

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.

How does ELCIC polity inform the discussion?

Clarification needs to be made as to whether the "blessing of same-sex couples" is different than a marriage service. No doubt that question will be addressed by other essayists. However, in this response it is assumed that the blessing, if not the same as marriage, will be considered as such especially as provinces approve same-sex marriages.

Responsibility for marriages rests with pastors who are authorized by the synod bishop to perform marriages according to the provincial laws and the "teaching of the church." Synodical constitutions (Article VII, Section 2) specify "Every pastor shall . . . marry in accordance with the teaching of the church and with the laws of the province." The present "local option" is exercised by pastors with or without consultation with their church councils as to whether to marry a particular couple, man and woman. However, that is exercised within the understood teaching regarding marriage. Necessary in my view, would be a social statement which would address the new situation and requests for same-sex blessings/marriages. That statement may (a) prohibit, (b) approve, and (c) allow and leave the option open to the congregation and pastor. The latter would still require the stated teaching and basis for such.

To my knowledge the ELCIC has not adopted a statement on marriage but has been guided by historic documents of the predecessor bodies until such time as the church has adopted subsequent statements or positions.

The Lutheran Church in America *Statement on Sex, Marriage and Family*, adopted in 1970, defines marriage as "a covenant of fidelity - a dynamic, lifelong commitment of one man and one woman in a personal and sexual union." The statement briefly touches on homosexuality and concludes, "It is essential to see such persons as entitled to understanding and justice in church and community."

What can we learn from our ecumenical partners?

It seems that this question is being addressed in other papers, and I do not know what might be learned by way of specific governance issues. I am aware of approval given by the Church of Sweden for blessing of same-sex couples which is not mandatory for pastors, but also know the controversies surrounding this issue.