

**Guidance for Pastors and Congregations
of the Lower Susquehanna Synod
Regarding Presiding at Same-Sex and Same-Gender Marriages**

A Statement by the Synod Council of the Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA

In our generation same-sex marriage has been an issue of considerable debate in our society and our church. Even after the United States Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marriage, questions remain for many Christian leaders who seek to serve all of God's people and also desire to be faithful to Scripture and the Lutheran tradition as they understand it.

Most pastors and congregations deeply appreciate their responsibility to solemnize marriages for the people they serve, and as result, over the years have established policies and procedures that assist them in determining which weddings are appropriate and which are not. Moreover, most congregations allow their pastors considerable discretion in determining whether they will solemnize any particular wedding.

These are often complicated matters for congregations and pastors to sort out, but the possibility of solemnizing legal marriages between couples of the same sex gives rise to additional issues.

To provide clarity, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust (2009) acknowledges that "some people, though not all, in this church and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender [sic] couples entering into lifelong, monogamous relationships."ⁱ And further, "On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some ... surround such couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God, find strength for the challenges that will be faced, and serve others. They believe same-gender [sic] couples should avail themselves of social and legal support for themselves, their children, and other dependents and seek the highest legal accountability available for their relationships."ⁱⁱ

At the same time, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009) acknowledges that faithful members, leaders and congregations within our church, after prayer, Scripture study and discernment, may disagree that homosexuality and heterosexuality are equally good gifts from God. "On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law... and some are convinced that homosexuality and even lifelong, monogamous, homosexual relationships reflect a broken world in which some relationships do not pattern themselves after the creation God intended. While they acknowledge that such relationships may be lived out with mutuality and care, they do not believe that the neighbor or community are best served by publicly recognizing such relationships as traditional marriage."ⁱⁱⁱ

Because people of good faith may come to different conclusions, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009) calls for our church to recognize and to respect differing viewpoints and practices within our denomination.

In addition to the changes regarding same-sex marriage, we have come to understand more fully the experiences and challenges of transgender persons who desire to marry.

In accord with *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009) and concern for transgender persons, the Synod Council of the Lower Susquehanna Synod endorses these guiding principles for pastors and congregations.

- Lutherans of the Lower Susquehanna Synod are encouraged to support the same standard of marriage for couples of the same sex or same gender identity that the church holds for couples of different sexes or gender identities.
- A pastor may solemnize marriages between same-sex or same-gender couples as they would couples of different sexes or gender identities. Ideally, such solemnizations will occur when:
 - 1) The pastor agrees that same-sex or same-gender marriage is appropriate, and
 - 2) the Congregation Council or Synod Council of the pastor's calling body and, if applicable, place of service, agree that the pastor do so.
- Our synod recognizes and affirms the right of a pastor to accept or decline the invitation to solemnize any marriage.
- Pastors and their calling or governing bodies are encouraged to be proactive rather than reactive, and review their current policies on weddings and marriages to discern how they might be revised to respond to same-sex and same-gender marriage. The review should be conducted with prayer, study, honesty and respect for one another.

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Thomas E. McKee, synod secretary

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ⁱ *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009), p. 18.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 20.