

Some Questions and Answers about the ELCA Sexuality Proposals

A Resource for the Church from Lutheran CORE

Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Reform) offers this resource to help members of ELCA congregations to better understand some of the questions on human sexuality that will be considered by the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. You are encouraged to copy this document and to share it with others. You can learn more about Lutheran CORE at www.lutherancore.org.

What are the recommendations on human sexuality that will be considered by the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly?

There are two main recommendations: a proposed social statement on human sexuality and proposed changes in ELCA ministry standards to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex relationships.

The Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality produced both documents. The ELCA Church Council reviewed the documents and prepared the form in which they will come before the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. The Church Council also is recommending implementing resolutions which outline what the documents will mean for ELCA teaching and practice.

What is the status of *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, the proposed ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality?

Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust was released February 19, 2009, by the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality as a proposed social statement for the ELCA. It is a revision of the *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality* that the Task Force released in 2008. ELCA members, congregations, and synods had the opportunity to respond to the content of the first draft and to offer suggestions for its improvement. The Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality considered responses and released this proposed social statement for consideration by the ELCA.

The proposed social statement was reviewed and edited by the ELCA Church Council which prepared the form in which the proposed social statement will come before the 2009 Churchwide Assembly for consideration.

The 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly may amend the proposed social statement before considering whether or not to adopt it as an ELCA social statement. Adoption of a social statement requires a two-thirds majority of a Churchwide Assembly.

If a new social statement on human sexuality is not adopted by the Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA will continue to rely on the 1996 ELCA Church Council Message *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions* and the social statements of the ELCA's predecessor churches — The American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America — for its teaching on human sexuality.

Does Lutheran CORE recommend adoption of the proposed social statement on human sexuality?

No. Lutheran CORE recommends that the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly reject the proposed social statement. The proposed social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, is so flawed that a significant number of amendments would be necessary to produce a new social statement which would be faithful to Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the accepted teaching of the Christian Church throughout the ages. It would be very difficult to rewrite the social statement at the assembly.

Instead, Lutheran CORE recommends that the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly affirm the ELCA's current teaching documents on human sexuality: the ELCA Messages *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions* (1996) and *Commercial Sexual Exploitation* (2001); and continue to rely on the social statements of the ELCA's predecessor churches: *Sex, Marriage, and Family - A Social Statement of the Lutheran Church in America* (1970); *Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior - A Social Statement of The American Lutheran Church* (1980); and *Teachings and Practice on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage - A Social Statement of The American Lutheran Church* (1982).

What is the status of the *Ministry Policies Report and Recommendations* regarding allowing pastors and other rostered to be in same-sex sexual relationships?

Ministry Policies Report and Recommendations are exactly what the title says — a report and recommendations from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Human Sexuality regarding possible changes to church teaching and policy to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships. They do not change church teaching or policy unless they are adopted.

The Task Force made these recommendations in response to a decision by the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly “to direct the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality specifically to address and to make recommendations to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly on changes to any church policies that preclude practicing homosexual persons from the rosters of this church.”

The Task Force recommendations go to the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly for consideration. The ELCA Church Council is recommending a simple majority vote on whether to change ELCA standards to permit pastors to be in same-sex sexual relationships. However, the 2009 Churchwide Assembly will adopt its own rules and could change the required vote to a larger majority.

What is Lutheran CORE's position on the proposed changes in teaching and policy to permit ELCA pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships?

Lutheran CORE recommends that the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly reject any changes to ELCA teaching and policy which would permit ELCA pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

Instead, Lutheran CORE recommends that the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly reaffirm the ELCA's current standards for pastors and other rostered leaders as expressed in *Vision and Expectations* and *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*.

Why is it only a simple majority vote to change church teaching and policy to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships? Is there a way to change that to a two-thirds majority?

The ELCA Church Council removed a recommendation from its Legal and Constitutional Review Committee that any motion to come before this Churchwide Assembly regarding changes in ELCA policy and practice for the pastors and other rostered leaders should require a two-thirds vote by the assembly for adoption from the proposed rules for the assembly.

The Churchwide Assembly could reinstate the two-thirds requirement when it adopts its rules at the start of the assembly. Given that this would be a significant change in teaching and practice that could divide the ELCA, an overwhelming majority vote should be required for the good of the ELCA.

Lutheran CORE has provided a model resolution for synod assemblies to ask the Voting Members of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to support a two-thirds majority rule of procedure to change standards for pastors and other rostered leaders.

Doesn't the ELCA usually require a two-thirds majority of a Churchwide Assembly for significant actions?

Yes. A two-thirds majority vote is usually required for major decisions including the adoption of an ELCA social statement and for amendments to the ELCA constitution and bylaws. Given the significance of these proposals, a two-thirds majority should be required for the sake of the ELCA.

How can I have input regarding the social statement and the recommendations regarding standards for pastors and other rostered leaders?

ELCA members, congregations, and synods may respond to the proposed social statement and policy recommendations through memorials (resolutions) at their 2009 synod assemblies. You are encouraged to work together with others in your synod to get your Synod Assembly to approve memorials to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly regarding the social statement and the recommendations regarding standards for pastors and other rostered leaders. Lutheran CORE has prepared three model resolutions to help synod assemblies to communicate with the Churchwide Assembly.

The voting members of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly may revise or amend the text of the proposed social statement before deciding whether to adopt it as an ELCA Social Statement. Approval of an ELCA social statement requires a two-thirds majority at a Churchwide Assembly. Talk to the Churchwide Assembly Voting Members from your synod about your thoughts about the proposed social statement and the proposed changes in standards to allow ELCA pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex relationships. Talk to the Churchwide Assembly Voting Members from your synod about the importance of a two-thirds majority for such a significant change in church teaching and practice for the good of the ELCA.

What are the resolutions that the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly will consider regarding changing church teaching and policy to permit ELCA pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships?

There are four proposed resolutions. The resolutions would change ELCA teaching and policy to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

Resolution #1 asks the ELCA to “commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”

This resolution would change church teaching and policy so that individual ELCA congregations could set their own teaching and standards regarding same-sex unions. Congregations would no longer be expected to uphold ELCA teaching and policy regarding the blessing of same-sex unions. Most significantly, an ELCA congregation would no longer be expected to uphold Scripture as the “source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life” regarding homosexual behavior.

Resolution #2 asks “that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”

This resolution would commit the ELCA to allowing pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships. It would mean an official change in church teaching and policy. It would require the ELCA to formally recognize committed same-gender relationships in a way similar to marriage so that those relationships could be “publicly accountable.” In essence, it is the ELCA’s approval of “gay marriage” for pastors and other rostered leaders.

Resolution #3 states “that in the implementation of these resolutions, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.”

This resolution would commit those in the ELCA to bearing the burden of the “bound conscience” of all other ELCA members on matters of same-sex sexual behavior. It would ask ELCA members to accept the opinions and biblical interpretations of others regardless of whether those interpretations are faithful to the Bible and to the Christian faith as it has been taught and understood for nearly 2,000 years. This idea of respect for the “bound conscience” of others would become a new norm for the faith and life of the ELCA — replacing Scripture — regarding homosexual behavior.

Resolution #4 is a much longer resolution. It directs that formal changes in ELCA standards for pastors and other rostered leaders be made to reflect the statements from the other resolutions. It directs that the ELCA create a way of formally recognizing committed same-gender relationships that would be similar to marriage so that those relationships could be “publically accountable.” It creates “structured flexibility in decision making” regarding the calling and approval of pastors and other rostered leaders. In essence, it allows each congregation or synod to set its own standards for pastors and other rostered leaders and requires those who might disagree on biblical or theological grounds to accept their decisions.

What is the best way to evaluate the proposed social statement and the *Ministry Policies Report and Recommendations*?

The Lutheran Confessions offer a clear answer to this question: “We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone” (*Book of Concord, Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm*).

Likewise, the ELCA Confession of Faith states: “This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life” (*ELCA Constitution 2.03*).

As the *source* of the Church’s proclamation, faith, and life, Christians draw their understandings for faith and life from the Bible. As the *norm* of the Church’s proclamation, faith, and life, Christians look to the Bible to define what is a faithful interpretation of the Christian faith.

A commitment to the clear word of Scripture was central to the Lutheran Reformation. It is essential that all statements and actions of the ELCA reflect this commitment to Scripture stated in our constitution and essential to our identity as Lutherans.

ELCA pastors promise to preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church when they are ordained and installed. Any teachings that depart from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions would create a crisis in the ELCA as pastors would be torn between their ordination and installation promises and their role as a pastor in the ELCA.

What is the role of 2009 Synod Assemblies regarding the proposed social statement on human sexuality and the Task Force’s ministry recommendations?

Synods may respond to the recommended social statement through resolutions and memorials at their 2009 Synod Assemblies. Resolutions and memorials are the best way for synods to communicate their perspective on the sexuality recommendations with the voting members of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

Lutheran CORE has prepared three model resolutions to help Synod Assemblies to communicate with the Churchwide Assembly. Organizations promoting change in church teaching and policy on homosexual behavior also have prepared model resolutions for Synod Assemblies.

What is an ELCA social statement?

ELCA Social Statements are to explain what the ELCA understands to be Scripture’s teaching and faithful Christian responses to a given topic. They are intended as teaching statements addressing the members of ELCA congregations to help them in their own ethical decision-making. Social Statements also shape the activities of ELCA organizations as they address social issues through church policy and through efforts to influence government action.

Why is the ELCA talking about accepting same-sex sexual relationships?

There are members of the ELCA who are asking the ELCA to reject what has been accepted Christian teaching and to affirm same-sex sexual activity. The 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly asked the ELCA to consider questions about whether to bless same-sex unions and whether to permit persons in same-sex sexual relationships to serve as pastors and other rostered leaders in the ELCA. The 2001 Churchwide Assembly also asked for the production of a social statement on human sexuality after the questions about the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of persons in same-sex sexual relationships had been addressed.

Do a majority of ELCA members favor this change?

No. The 2005 report of the ELCA Task Force for Sexuality Studies showed that only 22 percent of ELCA members who responded to the study favored change in church teaching to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of persons in committed same-sex relationships. A significant majority (57 percent) opposed change to accepted Christian teaching on homosexual behavior to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of persons in committed same-sex relationships.

Why are many ELCA members unwilling to change church teaching on marriage, sexual ethics, and same-sex sexual activity?

They believe that the ELCA must remain faithful to the Scriptures and to the Christian consensus of nearly 2,000 years on marriage, sexual ethics, and homosexual behavior. They have considered the arguments of those asking the ELCA to reject the classical understanding of Scripture and the settled teaching of the Church. They have not found those arguments to be convincing. They find Scripture's teaching on marriage and on same-sex sexual activity to be clear. They believe that there must be overwhelming evidence in favor of change to be willing to reject what they see as the clear witness of the Bible and its interpretation by generations of Christians.

Isn't the debate in the ELCA really a debate about the role of the Bible in church teaching on sexuality?

Yes. The ELCA Confession of Faith states: "This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life" (*ELCA Constitution 2.03*).

As the *source* of the church's proclamation, faith, and life, the ELCA has committed itself to drawing its understandings for faith and life from the Bible. As the *norm* of the church's proclamation, faith, and life, the ELCA has committed itself to look to the Bible to define what is a faithful interpretation of the Christian faith.

The question before the ELCA is whether the Bible will continue to be the source and norm of church teaching and practice or whether the ELCA will base its teaching and practice on something other than the clear teaching of Scripture.

Is the Bible supportive of same-sex sexual relationships?

No. The consensus of 2,000 years of Christian teaching is that the Bible is clear in its teaching about marriage and about same-sex sexual activity. Modern Bible scholars also agree that Scripture does not approve of same-sex sexual activity. Even scholars who support gay and lesbian unions agree that Scripture does not approve of same-sex sexual behavior. Instead, they argue that the Bible's testimony is no longer valid regarding homosexual behavior or that the biblical writers never thought about gay and lesbian committed unions in the way that they are talked about today. Some Christians who are open to civil unions for gay and lesbian persons have acknowledged that the church cannot bless those unions without rejecting the clear witness of Scripture.

Is it true that because homosexual behavior is only mentioned in a small number of Biblical texts that it really isn't that important?

No. "All the contextual evidence indicates that ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity viewed homosexual practice of every sort as abhorrent to God, an extreme sexual offense comparable only to the worst forms of adult incest (say, a man and his mother) and superseded among 'consensual' sexual offenses only by bestiality," according to Dr. Robert A. J. Gagnon, the leading expert on the Bible and homosexual behavior.

"A male-female prerequisite is powerfully evident throughout the pages of Scripture. **Every biblical narrative, law, proverb, exhortation, metaphor, and poetry that has anything to do with sexual relations presupposes such a prerequisite.** Even the male-dominated society of ancient Israel imaged itself as Yahweh's wife so as to avoid any connotation of a marriage between members of the same sex (an image replicated in the New Testament as regards Christ and his bride, the church). There are plenty of laws in the Old Testament delimiting acceptable and unacceptable sexual relationships between a man and a woman but not between two persons of the same sex. The obvious reason: No homosexual relationships were deemed acceptable.

"Those who contend that the Bible condemns homosexual practice only in 'a handful of passages' . . . overlook **the problem with equating frequency of explicit mention with importance.** Bestiality is mentioned even less in the Bible than homosexual practice and incest gets only comparable treatment, yet who would be so foolish as to argue that Jews and Christians in antiquity would have regarded sex with an animal or sex with one's mother as inconsequential offenses? Infrequency of mention is often an indicator that the matter in question is foundational rather than insignificant. You don't have to talk a lot about something that most everyone agrees with and that few persons, if any, violate.

"Scripture's male-female prerequisite for sexual relations and its attendant rejection of homosexual behavior is **pervasive** throughout both Testaments (i.e. it is everywhere presumed in sexual discussions even when not explicitly mentioned); it is **absolute** (i.e. no exceptions are ever given, unlike even incest and polyamory); it is **strongly proscribed** (i.e. every mention of it in Scripture indicates that it is regarded as a foundational violation of sexual ethics); and it is **countercultural** (i.e. we know of no other culture in the ancient Near East or Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin more consistently and strongly opposed to homosexual practice)." (From *What the Evidence Really Says about Scripture and Homosexual Practice: Five Issues* by Prof. Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.)

Haven't Lutherans always considered marriage the union of one man and one woman?

Yes. In keeping with Scripture and nearly 2,000 years of accepted Christian teaching, the social statements of the ELCA's predecessor churches — The American Lutheran Church (ALC) and Lutheran Church in America (LCA) — affirmed marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Christians believe that God's clear intention for sexuality is that it be a marriage relationship between one man and one woman.

The 1996 ELCA Church Council Message *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions* states the Christian understanding of marriage: "Marriage is a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman. In marriage, two persons become 'one flesh' (Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:4-6; Mk. 10:6-9; Eph. 5:31), a personal and sexual union that embodies God's loving purpose to create and enrich life. By the gift of marriage God 'founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come.'"

Didn't the ELCA Conference of Bishops say that there is no basis in Scripture or tradition for the church to bless same-sex relationships?

Yes. The 1993 Statement of the ELCA Conference of Bishops states: "We, as the Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, recognize that there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship. We, therefore, do not approve such a ceremony as an official action of this church's ministry. Nevertheless, we express trust in and will continue dialogue with those pastors and congregations who are in ministry with gay and lesbian persons, and affirm their desire to explore the best ways to provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister."

The 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly asked "that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America continue to respect the guidance of the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops."

Does it matter that God created humans male and female in discussing sexuality?

Yes. "Marriage is a structure of human life built into the creation by the Creator. It builds upon our creation as male and female (Gen. 1:27). Sexual differences are of God's good design, intended to bring joy and enrichment to human life as well as to provide for procreation. The essence of marriage is that in the act and relationships of marriage two persons become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). In this complementary nature of the two sexes as God created them lies the basis for marriage and each new family" (*Teachings and Practice on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: A Social Statement of The American Lutheran Church, 1982*).

Does the proposed social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, affirm marriage as the union of one man and one woman?

The proposed social statement says: “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, reflecting Mark 10:6–9” (*HSGT, Lines 502-508*).

However, the proposed statement also says, “It must be noted that some, though not all, in this church and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong monogamous relationships” (*HSGT, Lines 588-591*).

It is significant that the words “between a man and a woman” from the definition of marriage in the 2008 *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality (Lines 1005-1007)* were removed from the sentence defining marriage in the proposed social statement (*HSGT, Lines 502-503*). Instead, the sentence describing “the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions” is added as a separate sentence. This move to describe normative Christian teaching as merely historical is in keeping with a request from those advocating change in church teaching on marriage who asked that language describing marriage as between a man and a woman be described as merely historic (for example, see Lutherans Concerned/North America Response to the ELCA *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality*).

The proposed social statement acknowledges that “the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman.” Given that Scripture, the historic Christian tradition, and the Lutheran Confessions are in agreement that marriage is the union of one man and one woman and given that the ELCA “accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life” (*ELCA Constitution 2.03*), there should be no question about the definition of marriage for Lutherans.

What about sexual orientation? Aren’t gay and lesbian persons born that way?

Science continues to debate the causes of homosexual orientation. Regardless of its cause, homosexual orientation is not something that a person chooses. However, Christians believe that all human beings have orientations to sin that should be resisted. Lutherans confess in our worship liturgies that “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” All of us struggle with orientations to behaviors that are sinful. There are individuals who struggle with greed, overeating, gossip, selfishness, and other desires. These are orientations that must be resisted. An orientation may reveal our humanness and our need for Jesus as Savior, but just because something is natural does not mean that it is not sinful.

What is the difference between “sexual orientation” and “gender identity?”

The proposed ELCA Social Statement explains, “*Sexual orientation* is generally used to refer to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction. *Gender identity* indicates a person’s own sense of identification with a gender (male or female) regardless of physiological characteristics.” (HSGT, Page 21, Footnote 34).

Put more simply, *sexual orientation* refers to whom you are attracted sexually. Gay men are attracted to other men sexually. Lesbian women are attracted to other women sexually.

Gender identity refers to a person’s own sense of identification as male or female regardless of whether they are physically male or female. *Gender identity* makes a distinction between whether someone is physically male or female and their self-identification as male or female. For example, a *transgender* person could be a woman who identifies herself as male or a man who identifies himself as female.

What does LGBT or GLBT mean? Is there a difference?

The acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. Whether it starts with an L or G varies. Sometimes the acronym includes a Q as in LGBTQ.

Lesbian refers to a woman who is sexually attracted to other women. *Gay* refers to a man who is sexually attracted to other men. *Bisexual* refers to a person who is sexually attracted to both men and women.

Transgender refers to a person whose understanding of his or her gender identity is different than his or her actual gender in terms of physical characteristics. For example, a woman who identifies herself as male or chooses to dress as a man or a man who identifies himself as female or chooses to dress as a woman would be transgender. The term is very inclusive and is difficult to precisely define.

What about civil rights for gay and lesbian persons?

The social statements of the ELCA’s predecessor churches support civil rights for gay and lesbian persons even while affirming marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Christians oppose discrimination in society based on race, sexual orientation, and other factors. It is possible for Christians to affirm the dignity of all people without endorsing all of their behaviors. The social statements of the ELCA’s predecessor church bodies — The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America — both make this distinction. The ALC and LCA social statements also make clear that there is a difference between what is moral and what should be legal or illegal. There are many behaviors that are legal but are not moral. However, Christian teaching on what God intends for us remains clear and consistent.

Isn't the acceptance of gay and lesbian people about the Gospel?

The Gospel is the good news of Jesus as Savior and Lord. God's love is for all people. Gay and lesbian people — like all people — are welcome in the church as fellow sinners loved by and redeemed by Christ.

Some people have confused acceptance and affirmation with the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ. They have substituted a "different gospel" of acceptance and affirmation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. The Bible tells the story of human sinfulness and God's forgiveness. Jesus' death for us shows God's love and at the same time reveals our sinfulness. As a seminary professor once put it, "If Jesus died for you that must mean you're a sinner." Jesus does not die to justify our sins but rather to save us from them.

The question before the ELCA is not whether gay and lesbian persons are welcome in the church. All people are welcome because Jesus died for all. All people are welcome on the same basis — as human beings — sinners who need a Savior. Those asking for the acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships are not asking for acceptance and welcome as forgiven sinners. They are asking that same-sex sexual activity not be considered sinful and saying that they do not need God's forgiveness for homosexual behavior.

Shouldn't the Lutheran teaching about the distinction between Law and Gospel help in addressing questions of sexuality?

Yes. The Law reveals God's intention for us and helps to order society. The Law also shows us when we fail to live up to God's intention. It reveals our sin and drives us to Christ. The Gospel tells us about God's love and God's forgiveness in Christ. A social statement naturally flows from the Law. It describes God's intention for us and for society. Explaining God's intention for us may point out ways that we have failed to live up to God's intention. That knowledge of sin then allows us to hear the Gospel word of God's forgiveness and love.

Is it true that ordaining people who are in same-sex sexual relationships is the same as the ordination of women or as changes in church teaching regarding slavery?

No. There is significant Biblical support for the ordination of women. The ELCA's predecessor churches made the decision to ordain women by studying the Bible and based their decision on Scripture. It also was through reading Scripture that Christians came to challenge slavery as an institution. Those asking for the ordination of practicing homosexual persons are asking the ELCA to reject the clear teaching of Scripture on homosexual behavior and the consistent teaching of the Christian Church for nearly 2,000 years. They are asking that we make this decision on a basis other than what the Bible teaches and in spite of what the Bible teaches.

Is it true that acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships is the same as the acceptance of divorced people or as the acceptance of people who have had sex outside of marriage?

No. Christians have never said that divorce is God's intention for marriage. Christians have consistently taught that a lifelong marriage of one man and one woman is God's intention for sexual relationships. It is true that Christians have sometimes failed to live up to God's intentions in our relationships. However, Christian teaching continues to affirm the importance of marriage.

We welcome and accept people who have experienced the brokenness of divorce or who have engaged in sexual relationships outside of marriage as forgiven sinners who, like all Christians, rely on Jesus for forgiveness and new life. We believe that, in Jesus, forgiveness and new beginnings are possible for all people. Those asking for the acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships are not asking for acceptance and welcome as forgiven sinners. Instead, they are asking that same-sex sexual activity not be considered sinful.

Could the acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships affect our relationship with Lutheran Churches in other parts of the world?

Yes. Leaders of Lutheran churches throughout the world — especially leaders of Lutheran churches in Africa — have asked the ELCA to remain committed to Scripture and to accepted Christian teaching on sexuality. For example, the bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania issued a statement in 2004 affirming traditional Biblical understandings of sexuality and challenging those who would change Christian teaching on homosexual behavior.

Could the acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships affect our relationship with other Christians?

Yes. If the ELCA would reject traditional Christian teaching on sexuality, it would place the ELCA at odds with the vast majority of the world's Christians. This would hurt our ecumenical efforts with several Christian traditions. It would severely damage our relationship with the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church as well as our relationship with most Protestant denominations.

Could decisions on sexuality split the ELCA?

Yes. Members, congregations, and entire dioceses have seen no choice but to leave The Episcopal Church to maintain accepted Christian teaching including Christian teaching about marriage and sexuality. Given that a significant majority of ELCA members remain committed to traditional Christian teaching that marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman and to traditional Christian teaching on same-sex sexual activity, something similar could happen in the ELCA if the ELCA chooses to reject the clear teaching of Scripture and the accepted teaching of the church for nearly 2,000 years. ELCA members must work together to help the ELCA to affirm accepted Christian teaching on sexuality to avoid this possibility.

What is this idea of the “bound conscience” that is in the Task Force’s proposals?

The Task Force’s sexuality proposals are built around the idea that people have committed positions to a particular opinion or interpretation of the Bible. They describe these ideas as “bound conscience.” The proposals ask that the ELCA recognize all “conscience-bound” positions held by ELCA members and ask that ELCA policy be changed so that all “conscience-bound” positions and practices are acceptable within the ELCA. This is especially true in terms of teaching about homosexual behavior. The proposals ask that ELCA policy be changed to include the possibility of encouraging and blessing same-sex relationships including “gay marriage.”

The proposed social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, explains its proposal: “We understand that, in this discernment about ethics and church practice, faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of Scripture and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of ‘the bound conscience,’ will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world” (*HSGT, Lines 632-636*).

This idea of a “bound conscience” is based on Martin Luther’s famous statement before the Diet of Worms in 1521: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason . . . I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, may God help me.” However, Martin Luther was clearly saying that his conscience was captive to what Scripture — the Word of God — says, not captive to the different opinions of others within the church as the Task Force proposes.

Couldn’t this idea of “bound conscience” open the ELCA to accepting whatever strange teaching someone within the ELCA might hold?

Yes. The danger of voting to accept whatever “bound conscience” positions other people in the ELCA might hold is that there is no longer a basis for determining what is true. There would be no basis for our beliefs or our unity other than a commitment to accept each other no matter what.

The Lutheran Confessions clearly say that the teaching of the Bible is the way to evaluate what is true: “We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone” (*Book of Concord, Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm*).

Likewise, the ELCA Confession of Faith states: “This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life” (*ELCA Constitution 2.03*).

A commitment to “bound conscience” as the basis of determining church teaching and policy would mean that a standard other than the Bible now determines ELCA teaching and practice.

Wouldn't it be OK to just let each congregation do what it wants regarding same-sex unions and pastors?

No. The ELCA has committed itself to be one church with one clergy roster and one set of standards for pastors. Such a change would divide the ELCA into a confederation of congregations or synods — each with its own standards for pastors and other rostered leaders — rather than one church.

Changing church policy to allow some ELCA pastors to be in same-sex sexual relationships would require the entire ELCA to agree that the Bible is not clear in its teaching about marriage and about homosexual behavior. It would, in effect, change the source and norm of the ELCA's faith and life from the Bible to something else. If the desire to avoid conflict or to keep the ELCA together is the most important thing in the ELCA and defines our teaching and practice, it would become the source and norm of our faith and life rather than Scripture.

What is “Local Option” or “Structured Flexibility”?

Local Option Option — sometimes called “Synodical Option” — is an approach that would allow synods or congregations to set their own standards for pastors. A similar recommendation which would have allowed a synod bishop to grant an exception to ELCA behavior standards to permit a pastor to be in a committed same-sex relationships was defeated by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly. Such an approach would effectively dissolve the ELCA and must be rejected. Leaders of Lutheran CORE wrote an Open Letter on Synodical Option which explains the danger of synodical option for the ELCA. You can read the letter online at www.lutherancore.org. The proposed ministry resolutions use the term “structured flexibility” to talk about allowing a congregation to set its own standards for pastors and other rostered leaders. This is just another name for “local option.”

Can an ELCA congregation or synod set its own standards for pastors that are different than the ELCA as a whole?

No. This is clearly explained in *Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*: “Pastoral identity carries with it expectations and accountabilities that are determined by the whole Church and not simply by a given congregation, synod, institution, or agency served by the ordained minister.”

Haven't some gay and lesbian persons who refused to abide by ELCA standards been ordained anyway? Aren't some of them serving in ELCA congregations?

Yes. In recent years several persons have chosen not to comply with the ELCA constitution by refusing to follow the ELCA process for the approval and ordination of candidates for ministry and by seeking an unconstitutional ordination service, but they have sought to serve in ELCA congregations.

An organization called Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries has “approved” the ordinations of several individuals who have refused to abide by the ELCA's standards for the conduct of pastors. ELM reports on its website that it “credentials and rosters qualified candidates of all sexual orientations and gender identities for ministry.”

The participants in these ordinations have acted in ways that violate the ELCA constitution. The ELCA constitution states that “An ordained minister shall comply with the constitution of this church” and that “ordained ministers shall be subject to discipline for . . . willfully disregarding the provisions of the constitution or bylaws of this church” (*ELCA Constitution C7.22, C20.21.01*).

ELCA congregations must “agree to call pastoral leadership from the clergy roster of this church in accordance with the call procedures of this church except in special circumstances and with the approval of the synodical bishop.” “A congregation that maintains as its pastor an ordained minister who has resigned or been removed from this church’s roster of ordained ministers or that calls as its pastor one who has not been approved for the roster of ordained ministers may be removed from the roster of congregations of this church by the Synod Council upon recommendation of the synodical bishop” (*ELCA Constitution C9.21, C9.23*).

Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America explains: “Pastoral identity carries with it expectations and accountabilities that are determined by the whole Church and not simply by a given congregation, synod, institution, or agency served by the ordained minister.”

How many persons have been ordained in these unconstitutional ordinations?

Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries reports that there have been 16 unauthorized ordinations of pastors in the ELCA’s 20-year history and one ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran in Canada. Half of the unconstitutional ordinations have happened in the last three years. ELM reports that it has 38 “rostered clergy,” two seminarians, and two people “approved for call.” The ELCA has more than 17,000 pastors and 10,000 congregations.

Don’t gay and lesbian people have a right to be a pastor regardless of whether they agree to live in accordance with ELCA standards?

No. Lutheran pastors are not self-appointed. They are called by God through the Church to the office of ministry. *Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* — the ELCA document that sets standards for ordained ministers — explains this well:

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America therefore understands the call to the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament to mean that:

“Ordained ministers, called by God through the Church, are accountable to the Word of God for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ;

“Ordained ministers are called by God through the Church and are not self-chosen or self-appointed;

“Ordained ministers are called by God through the Church for a ministry of servanthood, and not for the exercise of domination or coercive power; and

“Ordained ministry is a privilege granted by God through the call of the Church and is not a right of the individual.”

What is “Vision and Expectations”?

It is the name of documents that detail the vision and the expectations that the ELCA has of its pastors and of other rostered leaders. *Vision and Expectations* articulates a broad vision for the faithfulness of the public leaders of the church. The document for pastors is divided into these four sections based on the four questions asked of future pastors when they are ordained:

1. The Call to Ordained Ministry.
2. Faithfulness to the Church’s Confession.
3. The Ordained Minister as Person and Example.
4. Faithful Witness.

Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA states its purpose in these words:

“In this document the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America seeks to state its vision and expectations for ordained ministers of this church. This document should not be understood as a juridical standard. Neither is it intended to suggest unrealistic or impossible expectations for those who serve on the roster of ordained ministers. Instead, it seeks to express the high value and importance that the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament has in the life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is offered for those who are already on the roster of ordained ministers of this church as a statement of expectations and hopes for the shape of ordained ministry, as well as an invitation for reflection and consideration to those who seek to serve in the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”

Vision and Expectations is available online at
<http://archive.elca.org/assembly/votingmatters/VisionandExpectations.pdf>

What is “Definition and Guidelines for Discipline”?

It is the name of documents that define the grounds for which an ELCA pastor, other rostered leader, or a congregation may be subject to the discipline of the ELCA.

Definition and Guidelines for Discipline of Ordained Ministers explains its purpose in these words:

“As an expression of its life in the gospel of Jesus Christ, this church embraces disciplinary processes of counseling, admonition, and correction, with the objective of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing.

“Simultaneously, out of deep concern for effective extension of the gospel, this church remains alert to the high calling of discipleship in Jesus Christ. The ordained ministers of this church, as persons charged with special responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel, are to seek to reflect the new life in Christ, avoiding that which would make them stumbling blocks to others. To that end, this church recognizes that there is behavior that is deemed to be incompatible with ordained ministry, and that calls for disciplinary action.

“The following definitions and guidelines do not set forth the high expectations this church has of its ordained ministers. (A document of such expectations has been developed by the Division for Ministry for this church.) The normative expectations of this church for its ordained ministers focus upon

faithful and effective exercise of ministerial leadership. In all matters of morality and personal ethics, this church expects its ordained ministers to be exemplary in conduct.

“These definitions and guidelines describe the grounds for which ordained ministers may be subject to discipline according to the practice of this church. Their purpose is juridical: to assist in the processes of consultation, discipline, and appeals.”

Definition and Guidelines for Discipline is available online at <http://archive.elca.org/assembly/votingmatters/DefinitionsandGuidelinesForDiscipline.pdf>

What is the status of the 1996 ELCA Church Council Message *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions*?

The message explains its own status: “Messages of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, adopted by the Church Council, are intended to focus attention and action on timely, pressing matters of concern to this church and society. They do not establish new policy for this church, but build upon previously adopted policy positions, especially from social statements.”

Sexuality: Some Common Convictions covers many areas of agreement on sexuality among ELCA members. It affirms the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality in keeping with the social statements of ELCA predecessor churches. Messages are adopted by the ELCA Church Council while social statements require the approval of a Churchwide Assembly.

The ELCA Church Council Message *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions* is available online at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Messages/Sexuality.aspx>

What status do the social statements of ELCA predecessor churches have in the ELCA?

The ELCA received the social statements of its predecessor churches as “historical documents.” The document *Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns* explains that: “Social statements and other resources on social concerns build on the rich legacy of the church bodies that united to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As a confessional church with an historical sense, this church continues to look to the social statements of The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America for guidance, while it develops its own social statements and further deliberates on social concerns.”

The ALC and LCA each adopted social statements on human sexuality that affirm the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality. These statements continue to shape ELCA policy. They provided the basis for *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions*, the 1996 Message adopted by the ELCA Church Council. They also continue to shape ELCA policy on homosexual behavior.

Adoption of the proposed social statement on human sexuality would end the role of these documents in the life of the ELCA.

Where can I read the social statements of the ELCA predecessor churches?

Links to the predecessor church body statements are available online at www.lutherancore.org in the marriage and family education resource section.

What happened at the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly regarding sexuality questions?

The 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly made no changes to ELCA standards for pastors and other rostered leaders. The Assembly rejected requests to make immediate changes to ELCA policy regarding clergy in same-sex sexual relationships.

However, the 2007 Churchwide Assembly did vote “to direct the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality specifically to address and to make recommendations to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly on changes to any church policies that preclude practicing homosexual persons from the rosters of this church.”

The 2007 Churchwide Assembly also approved a resolution which “prays, urges, and encourages synods, synodical bishops, and the presiding bishop to refrain from or demonstrate restraint in disciplining those rostered leaders in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship who have been called and rostered in this church.”

On the other hand, the 2007 Churchwide Assembly voted to “request the Conference of Bishops to enter into discussion and consideration of the matter of the accountability of bishops to the adopted policies, practices, and procedures of the ELCA and to formulate a clear statement of such accountability for consideration and adoption by the 2009 assembly of this church.” This request came, in part, because some synod bishops have refused to enforce ELCA policies including policies regarding pastors in same-sex sexual relationships.

What can I do to help the ELCA remain faithful in addressing topics of sexuality?

Talk to your pastor, to other members of your congregation, and to members of other ELCA congregations about how to work together to help the ELCA remain faithful in its teaching and practice on sexuality. Contact members your synod’s 2009 Churchwide Assembly voting members to encourage them to help the ELCA to remain faithful in its teaching and practice regarding human sexuality. Contact Lutheran CORE to volunteer your support.

Also, plan to attend the Lutheran CORE Convocation September 25-26, 2009, at Christ the Savior Lutheran Church in Fishers, Indiana.

Lutheran CORE — Coalition for Reform

2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220

New Brighton, MN 55112

www.lutherancore.org