



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Introduction to "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust"

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There is no single Lutheran approach to matters of ethics. Our theological heritage is richly textured and the task force could have adopted any number of theological frameworks to shape our approach. We could have entered into this statement from the perspective of the two kingdoms, the orders of creation, law and Gospel, or a number of other vantage points. However, following the example of Martin Luther and theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we became convinced that the profound biblical and Lutheran ethical call to the vocation of serving the neighbor provided a sure and certain guide to the topic of human sexuality.

Let me identify several considerations that led this task force's approach.

1. We can no longer assume that people in our society, or, even many in this church for that matter, hold a shared understanding of Christianity's core beliefs, let alone those of Lutheran ethics. The church can no longer simply assert the conclusions of Christian teaching with little explanation of how those conclusions came to be. We thus became convinced that the social statement would need to include a clear articulation of the biblical and theological assumptions that undergird the whole statement.
2. As important as issues over human sexuality might be, the first order of business in the ELCA is its missional challenge. We cannot afford to be inarticulate about what is most important in regard to our faith. And culture wars rarely illuminate the Gospel. This document, therefore, responds to this important social issue by making prominent the twin pillars of the reformation: God's unconditional love for all people in Christ Jesus and our vocational calling to love neighbor as oneself in all of life's arenas.
3. The use of human sexuality to engage, sell products and even create addictions is big business. The attitudes and perceptions being cultivated often challenge our most fundamental Christian perspectives, and they do so skillfully and often. This document attempts to respond theologically and ethically to these aspects of our culture.
4. There has been a recent tendency in our society to over-focus on sexual rights for the individual and under-focus on the ethical dimensions for the common good. Sexual ethics are deeply related to the good of neighbor and community. This document takes seriously the understanding the social dimension of sexual ethics.

Two additional emphases are important for this social statement:

The first is the concept of “trust.” Central to what it means to serve the neighbor in relation to human sexuality is the building and protecting of trust in human relationships and social institutions. In accord with Scripture, trust is understood as a fundamental character of right relationship. In response to God’s faithful, trustworthy relationship of love for the world in Christ, we seek to be trustworthy in our human sexuality, and build social institutions and practices where trust and trustworthy relationships can thrive.

A second is the concept of bound conscience. This social statement has been written in a church body profoundly divided about a variety of matters related to human sexuality. Since the likelihood of agreement appears extremely remote in the foreseeable future, we must face the question of whether and how we choose to live together amidst such divisions. Deep differences in ethical judgments are part of church history, and to a certain degree many of our traditions are a result of struggle over what it means to be faithful. This proposed statement takes the position that theologically, our disagreements need not be church-dividing, and draws on the historic Lutheran understanding of the bound conscience to give guidance. I would like to end this introduction by asking Dr. Timothy Wengert, a member of the task force, to introduce to you this concept that is so central to the thinking of the task force.

[See comments by Dr. Timothy Wengert published at <http://www.elca.org/assembly/discussion>.]

For the past seven years the task force has understood itself to be journeying together faithfully together with this church. Our work is now done. I would like to close with the words from the last paragraph of the social statement that is before you, trusting that it will communicate both the spirit and the hope of the task force for our life together.

"Seeking the Spirit’s guidance, we discern direction for living faithfully in terms of human sexuality. We do this not in some abstract ideal realm, but amid all the complexities, conflicts, sorrows, discoveries, and joys of actual social and individual life. It is a task that this church accepts as a redeemed community. As simultaneously captive to sin and yet liberated and forgiven people of faith, we walk together both humbly and boldly toward God’s promised future." Thank you.