

Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust
Proposed Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Executive Summary

ELCA social statements are theological and teaching documents. They assist the ELCA and its members to reach informed judgments on social issues from a perspective of faith. They are intended to cultivate individual and community deliberation as well as to guide moral formation. They govern this church's institutional policy in terms of its social witness and guide its work as a public church. Social statements are developed through an extensive process of deliberation involving the whole church and are adopted by a two-thirds majority of a churchwide assembly.

In order to understand this social statement it is necessary to note three foundational approaches that undergird the text:

- This social statement is grounded in key Lutheran principles that inform the way Lutherans discern how to live faithfully in a complex world. These include Scripture as the living Word of God, justification by grace through faith on account of Christ, and the Lutheran vocation to serve the neighbor in the midst of daily life.
- Scripture teaches that we are created for relationship. The fundamental orientation of this document is the differentiation of right relationship from wrong relationship. Our model of right relationship is God's absolutely trustworthy faithfulness to God's promises and to God's people; therefore, this statement proposes that all human relationships be considered in light of trust, faithfulness, and commitment. In relation to sexuality, both human behavior and the social structures we create are worthy when they foster trust, commitment, and protection for those who are vulnerable.
- Human sexuality is not limited to what is private or individual, but is profoundly shaped by cultural forces and practices. Economics, business and advertising, social roles, medicine and science, and the myriad ways we entertain ourselves—these all are relevant to a consideration of sexual self-understanding and to the ways we act in our relationships with others. Moreover, it is essential to understand the ways social structures shelter, sustain, and protect personal, familial, and social relationships. Part of the calling of this church is to evaluate social forces and social structures in light of what is good for the neighbor.

Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust addresses the question: how do we understand human sexuality within the context of Jesus' invitation to love God and love our neighbor? (Romans 13:9–10; Galatians 5:14.)

This social statement begins with a discussion of key Lutheran principles that inform the way Lutherans discern how to live faithfully in a complex world. It focuses particularly on how human sexuality relates to the Lutheran vocation to serve the neighbor.

Central to this vocation of serving the neighbor 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 in Christ for the world, we seek to be trustworthy in our human sexuality and to build social institutions and practices where trust and trustworthy relationships can thrive.

When God created human beings, sexuality was made integral to their nature. Sexuality is a good and wondrous gift, a rich and diverse combination of relational, emotional, and physical interactions and possibilities. Because of sin, however, it also can cause great harm.

This statement affirms the role of God's law in the world to reveal sin, constrain wrong behavior, and point the way for all to serve the neighbor. God's law instructs us how to protect and nurture relationships and build up the community.

Sexuality and social structures that enhance social trust

No relationships or social structures can thrive in the absence of trust. Two such foundational social structures are marriage and the family. Lutherans believe that God works through these structures for the good of society.

The trust and mutuality afforded by marriage offers one of the most beautiful, abiding, and transformative forms of human relationship. This church understands marriage as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by God. The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman.

The lifelong commitment and public accountability of marriage provide the context for trust to grow and people to thrive, creating the possibility for the care and support of children and others who are vulnerable. The public promises of marriage between a husband and wife also protect the community by holding people accountable to their vows. Fidelity to promises blesses all who depend on this trust within and beyond the marriage.

Precisely because marriage is the place where deep human trust and needs abide, it also can be a place of great harm. Many experience neither love nor trust within marriage. Particular care must be taken to support and find safe haven for all who are at risk within a marriage. This church will provide pastoral support for all who are divorced and for the special concerns of blended families, children of divorced parents, and the particular tensions that may accompany family breakdown and transition.

It is only within the last decades that this church has begun to understand in new ways the need of same-gender oriented individuals to seek relationships of lifelong companionship and commitment as well as public accountability and legal support for those commitments. This has led to differing understandings about the place of such relationships within the Christian community. Disagreements exist in this church and in the larger Christian community about whether marriage is also the appropriate term to use to describe similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong, monogamous relationships.

Although at this time this church lacks consensus on this matter, it encourages all people to live out their faith in the local and global community of the baptized with profound respect for the conscience-bound belief of the neighbor. This church calls for mutual respect and for guidance that seeks the good of all. As we live together with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect.

This church regards the family as an indispensable social institution because of its role in establishing conditions of trust and protection for the vulnerable. The erosion of safety or trust within a family, in particular due to sexual abuse or the betrayal of promises and commitments,

constitutes a flagrant harm precisely because it occurs within the context where trust is most assumed.

In this country and in our congregations, families are formed in many ways. All families have responsibility for the tasks of providing safety, shielding intimacy, and developing trustworthy relationships. Lutherans take great care to support whatever creates and sustains families as a foundation and support of trust.

The context of a healthy family nurtures growth, enhances trust, and offers protection. This is especially true for children and youth as they grow into sexual maturity. Safety within and outside the family is of overriding importance. Congregations and other ministry sites must continue in their efforts to be safe places for children and youth.

The ELCA regards the over-exposure of emotionally maturing children and teens to adult sexuality as a failing on the part of adults and society. It challenges all individuals and institutions in society to fulfill their responsibility to protect and nurture children and youth and provide for their appropriate development.

This church will give particular attention to the sexual education of children and teens, including how children and youth are supported and accompanied in their sexual and relational formation.

Sexuality and trust in relationships

One does not need to be in an intimate relationship to experience one's sexuality. This means that throughout life we need to find life-enhancing and appropriate ways of giving expression to this complicated dimension of ourselves.

A healthy sense of sexuality is related to having healthy body image. This church teaches that caring for the body and following the practices that lead to physical and emotional wellness are part of the stewardship of created goodness.

This church calls attention to the immense value of friendship for people in all stages of life. The violation of trusting relationships for sexual purposes is offensive and unacceptable.

As trust and entrusting are established in a relationship, physical expression naturally becomes more intimate. For this reason the church teaches that degrees of physical intimacy should be carefully matched to degrees of growing affection and commitment. Therefore, this church opposes non-monogamous, promiscuous, or casual sexual relationships because such transient encounters do not allow the context for trust in sexual intimacy.

This church does not favor cohabitation relationships outside of marriage, although it does recognize the social forces at work that encourage such practices. This church believes that the deepest longing for a sense of personal worth, long-term companionship, and profound security, especially given the human propensity to sin, are best served through binding commitment, legal protections, and the public accountability of marriage, especially where the couple is surrounded by the prayers of the community and the promises of God.

Sexuality and social responsibility

Social forces and contexts have significant influence on human sexual behavior. This church must be prepared to speak out where such forces cause harm. It will oppose in particular all forms of sexual exploitation within and outside this church. Justice for women in church and society must continue to be an important dimension of Lutheran response.

This church notes with grave concern both the public commodification of the human body as an economic asset and the billion-dollar global sex market. The possibility of profit is not a sufficient moral basis to use human sexuality for purposes that harm individuals or undermine social trust. Christian responsibility includes naming economic forces and monitoring the ways they constrain or support healthy individual choices and social structures. This church will work with public and private institutions to create structures, policies, and practices of accountability to support social norms of protection.

This church does not tolerate the abuse of the ministerial office for personal sexual gratification. Such violations not only cause grave harm to individuals and congregations, but also severely damage the credibility of the public ministry to which this church and its leaders are called.

The workplace requires appropriate boundaries maintained through respect, good sense, best practices, and legal protections. This church remains committed to its efforts to make congregations, synods, and churchwide offices safe and healthy places to live and work.

Seeking the Spirit's guidance, this church discerns direction for living amid all the complexities, conflicts, sorrows, discoveries, and joys of social and individual life. As simultaneously captive to sin and yet liberated and forgiven people of faith, we walk together humbly yet boldly toward God's promised future.