



**Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.
Office of the Bishop

March 6, 2018

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)

Dear friends in Christ,

A very serious situation has been unfolding at our new United Lutheran Seminary (ULS) that has burst onto social media and other conversations online and in various groups. This news has “afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down” people in our seminary and synods who identify as LGBTQ+, those who love them, and allies many of whom have been on the forefront in supporting the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ leaders in the ELCA for decades. I have a dual role in this controversy in that my call is as bishop of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, with responsibility for oversight and pastoral care for all our rostered leaders, candidates for ministry, as well as for the synod leaders and congregations. I also serve as a member of the Board of Trustees of the United Lutheran Seminary, and in that capacity I have served for several years through three presidents, two presidential search committees, and the hard, often grueling work of creating one seminary with two campuses, Philadelphia and Gettysburg, a task that has been discussed in various ways for more than 150 years.

It came to the attention of the Board of Trustees in late December that our new seminary president, as a college student 19 years ago, and prior to ordination in the Presbyterian Church USA, was Executive Director of an organization called OneByOne, a group that was clearly against the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people seeking leadership in the church. This group also promoted the theory that some LGBTQ+ people can and should change their sexual orientation through a remedy that is sometimes called “reparative” or “conversion” therapy. I feel I must pause here to completely repudiate the entire concept of “conversion or reparative therapy.”

In a new report (Julia Moreau January 26, 2018) I learned “tens of thousands of LGBTQ youth currently between the ages of 13 and 17 will undergo “conversion therapy”.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/80-000-teens-will-undergo-conversion-therapy-near-future-study-n841356>

This practice and promotion of reparative/conversion therapy has done physical, emotional and spiritual violence to thousands of LGBTQ+ people over decades, and even centuries of homophobia and aversion to naming and including LGBTQ+ people as made in the image of God in whom all people are created. This attempt to change a person’s orientation has no place in our theological understanding that we all are fearfully and wondrously made by our creator (Psalm 139:14) and that just as we have borne the image of one of dust, we will also bear the image of the One of heaven. (1Corinthians 15:49)

Our president assured the board that she was in no way directly involved in this kind of abhorrent behavior, but was a spokesperson for this group that she later came to strongly disavow as she entered seminary and made friends with LGBTQ+ people who were gifted spiritually for ministry.

I bring this to your attention now because so many of you in Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, across the ELCA and beyond have been embroiled in this crisis at our new United Lutheran Seminary (ULS). Here are the basic components of the situation.

Prior to her academic career, starting when she was in college at the age of nineteen, the United Lutheran Seminary president was the Executive Director of an organization called “OneByOne” that insisted that marriage only between a man and a woman, celibacy for all others, and the belief that with God’s help and perhaps “therapy,” an LGBTQ+ person could change their orientation to varying degrees.

See the summary of both gatherings last week at the Philadelphia and Gettysburg campuses.

<https://unitedlutheranseminary.edu/community-gathering-summary/>

Here is my own summary of what I said at the Philadelphia gathering February 27, 2018. I spoke extemporaneously, so these words might not be exact but I checked out the message with LGBTQ+ people who were there.

Before I share what I knew and when I learned of Dr. Latini’s involvement in a group that was clearly hostile to LGBTQ+ people; I want to express my remorse for my part in inflicting pain, and in so doing betraying the trust of seminarians and rostered leaders at ULS and in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. I am a CIS, heterosexual, baby boomer who was insensitive to the way learning of Dr. Latini’s association with this group would be a shock and affront, to our students, faculty, staff and alumni in ways I did not imagine or anticipate. For this I am truly sorry.

I learned that Dr. Theresa Latini was executive director of OneByOne on December 29, 2017 during a full board conference call in which she shared this information and a part of her story. She called me to give me a heads up of the conference call a few days before and I encouraged her to tell her story. At first I was surprised and concerned that a person who had been so involved for 12 years in multicultural competency, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and conflict resolution would have been involved in such an anti-LGBTQ+ group. I did not personally check out the

group on social media, and I trusted the background checks that did not uncover the information that is now circulating through social media.

On the conference call, I listened as Dr. Latini shared that she was 19 at the time she joined the group, came from a fundamentalist/evangelical conservative background, and although she was in college, she assured us she had done no peer counseling, nor she said, was she involved in any conversion therapy. My first thought, and now I see that that was very narrow and hurtful to the LGBTQ+ community, was that the personal journey she made to leave the group was painful and private. I was on the search committee and impressed with her pro-LGBTQ+ work for the last 12 years, as well as her writings and academic work. All the references supplied on her CV, and all checks with the Presbyterian Church USA, clearly lauded her for her support of the LGBTQ+ community as well as strong relationships with Historic Black Churches. I was clearly impressed and looking forward to her leadership as president of ULS.

The question was asked...what was I thinking when I did not insist her past association with OneByOne be publically and immediately revealed? I've asked myself this question after the fact many times. I thought, "Well this is a powerful and poignant story of transformation." At the time I felt it was her story to share when she was ready. We encouraged her to do so. I can see now this was wrong, the story *is a transformation witness*, but it was not shared earlier in an open and transparent manner.

I honestly did not anticipate how painful and shocking this news would be for the LGBTQ+ community at ULS, as well as many of the staff, faculty and alumni of the former LTSP and LTSG. I realize now this *was a transformation* story that needed to be shared, but was not mine *to keep*.

After the meeting I gathered the LGBTQ+ pastors and seminarians who were there at the meeting and promised I would begin a deep listening mode. I promised to meet with LGBTQ+ SEPA seminarians and pastors for conversations on how the hurt I have caused because of information not shared has impacted their lives and safety. I asked them to meet while I was at the Conference of Bishops to begin talking among themselves. I came back from the Conference of Bishops two days early and invited those who were able to meet with me Monday March 5 at the synod office.

Fifteen pastors and seminarians came on very short notice. For this I am grateful. I feel the conversation was extremely respectful and compassionate, even though the sense of betrayal for not releasing this information in a timely manner is a huge burden the board and I must bear. While at the Conference of Bishops I invited Aubrey Thonvold, the Executive Director of Reconciling Works and who is also a Spiritual Director to Philadelphia to help facilitate and guide the process for this meeting. She did a wonder-full care-filled, grace-filled and truth-filled guidance of our four hour conversation on Monday.

You should also know the Candidacy Committee of SEPA Synod, the Director, Deacon Allison Wilcox, the Chair, Pastor Sarah Stobie and a member of the committee Pastor Noah Hepler wrote a letter to every candidate in SEPA Synod assuring them of the support and accompaniment of our Candidacy Committee with the encouragement to speak their truth in Christian love. Accordingly a meeting of the Candidacy Committee to directly address the concerns and fears of all our candidates, but particularly the LGBTQ+ seminarians will take

place March 10. The letter closes with a quote from Luther's commentary on the 8th commandment: *“We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray them, slander them, or hurt their reputation, but defend them, speak well of them and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”*

Please know until a new bishop is elected and takes office, you have my promise that I will accompany, advocate for, and address as best I can the grievances, as well as the hopes and dreams of the LGBTQ+ community, both rostered and lay, and the congregations and communities of faith they serve, as I have tried to do for the last forty years.

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I pray that through the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, this may in time be true and lasting for us.

With and in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Claire S. Burkat". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

The Rev. Claire S. Burkat, Bishop