

A Statement on Same Gender Marriage in the State of California from Bishops Finck, Nelson, Holmerud and Bishop-elect Erwin:

July 12, 2013

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who serve or will soon serve the three synods which encompass the state of California, we offer the following pastoral guidance with regard to recent decisions of the Supreme Court and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals on same gender marriage in this state.

Within the past few weeks, rulings of the courts have again made same gender marriage legal in California. We expect that some of the pastors of the synods we serve will be asked to perform such marriages. We know congregations have been and will continue to be asked to decide how to receive, welcome and include same gender couples in their ministries. Since 2009, when the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted the Social Statement on Human Sexuality and the four implementing resolutions related to this statement, an understanding of “bound conscience” has become a part of the way we describe the many different sensibilities, understandings, interpretations, and theological perspectives represented across our church with regard to questions of human sexuality. We believe this social statement offers a helpful framework for you to decide how your congregation or ministry will respond to the questions which same gender marriage presents to us in our ministries and our witness to the communities we serve.

During conversations about this issue, we believe it would be beneficial to look at pages 18-21 of “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” (<http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues.aspx>). Our Social Statement neither endorses nor forbids same gender marriage but “commits itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publically accountable lifelong monogamous, same gender relationships.” It acknowledges the diversity of opinion in our congregations regarding same gender relationships, recognizes the historic tradition of marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, and goes on to offer:

“On the basis of conscience-bound faith, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage. They 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 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.”

Accordingly, we believe that where authorized by state law, ordained ministers in ELCA congregations have the authority to offer same gender marriage ceremonies, as long as there has been consultation and endorsement of this act by congregational leadership. There is no Churchwide policy that determines or defines how ELCA pastors officiate over marriages. The decisions of how to recognize, support, and hold publically accountable same gender relationships is entrusted to pastors and the congregations they serve. Such decisions need to be addressed prayerfully in the context of your congregation’s ministry; consultation with the synod bishop is also encouraged. We are available for such conversations. Since no rite or liturgy for the blessing of unions or marriage of same gender couples yet exists in liturgical resources provided by the ELCA, celebrations of such relationships can be drawn from other Christian denominations and advocacy ministries, emphasizing the lifelong, monogamous intentions which are a significant part of the 2009 decisions of this Church with regard to any marriage, whether of the opposite gender or of the same gender.

Thank you for the faithful witness you offer in your ministry—on this and other matters—as we live and serve together as followers of Jesus. Know that whatever decision you make as a pastor or a congregation with regard to performing same gender marriages, you will have our support and a commitment to be in continuing dialogue about the teachings and practice of this Church in all matters of our work and witness.

God’s blessings in your lives and ministries,

Bishop Murray Finck,
Pacifica Synod

Bishop Mark W. Holmerud,
Sierra Pacific Synod

Bishop Dean Nelson,
Southwest CA Synod

Bishop-elect Guy Erwin,
Southwest CA Synod