

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

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

Ever since marriage between couples of the same gender became legal in Massachusetts in 2004, same-sex marriage has been growing in both cultural acceptance and legal practice. On May 20, 2014, Pennsylvania became another jurisdiction where same-gender couples can legally marry.

As in other places where same-sex marriage has become legal, in Pennsylvania this has generated considerable discussion and questioning within the church.

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 gender gives rise to additional issues.

In an effort to provide clarity, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted the social statement “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. In accord with that statement, our denomination made changes in 2010 to the “Vision and Expectations” document for rostered leaders in the ELCA.

“Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” acknowledges that some people in the ELCA conclude that marriage is an appropriate term to use in describing the benefits, protections, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong monogamous relationships. On the basis of conscience-bound belief, many pastors and congregations have committed to including in their mission and ministry the practice of surrounding same-gender couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God. Some in the ELCA believe that same-gender 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.

Similarly, in “Vision and Expectations rostered leaders desiring to live in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous same-gender relationships are told that both church and community are part of the public within which they are accountable, and that public accountability for rostered leaders includes compliance with state law in the state where they reside.

At the same time, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” 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 they may oppose blessing or solemnizing lifelong relationships between people of the same gender. Because people of good faith may come

to different conclusions, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" calls for our church to recognize and to respect differing viewpoints and practices within our denomination.

In accord with these policies of our denomination, and in light of the May 2014 court ruling legalizing same-gender marriage in Pennsylvania, 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 gender that the church holds for couples of different genders.
- A pastor may solemnize marriages between same-gender couples as they would couples of different genders. Ideally, such solemnizations will occur when:
  - 1) The pastor agrees that same-sex 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 marriage. The review should be conducted with prayer, study, honesty and respect for one another.

Approved by Synod Council on May 29, 2014

Amended by Synod Council on June 4, 2014