



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

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

Executive Summary

This report on ministry policies responds to the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly action to request the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality “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).

As a result of its work since 2002, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality has been keenly aware of the lack of consensus in this church concerning the approval of Lutherans in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as ordained ministers, deaconesses, diaconal ministers, and associates in ministry. This lack of consensus also is present among the members of the task force itself. The majority of the task force members do not expect recovery of the former consensus. Neither do they expect a new consensus to emerge in the near future.

The task force recognizes that these differences are deeply held and often conscience-bound positions by people of faith who love this church. When Christians disagree about an ethical issue of this magnitude, one important consideration is to avoid presuming that disagreements grow out of pride or selfish desires, but to accept that a person’s conscience may be bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture and tradition.

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.

This concept of the bound conscience is foundational to this report. The task force believes this church must find a common way to live and serve in the midst of disagreements. Based on the belief that our perspectives on social realities, in particular human sexuality, are not the basis of our unity or disunity, this report suggests a way forward for this church in which all bear the burdens of the other and respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree.

This report briefly describes the different conscience-bound perspectives. It outlines arguments made by those who seek to retain the current policy of this church, which

requires all people of same-gender orientation who are or who wish to be approved for the rosters of this church to remain celibate. It also outlines the arguments made by those who seek to change current policy.

It emphasizes that, although there are sharp disagreements, we share the commitment to faithfulness to God and good faith with each other. All desire to live godly and self-giving lives in gratitude to God for the gifts promised and disclosed in the gospel. All believe that we are called to proclaim and serve God in the world. All are committed to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions to guide them, to lead faithful lives and support others in leading faithful lives as well as to pray and work for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to be an effective instrument of God's mission. The task force recognizes the deep love that all hold for this church and the shared commitment to remaining together in spite of differences in this matter.

Although the four-part interconnected recommendation contained in this report represents the strong majority of the task force, it does not have the support of all. Therefore it is presented humbly, with a sense of burden for the sisters and brothers in Christ — both on the task force and in the wider church — who are bound by their consciences to disagree.

The recommendation presents a process that begins with decisions about whether this church wants to find ways to recognize publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships and whether this church wants to move in the direction of approving for the rosters of this church individuals living in such relationships. If so, then the process proposes how this could be accomplished. The recommendation seeks agreement on the principles before it addresses policies.

The recommendation consists of four interconnected resolutions. Each takes a step in the decision-making process. The decisions are to be taken one by one: if the first is approved, then the second, third, and fourth are considered, but only if the preceding ones have been approved.

Step One

Step one asks the assembly whether, in principle, it is committed to finding ways to allow congregations and synods that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

Step Two

Step two asks the assembly whether, in principle, this church 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.

Step Three

Step three asks this church whether, in the future implementation of these commitments, it will make decisions so that all in this church bear the burdens of the other, and respect the bound consciences of all. This means that any solution that serves only the conscience-bound positions of one or another part of this church will not be acceptable.

Step Four

Step four proposes how this church can move toward change in a way that respects the bound consciences of all. It recognizes that such respect will lead to diversity of practice. However, the majority of the task force believes that the conscience-bound lack of consensus will be respected most faithfully by providing some structured flexibility in decision-making so that congregations and synods may choose whether or not to approve or call people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve on ELCA rosters.

In reaching this conclusion, the task force acknowledges that the existing policies and practices of this church give responsibility for decisions related to the approval or disapproval of candidates for rostered service or for a specific call to synodical call committees, bishops, and congregations. That is, individuals and groups are trusted to make these decisions. The task force also acknowledges that such decision-making takes place within a carefully determined process of mutual discernment by those seeking call and the representatives of this church.

The proposal suggests that this church, because of its acknowledgment of and commitment to the bound consciences of all, incorporate structured flexibility in decision-making into its policies and procedures so that synods, bishops, congregations, candidacy committees, and others involved in the candidacy process and in the process of extending calls will be free to act according to their convictions regarding both the approving or disapproving in candidacy and the extending or not extending of a call to rostered service of a person who is otherwise qualified and who is living or contemplates living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship.