



New Jersey Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Office of the Bishop

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Dear Colleagues in Ministry,

Grace and peace to each of you.

I have received questions and inquiries in regard to the State of New Jersey legalizing same-gender marriage. Same-gender marriage is now a legal reality in our state. Pastors are asking questions about what this means for ELCA congregations in our synod.

The short and easy answer is that the state's ruling does not change what the church said in our 2009 Social Statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, or its implementing resolutions. Of course, what we adopted with that statement leaves much to the pastoral care and discretion of each pastor and congregation. So, what follows is my best interpretation and guidance.

First, prayerful conversation is important. When our Social Statement was adopted, we called upon "members of this church...to commit themselves to finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements." In order to do this, we must continue to engage each other in prayerful conversation.

It is also important for you to be in conversation with your congregational leaders before recognizing same-gender unions publicly or using the church building (or refusing to do so). This doesn't necessarily mean asking permission, but it is not helpful for council leaders or congregation members to find out what the pastor is doing when they're reading the newspaper or seeing a picture on Facebook! If there has been no discussion, they are likely to feel blindsided should someone ask them about it.

You cannot disregard the fact that you are the public face of the congregation and that your actions impact the whole church as well as your colleagues in ministry. Being open to recognizing or not recognizing a same-gender union should always be a matter you have prayerfully considered for the sake of the couple and the community and not for the sake of publicity or making a political statement. Thank you for being intentional in your prayerful reflection and conversation as we move into this new day.

Second, it is important to be clear about what our Social Statement says and what it does not say.

Here are a few key points:

- The ELCA defines marriage as being between a man and a woman. The Statement also acknowledges that some people in the ELCA conclude that marriage is an appropriate term to use for same-gender couples.
- It is clear that there is significant disagreement in our church around same-gender unions and we are continuing to do our best to create space for ongoing conversation and dialogue.
- Nowhere does our Social Statement authorize ELCA pastors to perform same-gender marriages. Nor does the Social Statement prohibit pastors from performing same-gender marriages where authorized by state law. The Statement uses the language of “recognition” of same-gender unions (which NJ now calls marriage). It was agreed that this is a matter of pastoral care and authority in the local congregation.

Finally, we are living in a time of tremendous change in our society’s conversation and welcome of people in same-gender unions. We need to be careful and thoughtful in how we contribute to this conversation and welcome. Respect is one of our core values as a synod. The words we use to define relationships matter. The way we speak to and about one another matters. A helpful resource in this conversation is the video of Bishop Mark Hanson at the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly ([click here](#)). I am open to having further conversation with any pastor or congregation who would like to do so.

Thank you for all you do in faithfully serving the Gospel,



The Rev. Tracie L. Bartholomew
Bishop