

INTRODUCTION

This session focuses on confronting ministry challenges and is designed to help you step back and think about how that happens in your setting. Different congregations, congregation councils and parish organizations arrive at conclusions about ministry in different ways. Sometimes this is true even of different task groups within a congregation. Often participants simply reach consensus and take action. In other cases, there need to be public discussion and votes. More complex issues require more time and attention.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

After the 2015 Supreme Court ruling in support of same-sex couples' right to marry, same-gender couple applications for marriage licenses dramatically increased. Some couples approached their faith communities and asked to be married. Some Lutheran congregations already had clear policies or commitments. But many ELCA congregations have a wide range of perspectives within their congregation or have not received the request before. What would it take for a congregation to work through the issue of same-gender marriage and develop a clear path for responding to a request to be married in the church?

In fact, many smaller and quieter concerns (sometimes decisions) also need to be considered in light of these changing family configurations in our society. These may include parents' concerns for gay children in youth groups, the review of catechetical instruction relative to human sexuality, advocating for human rights and safety, who will be Sunday school teachers, expectations for behavior, and many others.

While the ELCA does have constitutional requirements, we do not have a church governance in which a hierarchical structure determines most of a congregation's policies. Though we have bishops who provide oversight, they primarily serve as pastors, administrators and theological educators, who advise and support a more democratic style of making decisions. ELCA congregations depend on the structure of the wider church – clusters, synods and the churchwide ministries – for certain kinds of guidance and for connection to ministries across the state or the globe. However, at the congregational level, the congregation council, committees and pastor work together with congregation members to define parish ministry and policies. Unsurprisingly, the resolution of concerns on small or on substantive issues are made in different ways.

An ongoing discernment

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has discerned and deliberated human sexuality issues for more than 20 years resulting in the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly's approving the "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" social statement. The 2009 assembly also adopted ministry policy resolutions. (See [Appendix 2](#)).

Lutheran congregations have responded to the social statement and policy resolutions and arrived at different conclusions. Two organizations in particular, Lutheran CORE and ReconcilingWorks provide resources that reflect differing convictions that are yet within the context of ELCA ministry policies. Both organizations invite congregations to affiliate and support their missions and both are committed to faithfully working within the ELCA.

RESOURCES FOR HAVING CONVERSATION

Confronting challenges together as a collection of people is easier said than done. Many people have strong views and value individualism and the freedom to express personal opinions – at times in complete disagreement with someone else. Creating a process to both listen to one another’s views and concerns and discern where God is leading is a significant task. In recent years, the ELCA has devoted resources to studying and encouraging several forms to constructively engage congregational differences.

One of those is generally called **communal discernment**. An ELCA task force examined the theology, cultural practices and habits that make for good communal discernment. They determined that the practice of discernment requires reflecting deeply on God’s Word, and through worship, prayer and conversation, finding the Spirit’s work in the congregation’s midst. The task force’s report provides guidance and resources and concludes:⁵

God calls to us work on how we discern where God is leading us. God calls us to wonder, “Can we improve the way we listen to one another, engage issues, and make decisions so that trust is deepened and respect grows, even if we should disagree?” We trust that God is calling us to find ways to improve our communal discernment around difficult issues and our communal deciding as we seek to be faithful in our time. While we will never find perfection in this broken world and in our own brokenness, God will still be leading us toward new and greater life, even when we think we have failed.⁶

Deliberative dialogue is another form of collective thinking that is used in democratic decision-making and useful in the church. Dialogue is different from debate. Debate is adversarial where opposing speakers endeavor to persuade listeners to choose a winner and a loser. Deliberative dialogue instead brings ordinary citizens together to share opinions and concerns and seek some degree of common ground. Deliberation is based on fairness, intellectual integrity and honest humility.

The practical characteristics of communal discernment and deliberative dialogue often overlap but together they provide the opportunity for people to think and make judgments collectively in the most constructive ways. This conversation series encourages using these kinds of collective thinking and communal practices regarding ministry to and with same-gender couples and their families.

Finally, in all forms of confronting differences, three key characteristics about disagreeing well help smooth the way for success. These have been used and identified by ELCA task forces and shared with the ELCA Conference of Bishops.⁷ All of these are consistent with the spirit of humility that the Bible urges upon followers of Christ (Romans 12:3).

⁵ [Report of the Communal Discernment Task Force](#).

⁶ Ibid, p. 4.

⁷ These are distilled from the [Report and Recommendations of Ministry to and with Same-Gender Couples and Their Families Working Group](#) (M2SGF), Appendix I: Reflections on the Theology and Character of Disagreeing Well written by the Rev. Dr. S. John Roth, bishop, Central/Southern Illinois Synod, who served as a member of the working group. He also shared these with the Conference of Bishops as part of the report of the working group.

1. *Fairness.* I am disagreeing well when I can state the position of the person I am disputing with accurately enough that that other person recognizes that position as genuinely his or her position.
2. *Intellectual integrity.* I am disagreeing well when I can state the strongest, most compelling argument against my position. In other words, I can recognize and acknowledge where my own position is most vulnerable and where a contrasting position makes valid points.
3. *Honest humility.* I am disagreeing well when, after thinking through my position and expressing it with true conviction, I acknowledge that as a fallen, flawed human being I may be wrong. This implies that I and another can learn from each other. This third characteristic is essential. And living this third characteristic – to be able to say honestly, “I may be wrong” – doesn’t happen unless I fundamentally entrust my righteousness to Christ, because I am *simul justus et peccator* (a famous term from the Reformation that means being a sinner and made righteous at the same time).

DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

1. How does our congregation incorporate prayer and Scripture when encountering difficult issues?
2. In what ways does our congregation involve its members in discussing important issues?
3. Take a moment to talk about the guidelines for disagreeing well. How does your congregation practice “disagreeing well”? When you think back to the issues listed in session 1, how would you grade your listening skills?
4. In addition to Scripture and prayer, are there other resources – organizations, written material or people – to turn to for help?

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