

September 20, 2018

Dear members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC),

Then [Jesus] took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:36–37, NRSV)

Grace and peace to you.

On Sunday, we will hear how the followers of Jesus were arguing about who was the greatest. When confronted, they are silent. Jesus takes a child into his arms, and directs the disciples to welcome everyone with a sense of the holy in each person.

From the margins of society, Jesus draws people into his arms and into the centre of our communities; and asks us to reconsider our attitudes, our assumptions and our ways of welcoming. I am reminded of how tempting it is for leaders and communities to argue about who is important and who is not; to make decisions about who is in and who is out; and to magnify the significance of our own experience of normal. Even after we have committed to following Jesus, to treating people fairly and to being inclusive, there is much work to be done to turn our commitments into true and meaningful action.

In 2011, the ELCIC National Convention adopted a [*Social Statement on Human Sexuality*](#), which calls us as a church to the following commitments.

We commit to upholding the dignity of all people. We recognize the image of Christ in every person and serve that person as Christ himself. In meeting diverse people, we begin with a core sense of respect for the value of each person as a unique child of God. We commit to following Jesus by welcoming everyone.

We commit to engaging in practices that more fully enable all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, to live as members of the body of Christ and as co-workers in ministry, and to help nurture disciples in the image of God. We recognize we are affected by the biases of our predominantly heterosexual culture. We commit to keep on learning.

We commit to engaging the diverse faces of the world in which we live. We recognize that meeting diverse peoples and forming a truly inclusive community is a journey of discovery that will include moments of discomfort and anxiety. We commit to using these moments to help us grow as disciples.

The ELCIC finds itself in an increasingly pluralistic context which invites us to think anew about how we preach and live the gospel. As we continue to learn and grow as God's people, we gain new understanding of our world. When we name our complex history, it can assist us in repairing those broken relationships and moving us towards being a more inclusive church. Language becomes an important vehicle to proclaim God's justice and well-being and reflects hospitality and welcome to all.

In March 2018, the ELCIC's National Church Council approved new [*Inclusive Language Guidelines*](#). Women and men, transgender and non-binary people, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, two-spirit, asexual, and heterosexual communities deserve to have their individual identities, titles, and pronouns respected and upheld. While it isn't required to know all of these terms, it is critical that we have a general understanding of the range of identities we have been gifted with by God and reflect that in our use of language with one another.

Just as the church wonders how to uphold dignity, so do our communities and our societies.

Recently, in different parts of Canada, there have been conversations regarding what curriculum will be used in schools as appropriate sexual education. Concerns are being raised about possible future use of the notwithstanding clause that may affect our LGBTQ2+ siblings. In the face of these conversations and concerns, how do we help each other to deepen respect for each other?

I am conscious that persons whose sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity means living as a minority in a predominantly heterosexual and gender-binary culture, the risk of painful, harmful and/or dangerous experiences remains far too high. The ELCIC does not support conversion therapy to change a person's sexual orientation; or any other form of treatment that is hostile to a person's identity. Rather, we sense a deep need for safe opportunities to listen to diverse experiences, to learn from each other, and to honour people's God-given identity. We are called to form families, communities and societies where all are welcome and where all make a meaningful contribution. We are committed to standing with our LGBTQ2+ siblings in Christ, both inside and outside of our church.

This church lives by faith and grace. Living faithfully means trusting in God's grace boldly, and taking risks. This church is yearning to see how God will be active in our future, and how God will use us as agents of reconciliation in our broken world.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan C. Johnson", with a small cross symbol to the left.

The Rev. Susan C. Johnson
National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada