sex blessings” should be authorized. Others have been asked to address the theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral implications of this question. This short note looks only at the governance issues.

1. How does our system of governance speak to the matter of blessing same-sex couples? How does ELCIC polity inform the conversation?

This church has a number of governing documents, which include the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada Act; the Corporate By-Laws; the Constitution; and the Administrative By-Laws.

Of these documents, only the Constitution speaks to the doctrinal stance of the ELCIC. What does the Constitution tell us? (Note: In our governing documents it is understood that the term “this church” means “the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada” while “the Church” refers to “the Church Universal” or “the Holy Catholic Church” or “the Church of Christ.”)

The *Confession of Faith* tells us:

This church confesses the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks, and as the only source of the Church’s doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the Church. (Article II, Section 3)

The *Nature of the Church* tells us:

Jesus Christ is Lord of the Church. All power belongs to Him as its head. All actions of this church are to be carried out under His rule and authority. (Article III, Section 1)

and

The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the Church, which exists both as congregations gathered together for worship, witness, education and service, and as an inclusive fellowship which has its own identity and integrity. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal church exists in and through congregations. (Article III, Section 2)

and

This church derives its character and its powers both from its congregations and from its inherent nature as part of the Church universal. It regards itself as standing in the historic continuity of the communion of saints and as being an expression of that Christian fellowship in today's world. (Article III, Section 3)

The *Mission of the Church* tells us:

The mission of this church, as an expression of the universal Church and as an instrument of the Holy Spirit, is to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people in Canada and around the world through the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments and through service in Christ's name. (Article IV, Section 1)

and in seeking to achieve its mission, this church shall

Receive, establish and maintain congregations in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the Sacraments rightly administered. (Article IV, Section 2, clause a)

and shall

Safeguard the faith and life of its congregations and ordained ministers, deciding all questions relating thereto on the basis of the Word of God and in accordance with the Confession of Faith. (Article IV, Section 2, clause i)

Finally, *Conventions* tells us:

The convention of this church shall be its highest legislative authority. (Article X, Section 1)

1.1 What should be the scope of a decision?

I understand from our Constitution that this church derives its nature substantially from its congregations, where "worship, witness, education and service" happen, and where the ministry of Word and Sacrament takes place. From this, I would conclude that a decision to bless same-sex couples could be nothing other than a parish-based local option. That is to say, if this church determines that blessing same-sex couples is permissible, it should go no further than to permit

this to be a decision of local parishes.

1.2 Who could make a decision?

Part of the mission of this church is to “safeguard the faith and life of its congregations ...” as noted above. This church understands that its Biennial Convention is “its highest legislative authority.” This church further teaches that “the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the Church” and that this is true when this church gathers in convention. Thus, it would be constitutional and appropriate if this church in convention were to make a decision for or against the blessing of same-sex couples.

1.3 On what basis should the convention reach a decision?

The convention would need to hear extensive discussion of the doctrinal issues involved. It would need to ask itself:

- “What does scripture, especially the Gospels, say about this matter?”
- “What can we understand from our Lutheran confessional writings?”

Most of all, the convention would need to pray that the hearts of all delegates would be open to the Holy Spirit, and that they would be guided by the Spirit on this decision.

I am not a theologian, and do not presume myself capable of making sophisticated theological decisions. As a person at the convention, I would want to hear theologians discuss the issues in the light of our Lutheran understanding of scripture and on the basis of the Lutheran confessions. I would want to come to the convention with my heart and mind open on the matter, and to ask the Holy Spirit to guide me.

1.4 If local option is approved by convention, could a Synod or a Synod Bishop disallow local option for its congregations?

If this church in convention determines that the parish-based local option is acceptable, there is no authority or power vested in Synods to disallow the local option. The Bishop’s authority would be to deal with situations where the parish pastor goes against the determination of the congregation; the Bishop would have no authority to intervene if the parish pastor and the parish were in agreement on same-sex blessings.

2. What can we learn from our ecumenical partners?

2.1 Who are our ecumenical partners?

Our closest ecumenical partners are the members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), especially the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Our next closest partner is the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC), and, by extension, the World Anglican Communion. Our other ecumenical partners are the members of the Canadian Council of Churches.

2.2 What can we learn from the LWF?

It is my understanding that the LWF and its member churches have not made recent statements on this issue. We know that the ELCA is wrestling with the issue, and is watching closely what we do. We are slightly ahead of the ELCA, but they are close behind. More instructive is what is happening in the Anglican church.

2.3 What can we learn from the world Anglican Communion?

First and foremost, we can learn that this issue is fraught with peril and challenges. The world Anglican Communion appears to see this as an issue to be decided by dioceses (the term various other churches use for what we call Synods) and their Bishops. The Diocese of New Westminster is already blessing same-sex couples, and some other dioceses are displeased. In the meantime, the Episcopal Church in the USA has ordained a practicing gay man as the Bishop of New Hampshire, to the great consternation of other parts of that church. Both the Anglican Church of Canada and the Episcopal Church in the USA have been severely criticized from various quarters within the Anglican communion because of these actions; the anger seems to come especially from the African and Asian churches. There is a very real possibility that the World Anglican Communion will fracture over the issue. This may give us an indication of what the LWF will think about the issue.

2.4 What can we learn from other ecumenical partners?

The largest segment of the Church universal, the Roman Catholic Church, has made it abundantly clear that it is completely opposed to the blessing of same-sex couples. A decision by this church to bless same-sex couples would be a setback for ecumenical progress; it is difficult to say how great a setback it would be.

3. Conclusion

This church has the ability, by acting in convention, to determine whether or not the blessing of same-sex couples is permissible. This church must be guided prayerfully by the Holy Spirit in making its decision, and must be prepared to listen with open hearts and minds to all points of view on the matter.

If this church makes the decision that such blessings are permissible, this church should go no further than authorizing the blessings to be a parish-based local option. Neither Synods nor Synod Bishops would be able to disallow the local option in their Synod.

While the views of ecumenical partners should be of interest to this church, their views would pull this church in all directions. This church must reach its own decision in a prayerful manner.