

Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

Executive Summary

This Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality is a preliminary document in the preparation of an ELCA social statement on human sexuality. Its purpose is to generate feedback from ELCA members to the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality as it considers what revisions are needed. The deadline for responses is November 1, 2008. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly meeting in Minneapolis (August 17-23, 2009) is expected to consider a proposed text that will require approval by a two-thirds majority.

ELCA social statements are teaching documents that assist the ELCA and its members in forming judgments on social issues. They are meant to aid in communal and individual moral deliberation and moral formation. They also set institutional policy for the ELCA in terms of its social witness to guide its advocacy and aid its work as a public church.

This draft social statement draws upon the wisdom and witness of Scripture and classical Lutheran themes (incarnation, justification, and the freedom of a Christian for service to the neighbor) to address the complex issues of human sexuality. As is consistent with all ELCA social statements, it provides a theological and ethical framework for discussion, discernment, and decision-making. It does not seek to offer once-and-for-all answers for all contemporary questions.

This draft statement is grounded in the Christian belief that the Triune God loves and redeems humankind and reconciles the creation through Jesus Christ. Because we are sinful, we constantly turn away from relationship with God, and therefore from the good of the neighbor and of society. This statement is grounded in the key Lutheran understanding that it is only through God's grace—and no action of our own—that right relationship with God is restored. God's grace sets Christians free to reflect God's love for us through responsible lives that seek the good of the neighbor and the world. Because of God's mercy and compassion to us, we are called to be merciful to each other. The draft also maintains that God provides constraint and guidance through the teaching and wisdom of the law (in its civil uses) to protect individuals and society from harm.

This draft statement affirms that God has lovingly created all humans as sexual—and therefore relational—creatures. In the Lutheran tradition trust is central to what it means to be in right relationship with God and with the neighbor. In the realm of human sexuality we are called not only to demonstrate trustworthiness in relationships with one another, but also to strive to strengthen institutions and social practices to make this world a more trustworthy place.

Section I (Page 1) recognizes that the Lutheran tradition has a particular and important contribution to offer to challenging discussions which take place in times of pluralism, rapid change, and globalization. Regarding sexuality it does so with a candid awareness of ongoing discernment within our own denomination and around the world. From within this tradition it calls this church to moral discernment with both humility and boldness.

Section II (Page 4) explores a Lutheran approach to sexual ethics in the light of God's incarnation and Christian hope in God who justifies us in Christ and promises the fulfillment of the creation. As people of faith we live in hope, seeking to anticipate in the present those values integral to God's promised future. These qualities include dignity, respect for the body, an understanding of law to serve the protection and flourishing of human relationships, and concern for justice.

Section III (Page 15) describes God's gift of sexuality for human beings as a fundamental dimension of life with both personal and inherently social dimensions and responsibilities. It emphasizes the holistic character of being human.

Section IV (Page 20) investigates how trust among human beings forms, as it does in the basic relation between God and human beings, the basis of healthy relationships, especially those involving sexuality.

Families are a key place in which trust is built up or broken down and this makes the family an indispensable social institution and one that needs tending. A particular concern is how families fulfill the vital roles of providing safety, protecting intimacy, and building trust, especially for the vulnerable. (Page 21)

The well-being of children is of overriding importance, including their sexual safety. This draft statement expresses grave concern over abuse and molestation of children. It strongly reaffirms the ELCA's stated opposition to any form of commercial sexual exploitation. Beyond that, the highly sexualized culture in which children are exposed to adult sexuality is recognized as a failing of adults and society. Children and youth need to be supported, nurtured, and accompanied in their sexual and relational formation. (Page 24)

Sexuality is an indelible feature of human life. At all ages and in all situations there is a need to find life-enhancing and appropriate expression of this wonderful but complicated dimension of being human. (Page 27) Trust is formed and nurtured in friendships even as they can be a source of harm and distrust. This church must continue to nurture trustworthy relationships. (Page 29)

Degrees of sexual intimacy should be carefully matched to degrees of affection and commitment. For this reason this church teaches that the greatest physical intimacies, such as intercourse, should be matched with and sheltered by the highest level of legally binding commitment (Page 32), as found in marriage between a man and a woman. Because of promises of fidelity and public accountability, marriage provides a context of love, trust, honesty and commitment within which a couple can express profound joy of relationship as well as address the troubles that inevitably will come. (Page 33) While recognizing the contemporary pressures that encourage adult cohabitation, this church does not favor it because of its lack of public accountability and binding commitment. (Page 34)

On the matter of loving and committed same-gender relationships, after many years of study and conversation members in this church continue to hold strongly differing and conscience-bound understandings of Scripture. In discerning where God is calling us, this statement draws deeply on the historical Lutheran tradition of seeking a pastoral response to the needs of the neighbor. In seeking responsible actions that serve others, the statement recognizes various pastoral responses which are being and can be taken by congregations. The draft calls all persons to avail themselves of the means of grace and pastoral care. (Page 36)

Finally, **Section V** (Page 39) extends to the area of sexuality the ELCA's existing emphasis on the need to build relevant social institutions in the pursuit of justice and the common good. It affirms that the building of social trust is essential for institutions and for practices that affect or are affected by human sexuality. These include the conduct of commerce, the practice of government, and community standards. Building social trust means accepting our responsibility for shaping structures and institutions that foster and influence social and market forces. These are to support and contribute to strong relationships of trust and accountability in which healthy sexuality might flourish. The pervasive commercialization of the body presents a serious challenge which this church must confront.

Because of God's embrace of all creation in Christ, we in the ELCA are set free for seeking the good of the neighbor. We do so not in an abstract ideal way, but amid the intricacies and conflicts, sins and sorrows, blessings and joys of actual social and individual life. (Page 46)