

Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church

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To: All rostered and synodically authorized ministers of the North/West Lower Michigan Synod

Dear Colleagues in Ministry:

One tragic consequence of the 2009 Churchwide decisions regarding human sexuality has been the disaffiliation of a number of congregations of this synod from the ELCA. Several of the congregations that voted to leave the ELCA have subsequently become part of or aligned themselves with the new church entity known as the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). When they are without a pastor, they are reaching out to pastors in our synod and synodically authorized ministers for the proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments. Bishop Satterlee asked me to assist him in determining whether this is permissible. As requested at the Autumn Leadership Event, I share what we learned.

It is not permissible for an ordained or synodically authorized minister to preside at Holy Communion in congregations with which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America does not have an agreement, except at community services that are hosted by an ELCA or full communion partner congregation. The North American Lutheran Church, and denominations formed in response to the ELCA's 2009 decision regarding human sexuality, provide a more specific circumstance.

The North American Lutheran Church was formed in reaction to the decisions of 2009 Churchwide Assembly and stands in opposition to the Assembly's decisions regarding human sexuality. Therefore this new church is, by its own intent and confession, a schismatic organization, one that has intentionally separated from the ELCA.

A problem arises when ELCA ministers of Word and Sacrament engage in Word and Sacrament ministries with schismatic organizations. Bylaw 8.72.15.d. of the ELCA constitution is very clear on this matter.

“As required by ELCA churchwide constitutional provision 7.22. and bylaw 7.31.11., ordained ministers on the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America must accept and adhere to this church’s Confession of Faith, as well as abide by this church’s standards and policies for ordained ministers.”

Among such policies is the provision that **“an ordained minister** (synodically authorized ministers as well) **who serves a group schismatic from this church or from a congregation thereof shall cease to be a member of this church.”**

Ministries of service would include sacramental ministry to schismatic congregations or members thereof, proclamation in schismatic assemblies including leading bible study, and pastoral care in lieu of the named pastor’s presence.

I know firsthand that, as our bishop and pastor, Bishop Satterlee appreciates the heartfelt desire of some of our pastors to continue in pastoral ministry with congregations and individual members thereof who have left the ELCA. These are people of God that many of us have grown to know and love. As our bishop, however, Bishop Satterlee cannot condone or allow such practices to continue. Again, the policy is very clear: **“The ordained minister’s** (along with synodically authorized ministers) **name shall be removed from the roster of ordained ministers by the bishop of the synod, who shall report the action to the secretary of this church and to the next Synod Assembly.”**

While we pray that such disciplinary actions shall not be required, if they do, Bishop Satterlee will act accordingly.

If you have any questions with regard to this matter, please call or email me.

In all things, may God’s peace be with you and the ministries you faithfully serve.

In Christ’s love,

Pastor Dennis Smith, Chair
Constitution Committee

CC: The Rev. Craig Alan Satterlee, Ph.D. Bishop