

Bishop Smith's reflections—May 24, 2016



Now for another installment of “Synod Myth-Busters.”

On Pentecost Sunday I was approached after worship by a member who said, “My son's congregation is worried because they've heard a rumor that you are going to be working toward requiring all NC Synod congregations to do same-sex weddings. If that's not true, then help us dispel this rumor that is out there.”

First, I thank that worshiper for asking me. We had a mission congregation in NC disaffiliate from the ELCA this year, and I actually saw in writing an email that someone had sent at least one member of the congregation before their vote. It began, “Now that it is clear that Bishop Smith will be forcing us to do same-gender weddings...”

Lastly, there was a congregation just two months ago in which I have deep personal relationships whose Council was in an uproar and inquiring about disaffiliation (but they never asked me or anyone in the synod office) because “someone told them” that I was going to “make” them do same-sex weddings.

Does anyone see a pattern in these three stories? All a myth, but all with great potential or real destructive power to the body of Christ.

First of all, someone or a group of someones invented this “myth,” either unintentionally due to misunderstanding (I hope) or possibly with malicious intent to tear down the body of the NC Synod, ELCA, and to discredit the ministry entrusted to me as a new bishop here in NC (I hope not). Either way, it's clear from these three and numerous other references in regard to same-gender weddings that there is incorrect information being propagated out there.

Here's the scoop. I have no need, nor any intention, nor any authority to make all congregations in the NC Synod do same-gender weddings. Those who do work in that direction are free, by ELCA policy since 2009, to do so, and I will support them in that study and discernment after which they will make their own decision. Those who don't or who simply don't bring up the question, who at this point appear to be the large majority of NC Synod congregations, I also support as holding a faithful position within our ELCA understanding of sexuality and marriage from the [Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust](#) 2009 document.

In my June 28, 2015, sermon at Redeemer in Atlanta, I announced explicitly—the Sunday after the Supreme Court decision allowing same-gender marriages nationwide—that in parishes entrusted to my leadership in NC, I would not intend to push this issue. Again, our polity would never allow me to “force” any of our congregations to do much of anything, including having same-gender weddings. Congregations vote on their pastors, on their pastors' compensation, and the 2009 policy says that same-gender blessings (marriages weren't being considered since not legal then) could happen only in “congregations who choose to do so.” Note that it doesn't say “pastors who choose to do so.”

Legally now, pastors by virtue of their ordination can marry whomever they choose. When pastors tell me it's none of their congregation's business who they marry, same or opposite gender, I remind them of the 2009 document and suggest that if they want to be a lone ranger on this, their congregation may well decide that they want to reconsider the call of that pastor.

Our church is not of one mind on this, to be sure, but your bishop has neither the desire nor the authority to force your congregation into doing same-gender weddings nor to prevent them if that's what the congregation's council decides to do. If you hear that rumor, which has apparently spread far and wide, please bust the myth.

In Christ,

Bishop Timothy Smith

