

Some Questions and Answers about the ELCA Sexuality Discussions

A Resource for the Church from Lutheran CORE

Lutheran CORE offers this resource to help members of ELCA congregations to participate in the process leading to an ELCA Social Statement on Sexuality and to enable them to better understand some of the questions on human sexuality that will be considered at the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. You can learn more about Lutheran CORE at www.lutherancore.org. You are welcome to copy this document and to share it with others.

What status does the *Draft Social statement on Human Sexuality* released in March of 2008 have?

The *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality* released in March 2008 was the first draft of an ELCA social statement. ELCA members, congregations, and synods had the opportunity to respond to its content and to offer suggestions for its improvement. The deadline for responses was November 1, 2008. The Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality will consider responses and release its second draft of a social statement on February 19, 2009.

What's next in the process leading to an ELCA social statement on human sexuality?

The second draft of a proposed ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality will be released February 19, 2009. The ELCA Church Council may amend the statement at its March 27-30 meeting before sending it to the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The Church Council will release its recommended text on April 2. The Churchwide Assembly may amend the text of the statement before voting on whether to adopt it as an ELCA Social Statement. The document will not become an ELCA Social Statement unless it is approved by a two-thirds majority of the Churchwide Assembly.

When will the Task Force announce its recommendations on whether to change church policy to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships?

The Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality is scheduled to announce its recommendations regarding whether to change ELCA policy to permit pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships on February 19, 2009. The ELCA Church Council may amend the recommendation at its March 27-30 meeting before sending it to the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly for consideration.

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.

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. These results are similar to those in polls of ELCA members.

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

They believe that the ELCA must remain faithful to the Scriptures and to the settled Christian consensus of nearly 2,000 years on 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 Constitution 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." 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.

Is the Bible supportive of same-sex sexual relationships?

No. There is agreement among Bible scholars that Scripture does not support same-sex sexual activity. Even scholars who support gay and lesbian unions agree that Scripture does not approve of same-sex sexual activity. 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.

Does 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.

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.'"

Do the Ten Commandments help in addressing questions of sexuality?

Yes. The 1996 ELCA Church Council Message *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions* notes the role of the Ten Commandments in discussions of sexuality: "Because human sexuality is a powerful, primal force in personal and communal life, both church and society seek to order sexual expectations and expression. God's Law serves this purpose by providing guidance and exposing sinfulness. For example, the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17) have implications for sexuality:

sexuality is placed in perspective (First Commandment);

family relationships are to be honored and nurtured (Fourth Commandment);

destructive abuses of power that harm others are prohibited (Fifth Commandment);

marriage is upheld and supported as a sacred union and social institution (Sixth Commandment);

truth-telling is essential in all relationships (Eighth Commandment);

sexual desire that lures one away from spouse or family is condemned (Tenth Commandment)."

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*)

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 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 inclusiveness?

The church welcomes all people as fellow sinners loved by and redeemed by Christ. What we all have in common is our need for a Savior. 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.

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.

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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. 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 settled teaching of the Christian Church for nearly 2,000 years.

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. Likewise, Christians have consistently taught that the 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. 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.

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 accepted Christian teaching. ELCA members must work together to help the ELCA to affirm accepted Christian teaching on sexuality to avoid this possibility.

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 Scriptural 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.

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.

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 proposed new ELCA social statement is to cover areas of human sexuality included in the message but also additional areas of sexuality including homosexual behavior.

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.

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

The predecessor church body statements are available online at

<http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Resources/Historical-Documents/Predecessor-Body-Statements.aspx>

What is the 1993 Conference of Bishops Statement that was affirmed by the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly?

“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.”

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 “Synodical Option”

It is an approach to standards that would allow synods or congregations to set their own standards for pastors. A similar recommendation which would have allowed synod bishops to grant exceptions to ELCA behavior standards to permit pastors to be in 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

<http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/synodical-option-letter.pdf>

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.

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has high expectations for those who serve within the ordained ministry of this church. It does so because it recognizes that when offense is given by an ordained minister, the witness of the gospel may be impaired and the ability to carry out public ministry is threatened.”

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. 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.”

From *Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

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

Synod Councils may submit resolutions to the ELCA Church Council regarding the second draft of a social statement and regarding proposals on standards for pastors and other rostered leaders before the council's March 27-29, 2009, meeting. The ELCA Church Council may amend the social statement and policy recommendations before sending them to the Churchwide Assembly. You are encouraged to talk to members of your Synod Council about how your Synod Council could respond to the statement and recommendations.

ELCA members, congregations, and synods may respond to the social statement and policy recommendations from the ELCA Church Council 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 recommendations regarding standards for pastors and other rostered leaders. Contact Lutheran CORE for a copy of some recommended synod assembly resolutions.

The voting members of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly may revise or amend the text of the statement before deciding whether to adopt an ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality. Approval of an ELCA social statement requires a two-thirds majority at a Churchwide Assembly. Talk to Churchwide Assembly Voting Members from your synod about your recommendations regarding the statement and recommendations regarding standards for pastors and other rostered leaders.

The ELCA Church Council is recommending a simple majority vote for any changes to ELCA policy that would permit pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships. Is there a way to change that to a two-thirds majority?

Yes. The 2009 Churchwide Assembly may amend this recommendation and set a higher standard for adopting changes to church policy regarding the sexual behavior of pastors and other rostered leaders. 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. Talk to 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.

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. Add your name to Lutheran CORE's Open Letter on the sexuality draft. Contact members of your synod council, the ELCA Church Council, and 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.