



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

A proposed social statement from the Task force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality

Frequently Asked Questions

In summary, what is most important to know about this proposed social statement?

Three things are important to know about the proposed social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*:

1. It is grounded in Scripture and key Lutheran principles to inform the way Lutherans discern how to live faithfully in a complex world.
2. It looks to the relationship of God with God's people and all of creation as a model for relationships between human beings. God is absolutely trustworthy and faithful to God's promises; therefore, with regard to sexuality, both human behavior and social structures are considered in relation to how they foster trust, commitment, and protection for human flourishing.
3. Human sexuality is not limited to what is private or individual, but is profoundly shaped by social forces. It is therefore essential that the statement consider the ways social structures and institutions shelter, sustain, and protect personal, familial, and social relationships of trust and trustworthiness.

This social statement considers a wide range of issues related to human sexuality from a Lutheran perspective, setting forth why and in what ways trust in individual behavior and social structures is foundational to human sexuality. It asserts that, in order to serve our neighbor in matters of human sexuality, we are called to be trustworthy in our relationships and to build social institutions and practices where trust and trustworthy relationships can thrive.

What else does the proposed social statement say?

Each person is encouraged to read the proposed statement, of course, but many of the main points are highlighted in an accompanying "Executive Summary," which also is available at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney.

Why is the ELCA developing a social statement on human sexuality?

The 2001 Churchwide Assembly (CWA) acted to "initiate a process within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to develop a social statement on human sexuality." In accordance with social statement development procedures, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality was created at the direction of the ELCA Church Council to complete this task.

What is a social statement?

Social statements are teaching and social policy documents, adopted by an ELCA Churchwide Assembly, which address significant social issues. They are the product of extensive and inclusive deliberation within the ELCA. Statements provide an analysis and interpretation of an issue and set forth basic theological and ethical perspectives related to it. They are social policy and teaching documents, meant to aid members in moral deliberation and moral formation about social issues. In relation to social responsibility, they also set policy for the ELCA and guide its advocacy and other work as a public church.

How are social statements used?

ELCA members are encouraged to use social statements for teaching and ethical guidance regarding social issues. On matters related to this church's social responsibility, social statements govern church policy and state the official position of this church. Members of the ELCA may not agree with all parts of a social statement. This is consistent with the understanding of this church as a community of moral deliberation.

Is this document now the ELCA's social statement?

If not, what happens now? No, this document is still a proposed social statement, written by the task force for consideration by the ELCA. The proposed statement now will be reviewed by the ELCA Conference of Bishops, which meets March 5-10, and the ELCA Church in Society program committee, which meets March 13-14. Their comments and recommendations will be brought to the March 27-29 meeting of the ELCA Church Council. The Council may amend the document and recommend the text of the proposed social statement for action by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. The Churchwide Assembly meets August 17-23, 2009, in Minneapolis and the statement may be amended by action of the assembly. Social statements require a two-thirds majority vote for adoption, and the implementing resolutions require a simple majority for adoption once the social statement has been approved.

What are "implementing resolutions?"

Social statements generally are accompanied by "implementing resolutions," which call for particular actions consistent with the content of the social statement. The resolutions often designate appropriate churchwide units, or ELCA organizations to take responsibility for specific actions.

How has the task force listened to what ELCA members think?

The task force has paid careful attention to all responses to the draft social statement on human sexuality during the comment period from mid-March to November 1, 2008. The task force received:

- 2,077 response forms (58 percent online and 42 percent on paper);
- two reports from each of 111 synod hearings; and

- approximately 800 pieces of direct correspondence or statements of varying lengths.

Each of these has been read individually by staff members and by at least several members of the task force.

Task force members also received two summary reports compiled by the ELCA Research and Evaluation unit, one summarizing the response forms and the other summarizing the reports from the hearings. Both are available at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney under “Reports from the Draft Social Statement.”

What did the task force hear?

Responses included praise for or affirmation of much in the draft social statement, such as its pastoral tone, concerns about family, the objection to commercialization of sexuality in this society, and much more. At the same time the task force heard several sustained points of criticism. In response, their work to revise and improve the document has been challenging. Often the points of concern or criticism differed widely or were in direct contradiction. This was especially true about concerns addressing marriage, same-gender relationships, cohabitation, the interpretation of Scripture, and theological focus.

What if my comments or views are not evident in the revision?

In paying careful attention to all responses the task force’s goal has been to listen and study along with the church. They sought to understand the reasons behind different and contrasting opinions in order to create a stronger proposed social statement. They recognized that it is impossible to create a statement that will satisfy everyone in its entirety. The task force asks everyone to remember that there is a difference between hearing each concern and satisfying each one.

Did everyone on the task force vote to approve the whole social statement?

ELCA social statement task forces work with a consensus-building model and do not take votes about the final product. A social statement is like a weaving or a construction project in which every task force member works together to help create the final document. This proposed social statement received nearly unanimous support from the task force, though several members upon completion could not concur with all parts of all sections for various reasons. Some of these were theological concerns; others had to do with particular wordings. While these reservations exist, all members affirm that it has been crafted through open and respectful dialogue in which every member has contributed significantly to the outcome.

The title talks about trust —what does trust have to do with sexuality?

Trust is a fundamental characteristic of good and right relationships. Just as we learn by faith that a right relationship with God is a relationship of trust rather than rebellious self-assertion, a right relationship with the neighbor is one in which each seeks to be truly worthy of the other’s trust. Trust needs to be built and protected in sexual relationships in order for them to be good and right. Social trust needs to be present so that we are able to

have a good and right relationship with our neighbor. Trustworthiness emerges as a central value to promote flourishing within human relationships.

The statement says sexuality belongs in the “left hand” realm of God. What is that? Lutheran theology often has made a distinction about the ways that God works among human beings. With the left hand God rules in this world (worldly realm), maintaining order and restraining evil through the law and reason. With the right hand God brings in the coming world of Christ’s rule where sin, death, and evil will reign no longer (spiritual realm). The point is that human sexuality should be discussed as part of God’s governance of the worldly realm rather than as central to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What does the statement say about marriage?

Marriage nurtures trust by the presence of a lifelong commitment and public accountability. The trust and mutuality afforded by marriage can offer one of the most beautiful, abiding, and transformative forms of human relationship. This church understands marriage as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by God. The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman.

What does the social statement say about same-gender relationships?

The social statement reaffirms this church’s welcome of all people regardless of sexual orientation and its commitment to the need for equal protection, equal opportunities, and equal responsibilities under the law, and just treatment for those with varied sexual orientation and gender identity. It also reaffirms the need for pastoral care for all children of God. On the matter of lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, the proposed social statement describes several broadly representative positions that members in this church continue to hold due to strongly differing, conscience-bound understandings of Scripture and tradition. In discerning where God is calling us, this statement draws deeply on the historical Lutheran tradition of respecting the other’s conscience and seeking a caring response to the needs of the neighbor. This statement affirms that this church, on the basis of the bound conscience, can include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.

Why doesn’t the social statement state the ELCA’s position about rostered leaders (clergy and other professional lay leaders) who would like to be in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?

Social statements do not address ministry policy questions directly. In 2007 the task force was directed by the Churchwide Assembly, however, to “address and make recommendations on changes to any policies that preclude practicing homosexual persons from the rosters of this church.” The task force has done this in a separate document titled, “Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies” that can be found, along with supplemental material of its own, at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney.

The statement often refers to “bound conscience.” What does that mean?

"Conscience," as used in these documents, is neither a "little voice" on your shoulder nor an inborn list of universal rights and wrongs. The social statement understands “conscience” in the way that follows the Apostle Paul, who understood conscience as the unconditional moral responsibility of the individual person before God (Romans 2:15-16). Conscience then concerns not a person’s opinion, but a person's personal identity and integrity before God.

Second, when Christians disagree strongly about an ethical issue of great magnitude, it is important to realize that the difference may not grow out of pride or selfish desires. Rather, it may be because the other’s conscience is bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture and tradition. What is at stake in respecting a conscience that believes strongly about a moral matter of great import is nothing less than the good of the neighbor (Romans 14).

The emphasis of “conscience-bound” is not on declaring oneself to be conscience-bound. Rather, we are bound in love by the conscience of the other—that is, we recognize the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:28-29). For Lutherans, the reality that people hold deep faith convictions that may be in conflict with the deep faith convictions of others is not merely a procedural or political difficulty because we bear one another’s burdens as sisters and brothers in Christ. For one member to suffer because his or her conscience has been offended is for all of us to suffer.

It is this understanding of "bound conscience" and this concern for the conscience of the brother or sister in Christ that stands behind to the statement’s appeal to the role of conscience.

How can I respond to the proposed social statement?

At this point, the task force has completed its work. The way to respond is through your synod assembly or council. Synod assemblies can consider and approve memorials in response to the proposed social statement, which are sent to the Memorials Committee of the Churchwide Assembly.

Synod councils also can adopt and forward resolutions to the ELCA Church Council. These must be received by March 11, 2009, for consideration at the Church Council’s March meeting.

Why are we spending so much money on these studies when that money is needed for things such as world hunger and mission?

The 2001 Churchwide Assembly voted to initiate this process because it believed the ELCA needed to have a teaching statement about human sexuality. The cost of developing this social statement is comparable to costs for other social statements, such as the 2003 statement on health care or the 2007 statement on education. That cost is a small fraction of what the ELCA spends on world hunger and mission.

Who is on the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality?

The task force is composed of 15 ELCA members chosen to represent a mix of clergy and lay people with a diverse set different experience, perspectives and competencies. Learn more at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney under “Contact Us.”