

October, 2014

To the Pastors and Congregations of the Montana Synod:

Grace and peace to you.

I am writing to you about same-sex marriage. As I write, the law banning it in Wyoming has just been overturned, and the Montana case is on appeal. In September we gathered clergy of the Montana Synod for a Convocation that explored various issues related to same-sex marriage. We looked at a Lutheran theology and ecclesiology of marriage, at the 2009 ELCA statement: "Sexuality: Gift and Trust," and at policies and practices in congregations and synods where same-gender marriage is legal. We also looked at global perspectives.

I want congregations to be prepared as same-sex marriage becomes legal in our states. I want you to have thought about marriage, have discussed it, and not be taken off guard by a change in the law.

I want to share a couple of things with you:

+Congregations make their own wedding policies. The Synod does not do it. The ELCA does not do it. You do. Many congregations have written policies. You get to decide these things, within the confines of the law.

+Pastors are not lone rangers. They do not decide to do marriages without consultation with the congregational leadership. Decisions about what is permissible in the building, what is permissible outside the building are joint decisions, with the Council, and with the Bishop.

+The First Amendment is alive and well. You cannot be sued if you choose not to do weddings for same-sex couples. You cannot be sued if you choose not to do weddings for divorced couples, or non-Christian couples. See #1.

+A marriage involves not only the blessing of the church, but an attestation to the state that all is in order legally. Therefore, if you are asked to sanction "a blessing by the church but not by the state," (sometimes requested for financial reasons), you are potentially participating in fraud.

+There is nothing in ELCA policy that requires you to do same-sex marriages. And there is nothing that prohibits it, where the law allows.

In 2009 many congregations were unprepared for the conversations about homosexuality, and suffered as a result. My hope for 2014 and following is that we will be prepared for careful listening and civil conversations about congregational response to changing laws. There are plenty of resources available to you, and my staff and I are willing to talk with you as well. Blessings to you as you minister to God's beloved people.

In Christ,

Jessica Crist, Bishop