



ELCIC

*In Mission
for Others*

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

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Canon Robert Falby, Chair
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Via The Ven. Bruce Myers (clerk)
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September 3, 2014

Submission to the Commission on the Marriage Canon

May God's grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the Commission on the Marriage Canon. As your Full-Communion partner, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) offers our prayers, support and encouragement to the Anglican Church of Canada in all aspects of your participation in God's mission and in your life as a faithful church. This is most certainly true as you deal with the often difficult and tense matter of the understanding of marriage.

We understand this submission to be part of a process of broad "consultation." Your letter indicates that the Commission "would especially welcome an account of the theological and biblical rationale offered by your church to justify this change in its understanding of marriage, as well as any other reflections on the experience of your own denomination through its own process of discernment."

ELCIC Process of Discernment

Beginning in 2006, the ELCIC entered into a process of developing a Social Statement on Human Sexuality. In our church, a *social statement* is a theological and ethical document that provides a foundation for understanding God's living word in the light of the changing realities of the modern world. A *social statement* seeks to provide the social analysis and theological basis for the collective ELCIC understanding of a continuing crucial issue that arises out of the mission of the ELCIC.

While debate and discussion regarding same-sex marriage was a key factor in developing a *social statement*, National Church Council (NCC) also felt that human sexuality was/is a factor in a variety of issues as the church faithfully engages mission in the current context. The *social statement* process includes the distribution of draft statements as part of a wide consultation across the church. It also includes regular reporting to the NCC.

In 2011, the ELCIC in convention adopted a *Social Statement on Human Sexuality*, a copy of which is included with this submission. The document is also available at <http://elcic.ca/Human-Sexuality/documents/APPROVEDELICISocialStatementonHumanSexuality.pdf>

The *Social Statement* has three sections:

1. “Encountering the World in Which We Live” names some of the current issues of sexuality that face our world. These realities are named without judgement.
2. “Facing God and Being Church” seeks to find common language to articulate the faith and theology which guide our life together.
3. “Doing Ministry” seeks to stimulate conversation about mission and ministry at the local and global level.

Along with the proposed *Social Statement*, NCC presented four policy motions to the Convention:

1. A motion concerning the unity of the church stating that the church should not be divided over moral issues.
2. This motion: “It is the policy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada that rostered ministers may, according to the dictates of their consciences as informed by the Gospel, the Scriptures, the ecumenical creeds and the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, preside at or bless legal marriages according to the laws of the province within which they serve. All rostered ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada are encouraged to exercise due diligence in preparing couples for marriage. All rostered ministers serving congregations are encouraged at all times to conduct their ministry in consultation with the lay leaders in the congregation, and with sensitivity to the culture within which the congregation serves.”
3. A motion establishing a policy that sexual orientation is not in itself a factor which disqualifies a candidate for rostered ministry or a rostered minister from seeking a call.
4. A motion calling on the church to address sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

Ultimately, the 2011 Convention ran out of time to deal with the fourth motion. The first three were adopted. A motion *Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking* was adopted at the 2013 Convention.

The implication of the second motion is that pastors, in consultation with local leaders, are permitted to preside at same-sex marriages. It is worth noting that “according to the dictates of their consciences” means pastors are able to refuse to preside at same-sex marriages. Throughout the *social statement process*, the church has been aware that engaging issues of same-sex marriage can be difficult and divisive. In the midst of diversity, a *social statement* is an attempt to find common language. From early in the process, it was clear that there would be no uniform opinion on how to handle the matter of same-sex marriages. After deep reflection, faithful, biblically-rooted people were coming to various conclusions regarding our understanding of marriage.

Theological and Biblical Rationale for this Change

In a sense, our *Social Statement* is the theological rationale for the policy changes we have made. While it seems risky to summarize the *Statement*, I will attempt to offer brief summary here in order to honour your request for an account of the rationale. Keep in mind, the purpose of this *Social Statement* was not to justify a policy change, but rather to help the church engage questions of what it means to be a faithful church *In Mission for Others* in our current context. The following points are worth mentioning. The words *in italics* are taken directly from the *Social Statement*.

- *God’s fundamental orientation to the world is self-giving love.* One implication of this is that we can have confidence in God even as we engage life’s most difficult questions.
- *In seeking to understand life’s complexity, the church’s gathering around Word and Sacrament reveals to us God’s direction and supports us with a praying community.*
- *Jesus summarized God’s law in this way: to love God and to love neighbour. It is not always easy to decide how best to love our neighbour. In our decision-making and consideration of which actions will be most loving and beneficial, the context and life-situation of our neighbour is important.*
- All of us have responsibility for living faithful lives and engaging in God’s mission.
- Marriage and family are gifts from God.
- Faith and the Bible inform our understanding of all of life, including marriage.
- Our understanding of marriage is influenced by context. This has been true throughout history, including during biblical times.
- *We all have biases and prejudices. When we use our biases to try to articulate God’s will, we run the risk of abusing power and authority.* Peter with Cornelius (Acts 10) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) are examples of the church engaging diversity as contextual mission issues.
- Seeking justice, showing mercy, and upholding dignity are biblical calls. *This church takes a humble attitude toward others. This church is called to confession and repentance, and to leave the judgement of other people’s salvation to God.*

- Supporting single people, married people, families and acting for justice are part of our call to be in mission. *Through teaching and learning, congregations and synods help people to understand faith, to nurture positive values about sexuality and to grow as disciples.*
- *This church is called to oppose sexual exploitation in all its manifestations.* This includes growing in understanding of emerging media.
- Our understanding of sexual orientation has changed over the years. The time has come to be a more welcoming community.
- *This church recognizes that in our life together, we listen, and continue to pray “Your will be done on earth as in heaven.” We pray for wisdom.*
- *This church lives by faith and grace rather than by fear. Living faithfully means trusting in God’s grace boldly, and taking risks. This church is yearning to see how God will be active in our future, and how God will use us as agents of reconciliation in our broken world.*

Reflections on the Process of Discernment

The reality is that after the ELCIC made the policy change regarding same-sex marriage, a number of congregations [some 50 congregations of about 620] decided to sever their relationship with the ELCIC. It was painful to lose members of the family. At the same time, some congregations found new freedom for mission in the new policy and/or discovered that communicating respectfully, even in the midst of divergent opinions, is a valuable skill for life-in-community.

Unfortunately, the Christian Church has a history of division in the face of disagreement, where both sides quote Scripture and display a certainty regarding the will of God on something in particular. We do not do so well at disagreeing in a manner which conveys the love of Christ to the other in the church, but more importantly to the communities in which we are called to serve. Will our communities look at our actions and be able to say, “See how they love one another”? (John 13:35)

This is not to minimize either the joy or the disappointment that some may feel with respect to this matter. But neither can we minimize what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ in which we have need for one another, even in the face of strong disagreement about this or any other matter. To find common ground, and to mutually respect the diversity among us, is the intent of the motion that was passed at the Convention concerning the “unity of the church.”

Our Full-Communion Relationship

In closing, I want to say that the ELCIC fully respects the conversations and decision-making processes that need to take place in the Anglican Church of Canada with regard to the Marriage Canon. We will respect the decisions of General Synod no matter what they are.

I also want to say that I believe there is a reason we are in Full Communion: we are together for

the love of the world and we are called to the mission of sharing God's love with the world. While definitions of marriage are important, they are not the sum total of God's mission.

I look forward to many opportunities to work together to share the gospel, to teach, to promote justice and peace, and to worship. As I said earlier, as your Full-Communion partner, we offer our prayers, support and encouragement to the Anglican Church of Canada in all aspects of your participation in God's mission and in your life as a faithful church.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:3-6)

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a plus sign followed by the name 'Susan C. Johnson' in a cursive script.

The Rev. Susan C. Johnson
National Bishop,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada