

## **An Open Letter on Synodical Option to the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality and the ELCA Church Council and Conference of Bishops**

A debate continues in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America about whether to change church teaching and policy to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships. The 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted “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.”

As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America — both pastors and lay people — we care deeply about the life and ministry of the ELCA. Because of our commitment to Christ, the Word of God, and the Church, we call on the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, the ELCA Church Council, and the ELCA Conference of Bishops to affirm and to maintain the clear standard that the ELCA and its predecessor churches have held for the sexual behavior of pastors — that intimate sexual relations are to be reserved for the marriage of one man and one woman. This is the standard that has characterized Christian teaching on marriage from apostolic times and is maintained today by the overwhelming majority of Christians worldwide.

Some have suggested allowing synods or congregations to set their own standards for pastors. Such an approach — usually called synodical option — would effectively dissolve the ELCA. The chaos described in the book of Judges could then describe the ELCA — “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6). 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. The ELCA must reject such an approach.

Synodical option is not a real compromise at all. Its adoption would force synods and congregations to agree that there are multiple biblical teachings on these matters. Synodical option would represent a real change in the teaching of our church. Even those synods and congregations that might not agree with this change would be forced by synodical option implicitly to accept the notion that Scripture is not clear on this subject.

If the ELCA is to continue as one church, it must have one Office of Ministry, one roster of pastors, and one set of expectations for pastors and other rostered leaders throughout the ELCA. Without a common roster of pastors and common expectations for pastors and other rostered leaders, it would be very difficult for pastors to move from one synod to another. Such an approach would effectively divide the ELCA into 65 separate church bodies — each with its own standards for clergy and its own clergy roster.

The interdependent relationship between the churchwide, synod, and congregational expressions of the ELCA requires one standard for clergy throughout the ELCA. *Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* correctly states that “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.”

*Vision and Expectations* also states that “the ordained minister is to be an example of holy living, so that the ordained minister’s life does not become an impediment to the hearing of the gospel or a scandal to the community of faith. . . . Ordained ministers, whether married or single, are expected to uphold an understanding of marriage in their public ministry as well as in private life that is biblically informed and consistent with the teachings of this church.” We affirm this commitment of the ELCA.

We understand the desire of some ELCA members for a compromise on same-sex sexual relationships given the debates raging in some ELCA synods. However, given the Bible's clear affirmation of marriage as between a man and a woman and its clear rejection of homosexual behavior, it is not possible for the ELCA to allow its pastors to be in same-sex sexual relationships without rejecting biblical teaching on sexuality and thus rejecting Scripture as "the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life" (*ELCA Confession of Faith - ELCA Constitution 2.03*). The question of the authority of the Bible in the Church is not something on which a compromise can be reached. The ELCA either remains committed to Scripture as "the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life" or the ELCA will have chosen to deny its Confession of Faith and chosen to function with a different source and norm for its faith and life.

It is also important to note that a significant majority of ELCA members (57 percent) opposed the ordination of those in same-sex sexual relationships and the blessing of same-sex relationships, according to responses to the 2004 *Journey Together Faithfully* study on homosexuality. Only 22 percent favored the blessing of homosexual relationships or the rostering of people in those relationships, according to the study's responses. While popular opinion is not a reason to make decisions in a confessional church committed to Scripture as "the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life," the faithful confession of such a significant majority of ELCA members should not be ignored or rejected.

The words of Jesus are an important reminder for those who suggest that we celebrate the divisions in the ELCA regarding homosexual behavior: "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand" (Matthew 12:25). We have seen the truth of Jesus' words in the divisions taking place in The Episcopal Church and in other church bodies that have adopted, in effect, a synodical option. The teaching of Scripture and of the Christian Church throughout the ages is clear on these matters. The only question is whether the ELCA will acknowledge this reality.

We offer this letter because of our commitment to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We will continue to pray for the ELCA and for all those entrusted with leadership in the Church.

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