



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies From the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality

Frequently Asked Questions

Why did the task force create a report and recommendation on the ELCA's ministry policies?

The 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly directed the task force "specifically to address and make recommendations to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly on changes to any policies that preclude practicing homosexual persons from the rosters of this church" (CA07.06.27). This report and recommendation is the product of that request.

How was the content of this document created?

This report and recommendation represents the best thinking of the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality, which is responsible for it. It is supported by a strong majority of the task force, although not all agreed with all aspects.

It looks as though the recommendation contains four resolutions. Would they all be subject to a vote at the same time?

The recommendation consists of four resolutions, each of which takes a step in the decision-making process. The task force proposes to the assembly that consideration of each resolution depends on passing the previous one, so if a resolution is defeated, the process stops.

What is the purpose of this recommended decision-making process?

The task force recommends the assembly begin by declaring its intention about what it wants to do. The proposed process begins with resolutions about *whether or not* this church wants to find a way to recognize publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships; and *whether or not* this church wants to move in the direction of rostering people living in such relationships. Then, if both of these are adopted, the next resolution asks if this church will commit itself to doing so with respect for the bound consciences of others. *If so*, then the process leads to considering *how* this could be accomplished. The resolutions begin by seeking agreement on the principles before they address the practice.

What is the task force asking in the first resolution?

The first resolution asks the *whether or not* this church wants to find ways to recognize lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. The task force believes this commitment needs to be made before asking the question of rostering, in order to ensure that people in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships may be held accountable to a common standard.

Does the first resolution mean an official rite would be created in the ELCA for those in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?

The task force is not prepared to recommend an official liturgical rite or order of public accountability because this church does not have biblical and theological consensus on the matter. At the same time, most task force members believe that ways can be found within local congregations to surround the commitments of lifelong, monogamous, same-gender couples with prayer and, in so doing, provide public affirmation and accountability within those communities.

What is the task force asking of the assembly in the second resolution?

The second resolution asks this church whether, in principle, it is committed to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church. This step is based on the assumption that, before being able to consider specific proposals for how to accomplish such a change, this church must decide, in principle, *whether or not* it wants to move in this direction. The approval of this resolution would not, at this step, imply a commitment to a particular way of accomplishing this.

What is the intention of the third resolution?

The third resolution is similar in nature to the first resolution of the recommendations that came from the task force in 2005, which stated “that the ELCA be urged to concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements, recognizing the God-given mission and communion that we share as members of the body of Christ.” The task force believes that, before considering any concrete proposal to approve the rostering of people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, the assembly must first consider whether it is willing to commit this church to taking such a step in the spirit of mutual support, love, and community in Christ.

How does the fourth resolution work?

If the assembly has voted to commit this church to find ways to recognize and hold accountable people in their same-gender relationships, to commit this church to find a way to roster people in such relationships, and to commit this church to do both in ways that enable us to bear one another's burdens and respect bound consciences, the task force proposes this means of implementation:

1. Add a new element of structured flexibility to existing candidacy and call policies;
2. Move *from* a policy that says a person in such a relationship can never be considered for rostering *to* a policy that trusts those to whom this church already has given responsibility for these decisions to;
3. Allow them to act, should they so chose, within their arenas of responsibility;
4. Using consistent churchwide policies that respect bound consciences; and
5. Discern whether or not the ministry of Christ may be served best by approving or calling a specific gay or lesbian person who is living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship.

If the “structured flexibility” resolution (#4) is passed, where would pastors, deaconesses, diaconal ministers, or associates in ministry who are living in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships be able to serve?

He or she would be able to serve only where those with responsibility for decision-making (i.e. congregations, synods, and bishops, or candidacy committees) decided that the mission of this church would be served best by approving or calling that particular candidate or rostered leader.

How would “structured” flexibility (#4) affect those Lutherans who are convinced that there should not be any changes to ELCA’s present policy regarding people in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?

If this approach to structured flexibility were adopted, it would still protect any congregation, candidacy committee, synod, or bishop by not requiring them to violate bound conscience by approving, calling, commissioning, consecrating, or ordaining anyone in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship.

Will this four-part recommendation go to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly?

The Church Council has the authority to pass the recommendation on to the Churchwide Assembly in its present form or to make changes. The assembly then has the authority to accept or reject the recommendation given to it, or to make changes through plenary debate. The final approval or disapproval is by vote of the Churchwide Assembly.

The document often refers to “bound conscience.” What does that mean?

"Conscience," as used in these documents, is neither a "little voice" on your shoulder nor an inborn list of universal rights and wrongs. The social statement understands “conscience” in the way that follows the Apostle Paul, who understood conscience as the unconditional moral responsibility of the individual person before God (Romans 2:15-16). Conscience then concerns not a person’s opinion, but a person's personal identity and integrity before God.

Second, when Christians disagree strongly about an ethical issue of great magnitude, it is important to realize that the difference may not grow out of pride or selfish desires. Rather, it may be because the other’s conscience is bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture and tradition. What is at stake in respecting a conscience that believes strongly about a moral matter of great import is nothing less than the good of the neighbor (Romans 14).

The emphasis of “conscience-bound” is not on declaring oneself to be conscience-bound. Rather, we are bound in love by the conscience of the other — that is, we recognize the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:28-29). For Lutherans, the reality that people hold deep faith convictions that may be in conflict with the deep faith convictions of others is not merely a procedural or political difficulty because we bear one another’s burdens as sisters and brothers in Christ. For one member to suffer because his or her conscience has been offended is for all of us to suffer.

It is this understanding of "bound conscience" and this concern for the conscience of the brother or sister in Christ that stands behind to the statement's appeal to the role of conscience.

How can I respond to the Report and Recommendation?

At this point, the task force has completed its work. The way to respond is through your Synod Assembly. Synod Assemblies can consider and approve memorials in response to the report and recommendation, which are sent to the Memorials Committee of the Churchwide Assembly.

Synod councils also can adopt and forward resolutions to the ELCA Church Council. These must be received by March 11, 2009, for consideration at the Church Council's March meeting.

What is a memorial?

Synod assemblies address the Churchwide Assembly through memorials. A memorial adopted by a synod assembly is submitted to the Churchwide Assembly with a recommendation for action from the Memorials Committee of the Churchwide Assembly. Memorials should be reserved for broad policy issues that belong in the Churchwide Assembly.

Did all members of the task force agree with this recommendation?

The recommendation represents the best thinking to date of the ELCA Task Force for Studies on Sexuality, which is responsible for it. Not all members agreed with all aspects, but it was passed by a strong majority of the task force.

What is the significance of the dissenting positions?

Some task force members from two very different perspectives felt the need to record dissenting opinions. This is a further sign that the task force reflects differences that exist throughout this church. The fact that the task force members embraced both agreement and dissent among themselves embodies the respect for conscience and sharing of burdens that they have encouraged among members of this church.