



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

September 19, 2017

The Rev. Canon Jordan Hylden, on behalf of:
The Task Force on the Study of Marriage
78th General Convention of The Episcopal Church (USA)

Dear Canon Hylden and sisters and brothers in Christ of The Episcopal Church (USA),

Grace, mercy, and joy to you from our Lord Jesus Christ!

I am writing in response to the question you posed to the ELCA: “What has been the impact of the Episcopal Church’s authorization and use of liturgical rites for same-sex marriage and the blessing of same-sex unions on “the Church?”

It will be helpful first to describe the ELCA’s experience with these matters:

The ELCA first allowed LGBT persons to become ordained and be in partnered relationships in 2009. This was, of course before the Supreme Court decision of 2 years ago. In 2013 the Churchwide Assembly called for a task force, "Ministering to and with Same Gendered Couples and their families." That group’s work can be found here:
http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/M2SGF_Final_ENABLED.pdf?_ga=2.107229892.753550351.1501509342-849358644.1500475709

In that report, the task force worked towards naming pastoral care concerns and other issues. This task force decided to call on me, as the Executive for Worship, to draft supplemental language for the already existing marriage rite within *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW). You can find that material here:
http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Supplemental_Marriage_Resources.pdf?_ga=2.49118176.753550351.1501509342-849358644.1500475709. It is also available through the Sundays and Seasons, the online resource for worship planning which draws on ELCA resources: [ADDRESS](#).

It was intentional that we used the language of “supplemental” and not “same-gendered,” so as not to separate out groups of people, but rather to show that this supplemental liturgical language can be used within the already existing rite of marriage.

In doing so, the resource provides inclusive language not only for same-gendered couples but also for hetero-sexual couples who yearn for more inclusive language. This supplement also makes a deeper connection to the sacrament of baptism and elaborates how marriage is a living out of our baptismal vocation.

We have proceeded with these changes, though the ELCA has not returned to its 2009 statement on human sexuality, which states that we "hold the traditional view of marriage." You can find that statement at: <http://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Human-Sexuality>

The first response to your question is that we give thanks for The Episcopal Church for your good work early on with "I will bless you to be a blessing." This appeared prior to our 2009 Assembly decisions and has proven beneficial to many across the ELCA who chose to bless relationships and unions prior to the Supreme Court decision on marriage. Much of the language from that resource was also beneficial to us as we crafted the materials for our own denomination. We also included the Episcopal marriage blessing in our 2006 worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Your process and timeline for resources are in many ways different from our own, as is the polity behind them. We see, however, that your authorization of marriage for all persons and your offering of resources send a strong message of unity. This message is one that the ELCA too celebrates. While not all persons within our denomination are in favor of same-gender persons being married, this church has said that the pastoral care of all persons is our commitment, and thus we have made available these supplemental resources for those persons, congregations, and synods who choose to use them.

It has been said that marriage is a gift from God, intended for the joy and strength of those who enter it and for the well-being of the whole human family. As you continue to wrestle with hard questions, create life-giving liturgical rites, and welcome many into the covenant of marriage, we pray for your work and give thanks for the common bonds we share as siblings in Christ. We anticipate continued opportunities to learn from one another as our liturgical expressions continue to live into the commitments which our denominations have made.

Walking together with you!

The Reverend Kevin L. Strickland,
Assistant to the Presiding Bishop/Executive for Worship

CC: The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, *Presiding Bishop*
Dr. Kathryn Johnson, *Director, Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations*

Moravian Church, Northern Province

I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who binds us together as one.

Thank you for reaching out to the Moravian Church Northern Province – we are enriched by our full communion relationship with the Episcopal Church. I can appreciate the work that went into creating the Celebration Rites – and the work that is now going into preparing for a full reflection of their merit at your 2018 General Convention.

In case you are not aware, in 2014 the Northern Province voted to allow for the marriage of same-gender couples, and for the ordination of gay and lesbian individuals, whether single or married. Legislation called for the formation of a rite that would help pastors solemnize such marriages. However, we have not yet developed such a rite. Individual pastors have created their own and shared them informally; others have simply verbally modified the existing rite that assumes a male/female marriage. Our decision not to create a rite was three-fold: we do not have the staff to devote time to this, we did not relish an “in-your-face” ritual at a tender time in the living out of our synod legislation, and we did not believe that a “separate but equal” rite for same-gender marriages was appropriate. We favor a revision of the existing rite to do what yours has done – make one rite suitable for all marriages.

From our perspective, the Rites that you developed offer us an example of the wisdom of creating one rite for marriage – not two separate rites. Thank you. The Witnessing and Blessing rite also offers us an example of how to respond with a marriage rite that acknowledges the long commitments many same-gender couples made before they could legally consider marriage. Again, thank you for the sensitivity and realism within that rite. You are further along on this journey than we are – and the liturgical resources represent gifts to us as we continue on this path.

The specific impact of the Episcopal Church’s authorization and use of these resources is positive, although there has been no broad sharing of these resources with our pastors. I’m sure those who researched resources found yours – and found it helpful, because it is theologically sound and sensitively conceived. There are those in our denomination who were not (and are not) in favor of our 2014 decision, so they would not welcome these resources – but I suspect they would be no less welcoming than those priests in your tradition who are opposed to same-gender marriage.

While the Northern Province of the Moravian Church has passed legislation allowing same-gender marriage, our brothers and sisters in the Southern Province have not – and are in the midst of deliberate and thoughtful conversations on this topic in anticipation of their Provincial Synod in April 2018. It would be premature to even venture a guess as to how they will discern God’s leading – so you should not assume that the Southern Province will vote as the Northern Province has.

I wish you much wisdom and grace as you prepare for your general convention and this topic in particular. Thank you for your leadership on this important matter of inclusion for all of God’s people.

Grace and peace,

Betsy Miller

The Rev. Dr. Betsy Miller
President, Provincial Elders’ Conference
Moravian Church Northern Province

THE MARRIAGE OF PEOPLE OF THE SAME SEX.

Follow-on to the Paper 'Blessing of Life commitment'

History and purpose of this paper

For more than 20 years, members of the Old Catholic Synod have been asking for possibilities of same sex blessings and same sex marriages

In order to explore these matters, The Collegial Executive Body (CB) installed a committee carrying the name of Verhey-de Jager. Within a timeframe of two years, a report Connections for Life and Sacrament of Blessing was published.

Conversations and discussions in our parishes led to a report for Synod in 2004

A new committee (called Frede-Robinson) was asked to reflect on the outcome of the report that was published earlier. Their findings resulted in a report carrying the title 'The sacramental marriage open for couples of the same sex?' (June 2006). In addition the CB reflected on the matter and issued a report 'Blessing of Life Commitment'. The discussion at Synod led to two requests to the CB:

- Provide an order of service for same sex blessings.
- Provide Synod with a report after theological reflection on the sacramentality of this blessing.

In 2009 the Bishops issued an order of service for the blessing of these Connections for Life. The quest for Sacramentality led to two study days for the clergy in December 2013 en March 2014.

With this paper we want to report the results of the above and in particular the theological research on the Sacramentality of the marriage.

Explicitly we start with our report "Blessing of Connections for Life".

In our opinion this report gives a good overview of the stance of the Dutch Old Catholic Church relating to the appreciation of Connections for Life of people of the same sex.

As civil marriage is open to people of the same sex since 2001 in our country, as it is in other countries as well, we want to use the term 'marriage' for Life Commitment of people of the same sex, characterized by loyalty and exclusivity.

That will lead in our church to acknowledgement of a marriage of a man and a woman, of two women and of two men. This means that in these three situations, one speaks of a civil marriage with specific characteristics such as the obligation to care for each other. One can ask if we, theologically, can speak of the same reality. We will explore this further, in a sub sequential theological research.

The search to sacramentality of a marriage of people of the same sex is not an ethical one.

We are convinced that a marriage of people of the same sex is intrinsically good if it contributes to becoming truly human and giving true happiness to the partners.

The search for sacramentality is a theological and a anthropological one.

Theological-anthropological considerations.

The theological anthropology looks at what people do and how they want to realize a life according to God's holy laws.

The theological-anthropology asks the question who the human being is in the light of the Eternal.

According to Anton Houtepen, theological-anthropology wants to describe humanity as taken out of the earth, but created in the image of God, living in grace because God has pleasure in humanity, enjoying the wonderful freedom of his children destined to the full development with the living God.

In order not to cause any misunderstanding about our positive appreciation of a marriage of two women or two men, we want to be in line with Margaret Farley, and to state the following in cases of homosexuality:

1. Experiences of countless people make clear that homo-relationships contribute to the wellbeing of both partners. Therefore we can say that in principal these relationships are intrinsically good.
2. Homo-relationships are life advancing - considering the same conditions - as hetero-relationships are. These conditions concern to ensure the human dignity and loyalty of the partners towards each other. The basics are thereby that the human being is a purpose in itself, and never can be lowered to a means; there will be mutual reciprocity and commitment of the partners; there is a sort of form of fruitfulness, whether the gift of child bearing and bringing up of ones (own) children; and the relationship of both partners inspires to social justice.
3. To make the marriage open for homosexual couples is a development towards more justice in society, whereby discrimination, based on public recognition of intimate relationships, can disappear.
4. Homosexuality must not be limited by terms of biology. It is a known fact that a number of people feel attracted to the same sex, whilst others do not have the same, or less felt attraction. That means that a number of people have a sexual preference, eventually a choice as well as an irreversible tendency. Engaging in a relationship with the person involved is not important, but the way how this relationship is shaped.

The history of the church with homosexuality is complex and diverse.

It is not correct to say that the church always rejected same-sex relationships.

It is not possible to derive valid guidelines concerning commandments/prohibitions re sexuality for all times and places.

Although the Bible has a great appreciation of love and sexuality (especially the Song of Songs), it doesn't have passages that concern sexuality explicitly.

These passages often relate to a context of violence, abuse and degrading practices and the avoidance of it.

The blessing of a marriage and procreation is put in a framework of a patriarchal society, whereby the openness of homo relationships, as known these days, was very limited or non existing.

We, ourselves have to search for the true meaning of homo-relationships within the framework of a Christian design for life. The biblical witnessing of God's vision about humanity and the human experience, play an important role.

We are convinced that homosexual partner-relationships, looked at from a theological and anthropological point of view, can be affirmed in faith and can be seen as forms of human passion to the possible good and mutual care for each other, that can carry the blessing of the faithful community.

This will not mean that the three forms of marriage represent the same reality.

The 2006 report does not question the equality of each of these the marriages , but to righteously serve the own character of each of them.

Equality doesn't mean sameness. As Mattijs Ploeger mentioned on one of the study days *"Perhaps is it possible to recognise the diversity and heterogeneity of people and relationships in a Christian community and similarly the awareness that our diversity brought together to unity in Christ"*.

Theology of the Sacraments

The Old-Catholic interpretation of the sacrament of marriage, as the sacrament of blessing a marriage paves the way to apply the same sacramental character to the three forms of marriage.

The 2006 report said that, based on the baptism of those involved, the pronouncement of the blessing should be included in acts of sacramental signs.

In a document that Remco Robinson wrote in this context: *The sacramentality means that the fact of a relationship is included in the whole of salvation history and thereby is to be seen in a new perspective. Therefore the relationship is a sign of grace and therefore a sacrament.*

Mattijs Ploeger confirmed that according to the theology of the sacrament, it isn't possible to deny a sacramental character to official ecclesial liturgical acts. He adds: *Whether it will be the same sacrament is hard to say, but it is defensible to say that there is sacramentality.*

In the Bible we can distinguish three meanings of the marriage.

Traditionally, marriage is seen as gift of creation: man and woman are in creation given to each other with the command to be fruitful (Genesis 1, 26-28; 2,18-25).

Apart from this, marriage is seen as an intimate relationship of a man and a woman as an image of the covenant of God and his people Israel (Isaiah 54, 1-10; Hosea1-3; Jeremiah2-3).

Although marriage is seen as a blessing, the apostle Paul puts the marriage in the perspective of the Kingdom of God. He puts Christ at the centre of the covenant, whereby the love between people is compared with the love that Christ gives to his church (Ephesus 5,30-33). Paul puts the marriage in perspective by mentioning also the possibility not to marry for the sake of the Kingdom of God.(1 Cor. 7, 8-9)

Based on these traditional and biblical meanings of marriage, it is obvious that there are in the light of a marriage of men and women, two interdependent questions appearing: that of the biological fertility/fruitfulness and that of the bridal symbolism of Christ and the Church.

The link of sexuality and the specific biological fruitfulness of men and women is often seen as the backbone for a certain sexual morale and a connecting coherent ordering of society.

Letting go or widening this morale by also seeing a marriage of two men or two women as sacramental, may lead to fear or uncertainty.

Although we realise that this fear and uncertainty for these other than traditionally accepted corporality and sexuality by some Christians and Churches can be felt, we want to keep a positive attitude towards homosexuality, for which many homosexuals and heterosexuals make an effort.

We also realize that there are differences between churches in our own country as they are worldwide, whereby non-theological reasons also play an important role.

Within the World Council of Churches there is work in progress to make these differences acceptable for discussion by means of a so called 'morale debate'. Recently, in the Dutch National Council of Churches there are attempts to initiate a conversation about these differences between Churches in the Netherlands.

Within the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches the subject matter is less complex. Because of the relatively independency of the local churches, the member churches respect the differences and keep their ecclesiastical community.

The Polish and Czech do not follow the developments in the Dutch, German, Swiss and Austrian churches, who explore the sacramentality of marriage of people of the same sex and know an order of a marriage service

On the other hand, the four churches do not pressurize their sister churches to concur.

Conclusion.

Taking into account the developments in our church, in the Union of Utrecht and in the worldwide ecumenical movement for which we are also (co) responsible, we consider to confirm the sacramentality of the blessing of a marriage of two men or two women, of which at least one of them is a baptised member.

We aim to formalise the order of service for such a marriage and thereby give it a final status. This order of service has been used as an experiment already.

We feel obliged to make an effort to promote the sacramentality of this blessing within the (wider) ecumenical circles in order to create more openness for the marriage of two men or two women and for further research.

We will inform our Synod of the developments in this area of the Union of Utrecht.

Finally we, together with the Collegial Executive Board (CB), call upon all Christians to commence open and respectful conversations about relationships and sexuality. We also want to cooperate to stimulate these conversations in a ecumenical context.

Amersfoort, Festival of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8 September 2015

+ Joris Vercammen, Archbishop of Utrecht

+ Dirk Jan Schoon, Bishop of Haarlem

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