

Campus pastor's suspension intensifies denomination's gay marriage debate

Several Evangelical Covenant clergy are facing discipline for participating in a same-sex wedding. Thousands of people connected to the denomination are petitioning for a moratorium on such actions.

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [February 14, 2018](#) issue



Judy Peterson. Photo via North Park University.

The suspension of a popular Christian university chaplain has highlighted tensions over same-sex marriage in a Protestant denomination that forbids it—yet takes pride in its willingness to allow congregants to hold opinions contrary to church doctrine.

Judy Peterson, ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church and pastor at its flagship North Park University in Chicago, presided at the wedding of two men in April. That act resulted in her suspension, followed by [a petition calling on ECC](#)

[leaders to place a moratorium on their guidelines forbidding clergy to officiate at same-sex weddings](#). The petition had more than 4,900 signatures as of January 29.

She is one of several pastors facing discipline related to same-sex marriage in the ECC, which has more than 850 churches in North America, with about 225,000 weekly attenders. Some congregants hope the church's tradition of tolerance for those who take issue with its official stances can lead toward a more amicable resolution of an issue that has split other churches.

Peterson, in a statement circulated by Mission Friends for Inclusion, an LGBTQ-affirming network of ECC members, wrote that she did not relish challenging church authority.

"This was not a flippant decision done with disregard for religious rules, but rather a discerned decision to stand with my brothers in the same way Jesus has stood with me," she wrote.

Some consider this a significant juncture for the small denomination known for its "freedom in Christ." The ECC has allowed both infant and believer baptisms since its early days in the 1800s, and since the 1990s it has allowed different opinions on the ordination of women.

"When it comes to queer inclusion, LGBTQ inclusion, we've just failed to do that," said Paul Corner, an ECC pastor in Seattle and a founder of Mission Friends for Inclusion.

In the months following the wedding ceremony, Peterson was called to a series of meetings with officials of her denomination and her credentials were suspended in November. She declined requests by the school and the church for her to resign. Days before Christmas, she wrote in the statement, she was placed on sabbatical leave and was told she could not resume campus pastoral duties unless her ordination status was reinstated.

She had a hearing in January before an ECC board that supervises ministers, which reaffirmed the denomination's restriction on officiating at same-sex marriages. The board continued the suspension of credentials for both Peterson and a retired pastor who officiated his son's wedding to another man and called both pastors to further conversation in June. Peterson's employment at North Park is "between her and the university," the board wrote on January 21.

A university statement released on January 4 apologized for hurt caused by the situation, affirmed Peterson's "remarkable and transformative work," and said a university task force would be formed to ensure the support and protection of LGBTQ students.

An ECC pastor who asked that his name not be used for fear of losing his job said he, like Peterson, is meeting with the denominational board for ordained ministers. This pastor agreed to say a prayer at the wedding of a lesbian couple but did not officiate. He struggled with how to abide by church guidelines that forbid marrying such a couple and at the same time affirm the principle of not withholding pastoral care on the basis of sexual orientation.

"I couldn't uphold both vows," he said.

Dan Collison, pastor of a Minneapolis ECC church, said he has been called to a meeting with the same board for a "clarifying conversation" after he preached a sermon that affirmed LGBTQ people and included a brief interview with a married lesbian couple. He was disappointed by the suspension of Peterson's credentials.

"It's disheartening on many levels, number one because our denomination in its historic practice and polity has not been the denomination who kicks people out," he said. "While suspending a pastor is not technically kicking a person out, it's showing them the door." —Religion News Service; added information

A version of this article, which was edited on January 29, appears in the February 14 print edition under the title "Suspension of pastor intensifies the debate on same-sex marriage for Evangelical Covenant."