

## **PRESENTATION FROM WEDDING TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION FOR SAME SEX MARRIAGES AT TLC**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Task Force is prepared to make a recommendation to the council updating our Wedding Policy. The recommendation of the task force is to allow same sex marriage at Trinity. We are not going to present a motion or vote today. We will present the revised policy, share with you how we reached the recommendation and allow you time to reflect, provide feedback, and pray about this decision. We will then present a motion at the May Council meeting and have a vote.

We want to assure you that this recommendation was done thoughtfully, prayerfully and in consideration of the effects it may have on our congregation. None of us have taken this decision lightly. As the Council weighs this decision we need to remember that God created us in God's image and that we are all God's children.

### **HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

The United States Supreme Court ruled to nationally legalize same-sex marriage on Friday, June 26, 2015. This court ruling established a new civil right for this population and provides equal dignity in the eyes of the United States law.

Prior to 2015, there were select states in which same-sex marriage was legal. In those states, the ELCA (via the 2009 Social Statement) had established that individual congregations may make their own decision about same-sex marriages within their church.

Following this Supreme Court decision, the ELCA responded by reaffirming that same-sex marriage decision-making remain in the hands of individual congregations as was established in the 2009 Social Statement. This allows for both autonomy and immense responsibility.

Let's look at how ELCA churches in South Carolina and surrounding areas are responding:

- Christ the King, Greenville -- a Reconciled in Christ congregation; supports same-sex marriage in the life of their congregation
- Ebenezer, Columbia (which is located in downtown Columbia and is, according to Pastor Crowell, in many ways very similar to Trinity) -- in the past few months adjusted their wedding policy to include same-gender marriage
- Reformation, Columbia -- a Reconciled in Christ congregation; has been celebrating same sex unions since August of 2009 and, shortly after the Supreme Court decision, happily began celebrating same-gender marriage
- Incarnation, Columbia -- changed their wedding policy to include same sex marriage several months after the Supreme Court decision
- Gethsemane, Columbia -- changed their policy to include same gender marriage
- Pilgrim, Lexington -- currently in a process leading toward same gender marriage in the life of their congregation
- Redeemer, Atlanta -- in the fall of 2015, the Congregation Council made the decision to include same sex marriages in their wedding policy

The Bishop of the South Carolina Synod is unaware of and, therefore, unable to provide information about any congregations who may have considered this issue and have affirmatively decided against endorsing same-sex marriages in their congregations. Also, it should be noted that nationwide, some congregations did choose to leave the ELCA after the adoption of the 2009 Social Statement – several in South Carolina.

It's been almost 2 years since the Supreme Court decision. We, at Trinity Lutheran Church, have both a responsibility and an obligation to take a stance on this issue. We are at a place where we can no longer remain neutral. This is an opportunity for us at Trinity to be a grace-filled congregation, reaching out in love to embrace *all* of God's people.

In February of this year, Congregational Council appointed our group of 6 congregational members along with Pastor Crowell to be the Wedding Policy Task Force. We were charged with exploring the possibility of expanding Trinity's

Wedding Policy to celebrate and bless those in supportive, monogamous, committed same-sex unions.

### **WORK OF THE TASK FORCE**

Once the task force was appointed, we set out to better understand this issue, review our current wedding policy and explore the possibility of adapting our current policy to include same sex marriages. As mentioned, we took this responsibility very seriously and over the last several months, have worked hard to come to a recommendation that we believe is fair and right. Work of the task force included:

- Multiple meeting dates, beginning in late February
- Careful review of current wedding policy
- In depth readings, including both articles and chapters from books, to better understand issue – particularly related to historical events, position of ELCA, our constitution, bible references
- Consultation with the Bishop Herman Yoos, the Bishop of the South Carolina Synod.
- Personal reflection and intimate sharing
- Discussions around potential concerns and obstacles
- Congregational council small groups
- Prayer, lots of prayer

As mentioned, one of the documents we reviewed as part of our work is our congregation's Constitution.

### **TLC CONSTITUTION**

Introductory Comments--- On March 16<sup>th</sup>, we forwarded a copy of our Constitution to all Council members, with certain highlights which seem to be relevant to this particular issue. We would like to review some of those passages



for you. Now, this is picking and choosing the passages for you to be reminded of today, but it's not taking anything out of context, and you have a highlighted copy of this document to follow up however you like.

## PREAMBLE

We, baptized members of the Church of Christ, responding in faith to the call of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, desiring to unite together to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and carry out God's mission, do hereby adopt this constitution and solemnly pledge ourselves to be governed by its provisions. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

### C3.02.

The Church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.

### C4.01.

The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.

### C4.02.

To participate in God's mission, this congregation as a part of the Church shall:

c. Carry out Christ's Great Commission by reaching out to all people to bring them to faith in Christ and by doing all ministry with a global awareness consistent with the understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of all.

d. Serve in response to God's love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless, and committing itself to their needs.

f. Manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives.

#### C4.03.

To fulfill these purposes, this congregation shall:

e. Witness to the reconciling Word of God in Christ, reaching out to all people.

f. Respond to human need, work for justice and peace, care for the sick and the suffering, and participate responsibly in society.

#### C6.03.

This congregation acknowledges its relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in which:

- a. This congregation agrees to be responsible for its life as a Christian community.

## Chapter 9. THE PASTOR

### C9.03.

Consistent with the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, every ordained minister shall preach the Word, administer the sacraments, conduct public worship, provide pastoral care, and shall speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world. Each ordained minister with a congregational call shall, within the congregation, offer instruction, confirm, marry, visit the sick and distressed, and bury the dead; supervise all schools and organizations of the congregation; shall install regularly elected members of the Congregation Council, and with the council administer discipline. Every ...

## Chapter 12. CONGREGATION COUNCIL

### C12.04.

The Congregation Council shall have general oversight of the life and activities of this congregation, and in particular its worship life, to the end that everything be done in accordance with the Word of God and the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. ...

To summarize, using some of the wording that you've heard from our Constitution:



The Task Force believes that addressing our responsibility as a Christian community, reaching out to all people, and acting as an expression of the broader fellowship of believers and congregations in our day, means that it is time for Trinity Lutheran to agree to conduct same gender marriages in accordance with the law. Our desire is to offer the blessing of God on same gender marriages, just as we do with all of our marriages. If we decide not to be inclusive to same gender marriages, we are denying the blessing of God on those people.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Task Force unanimously recommends the following amendments to the Trinity Lutheran Church Wedding Policy, approving same-sex marriages:

#### A Ministry of the Church (p. 1)

“It both legally unites ~~a man and a woman~~ two people, neither of whom are married, according to the laws of society and celebrates the gift of love and committed relationship which God gives to humanity.”

#### Wedding Party and Congregation (p.2)

“Because of the width of the chancel area of the sanctuary, it is recommended that wedding party (~~best man, groomsmen, maid/matron of honor, bridesmaids, flower girl, and ring bearer~~) be limited to a total of ten.

The use of flower ~~girls~~ children and ring bearers is discouraged. If they are used, neither flower ~~girl~~ child nor ring bearer shall be younger than six (6) years of age at the time of the wedding. A specific individual sitting near the front of the sanctuary must be designated to look after each child during the service and remove them from the wedding party if they become disruptive to worship.”

## Photography and Video (p. 3)

~~“A picture of the bride and her escort~~ Pictures may be taken of members of the wedding party in the narthex prior to their entering the nave. A picture may be made from the narthex door of the ~~bride and groom~~ couple as they recess at the conclusion of the service.”

### **Rationale:**

The Task Force’s recommendation is based on fundamental tenets found in Trinity’s purpose in carrying out “Christ’s Great Commission by reaching out to all people” (see TLC Constitution), our biblical teachings that underscore the “whole Bible’s witness to God’s will for human life and relationships” (Peterson, 2009), the ELCA’s previous statements of inclusivity and homosexuality, and our belief that love – genuine, promised for a lifelong commitment to another, exclusive and faithful – that this type of love, above all things, should be celebrated and blessed at Trinity Lutheran Church.

The objections over same-sex marriages are often rooted in the literal interpretation of selected Biblical passages, interpretations that fail to consider the historical context or acknowledgement that these translations are products of people like us, imperfect humans -- often based on incorrect assumptions or incomplete information. Passages from Genesis 1:1-2:4a, 2:4b-24, and 19:1-15 as well as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are often cited as evidence of the condemnation of homosexuality. However, these interpretations fail to acknowledge the ambiguity of the original meaning of the Greek words contained in these passages (there were no terms for “homosexual” or “homosexuality” until the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the prevailing norms of society at the time (which were not always religiously grounded), and the misguided agendas of some translators.

The ELCA has never recognized Biblical literalism. Instead we have supported those interpretations that consider the overall message of grace and love, just as



Luther discovered when he studied the scriptures. "Proper interpretation always involves listening to each text within the context of the whole witness of the Scripture. (Peterson, 2009). If our behaviors were strictly guided by Biblical literalism then we would not eat shellfish (Lev 11:10, 12), we would not wear clothing made from two different materials (Lev 19:19), a husband and wife would have intercourse only during specific times in the menstrual cycle (Lev 18:19), and all men would be circumcised (Gen 17:12). The latter, as described in Acts 10-11 and 15, illustrates an instance in which the early church assembly met and determined the Old Testament rule regarding circumcision did not serve God's will. Thus, their New Testament scriptures conveyed their new thinking and a more holistic view of the desired behavior: "For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God" (1 Corinthians 7:19). So between its own covers, the Bible evolves and its message changes throughout the chapters. Today we recognize that God's message through the Bible evolves over time and at a given time reflects society and our best understanding of what pleases God.

Curiously, Jesus never addresses homosexuality or anything that could be construed as such. Instead, what we see and hear from Jesus throughout his life is a message of love, not love for one segment of a population or another, but for all of God's children. Jesus modelled for us behavior that reaches out to the disadvantaged, the marginalized, and other people alienated by society. Through his loving embrace, Jesus extended the boundaries of God's kingdom to include all people. We believe a policy to allow same-sex marriage will also provide a pathway for all members to experience the full embrace of God. We have long abandoned the notion that marriage is for the sole purpose of procreation. Rather, marriage is the celebration of a loving, committed, lifelong, responsible, and exclusive relationship. We fervently believe that men and women of the same gender can and do enjoy these types of relationships and should therefore have access to the blessings of our church through a Lutheran wedding ceremony performed by a Trinity pastor in Trinity's Sanctuary.

Trinity Lutheran Church, like the church described in Acts 10-11, must determine the behaviors that represent the values of our Christian faith. The Task Force's discernment has come with much thought, discussion, research, and prayer as we developed a recommendation that would best serve our congregation and our faith. Our faith has taught us to display mercy, compassion, faithfulness, and love of our neighbors. A wedding policy denying same-sex marriage ultimately discriminates against members of our congregational family who are or might enter into loving, committed, monogamous relationships with someone of the same sex. These beloved, valued members of our congregation are seeking the full measure of God's grace as well as the full benefit of membership at Trinity. We believe it is time to extend the benefits of marriage at TLC to all our members who are legally eligible.

As a final thought, we share this observation from Peter Gomes, minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, "If the gospel is truly good news, it has to be good news for everyone, for it is either an inclusive gospel or no gospel at all. Prejudice, paranoia, the politics of exclusion – all these little systems have their day, and there are moments when they appear to prevail, but the church, we know from experience, will eventually do the right thing once it has exhausted every other alternative." (Gomes, 207) We believe that the good, right, and faithful action, as a church of grace and love that seeks to emulate Jesus and Jesus' love and embrace of all people, is to begin celebrating same-sex marriages at Trinity within the same guidelines and advisories as our heterosexual marriage ceremonies.

Constitution for Trinity Lutheran Church, Greenville, South Carolina

Peterson, Brian. "The Bible, the Church, and Faithful Discernment," Blog at WordPress.com, 2009

Gomes, Peter J. *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*. Harper Collins, 2001.