

Further Information about Churchwide Assembly Decisions Regarding Human Sexuality

What happened in regard to the social statement?

The assembly adopted by a 2/3rds vote the 10th social statement of the ELCA entitled *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* after making a couple of changes. The statement is now available on line at www.elca.org/assembly/actions and is expected to be published in mid autumn.

Social statements are an important means by which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America addresses social concerns and carries out its active participation in society. Social statements are developed over a 5-year period. In particular this social statement was adopted after a participatory, and uniquely deep and reflective process of study, discussion, prayer, and dialog engaging the entire church. Like other social statements, this one will become guidance to the church for its policies and a basis for advocacy.

This statement is consistent with other ELCA social statements. It approaches sexuality primarily as a social issue in the same way other social statements address topics such as the environment, economics and health care. It presents a framework for thinking through issues and emphasizes responsibility and moral deliberation.

The social statement draws upon classic Lutheran themes to address the complex issues of sexuality. Key themes include justification by grace through faith, trust, vocation, and the freedom of the Christian for service to the neighbor.

This statement addresses a broad scope of issues, including marriage, families, children, divorce, sexuality outside marriage and friendship, as well as social issues including sexual abuse, exploitation, commodification of the body, professional misconduct, and structures that support relationships and enhance trust.

On the matter of lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, the proposed social statement describes several broadly representative positions that members in this church continue to hold due to strongly differing conscience-bound understandings of Scripture and tradition. In discerning where God is calling us, this statement draws deeply on the historical Lutheran tradition of respecting the other's conscience and seeking a caring response to the needs of the neighbor.

Previous documents or statements on this topic, including the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops, the action of the Churchwide Assembly in 2005, predecessor church body statements, and previous messages will continue to provide guidance. If there are inconsistencies among these documents, the social statement, as a policy of this church, takes precedence.

On the matter of the meaning of bound conscience. This concept is rooted in our Confessional documents and Scripture (See Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 for instance.) It does not mean I simply declare myself bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture and tradition. Rather it also means that I am called to respect and protect the other person with whom I disagree, whose position is also tied to a thoughtful interpretation of scripture and tradition. This is one way that each person can bear the burden of the differences between us.

Note: An *executive summary* of the social statement and additional information about it, including a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) are available at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney.

What happened in regard to the recommendations concerning ministry policies and congregational recognition of publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships:

The short answer is that the assembly adopted four resolutions that commit the ELCA to respect bound consciences, to allow congregations that choose to do so to find ways to recognize and support lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships and hold them publicly accountable, and to find a way for people in such relationships to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA

First, the assembly voted by a 78% majority that in the implementation of any resolutions on this matter the ELCA would commit itself “to bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor and respect the bound consciences” of all. This sets a distinctive commitment for how we are called to move forward together.

The assembly deliberation exemplified this commitment to respect all. As Dr. Ishmael Noko, the general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation observed during his speech, the members of the assembly spoke with dignity and respect for each other in a way that brought honor to this church and its witness to the world.

After a great deal of passionate but respectful debate, the assembly voted by a 60% majority (only 50% was needed to adopt any of these resolutions) that the ELCA should commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable those lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

This action does not require any congregation to find ways to recognize such relationships. Nor does the resolution authorize developing any churchwide rite of blessing. It does mean that the local faith community of a congregation could find ways to hold publicly accountable the same-gender relationships that intend to be lifelong and monogamous and to offer prayer and support for couples.

The assembly again deliberated long and seriously, frequently pausing for prayer, and voted by 55% to adopt a resolution that committed the ELCA to find a way for people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders. Subsequently the assembly voted by 68% to affirm a series of directives indicating ways in which ELCA policies will be changed to create the means necessary to do this. The changes must honor the differences of convictions within the church while maintaining this church’s present approach of having consistent churchwide ministry policies that are applied by synods, congregations and others according to local ministry needs.

These policy changes will not take place immediately. Specific language must be developed by the appropriate churchwide units in consultation with the Conference of Bishops. The Church Council has the responsibility to approve all final language. It next meets in November.

The relevant policies are spelled out there in several documents of this church that guide candidacy, call, and discipline are “Vision and Expectations” for each of the rosters, “Guidelines and Definitions for Discipline,” the “Candidacy Manual,” and the “Manual of Policies for Management of the

Rosters.” These documents will be revised as directed by the Churchwide Assembly. The revisions need to be consistent with the constitution and bylaws of this church. In addition, other guidelines may need to be developed.

Existing policies will remain in effect until the Church Council, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, approves amended policies consistent with the actions taken by the Churchwide Assembly and the constitution and bylaws.

Work will begin shortly after the assembly and will proceed with both a sense of urgency and a sense of care and due diligence. It is not clear whether all the necessary preparatory work could be completed by the November Church Council meeting.

Policy documents will be revised to give guidance on how the phrase “publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships” will be understood in reference to those seeking to serve in rostered ministry. These would be developed through thoughtful and prayerful consultation among offices, units, and committees of the churchwide organization, and the Church Council, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, as well as consultation with ministry partners.