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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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## Frequently Asked Questions

### about the 2009 Churchwide Assembly actions regarding human sexuality

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#### What happened at the assembly in regard to the social statement?

The assembly adopted by exactly a two-thirds vote the 10th social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) entitled *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. The statement is now available online at [www.elca.org/assembly/actions](http://www.elca.org/assembly/actions) and is expected to be published in mid-autumn.

#### What are social statements?

Social statements are an important means by which the ELCA addresses social concerns and carries out its active participation in society. They are theological and teaching documents that assist the ELCA and its members in forming judgments but also govern institutional policy in terms of the its witness as a public church. Other examples include statements on environment, economics, and health care.

#### How do social statements come into existence?

Social statements are developed through a participatory process over a 5-6 year period. In particular, this social statement involved a broad and reflective process of study, discussion, prayer, and dialog engaging the entire church beginning in 2002. It involved three studies and over 30,000 responses to those studies. In 2008, 111 synodical hearings took place. Forty-two synods adopted memorials to the churchwide assembly, some calling for its adoption (37) while others called for its rejection (5).

#### What is in the statement?

The social statement draws upon classic Lutheran themes to address the complex issues of sexuality. These include justification by grace through faith, trust, vocation, the Ten Commandments, and the freedom of the Christian for service to the neighbor. It addresses a broad scope of issues, including marriage, family, children, divorce, sexuality outside marriage, and friendship. It also speaks about social issues, including sexual abuse, global sex-trade exploitation, commodification of the body, professional misconduct, and social structures that support relationships and enhance trust.

#### What does the social statement say about homosexuality?

It states that the ELCA is opposed to all forms of violence or discrimination against homosexuals and is committed to welcoming all people, regardless of sexual orientation, and their families into our congregations. On the matter of whether or how to regard lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, the social statement describes several broadly representative positions that members in this church hold. It acknowledges that these follow from strongly held different understandings of Scripture and tradition. The statement recognizes that these differing understandings will continue to exist among ELCA members and it affirms the possibility of living together in continued discussion despite our disagreements. We can do this by drawing deeply on the historical Lutheran tradition of respecting the other's conscience and seeking a caring response to the needs of the neighbor.

#### What is the relation of the social statement to previous statements and messages of our church?

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.

#### What does "bound conscience" mean?

The idea of a conscience being "bound" to a particular interpretation of Scripture and confessional understanding is rooted in the Bible (See Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 for instance.) and the Lutheran heritage. It does not mean that a person simply declares "him or herself" to be bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture and tradition. Rather, it puts the emphasis on how each Christian is called to respect and protect other believers with whom they disagree when those positions are also tied to their faith and to a carefully reasoned, thoughtful interpretation of

Scripture and tradition. This is one way that each person can bear the burden of the differences on this matter.

#### **Where can I find more information about all of this?**

Additional information including an *executive summary* of the social statement is (FAQs) available at by clicking here.

### **About the ministry policy resolutions**

#### **What happened with regard to the recommendations concerning ministry policies and congregational recognition of publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?**

The assembly adopted four resolutions that commit the ELCA to bear one another's burdens and respect bound consciences in these matters; 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. The fourth resolution points toward a specific way to allow rostering while respecting bound consciences.

#### **What is the content of the first resolution about bearing one another's burdens and "bound conscience?"**

The assembly's first action was to vote by a 78 percent majority to require 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 the ELCA will move forward together, as was exemplified by the discussion at the assembly. As Dr. Ishmael Noko, the general secretary of The Lutheran World Federation observed during his speech, the members of the assembly spoke about these controversial issues with dignity and respect for each other in "a way that brought honor" to the ELCA and its witness to the world.

#### **What about resolution #2 regarding same-gender couples?**

After a great deal of passionate, but respectful debate, the assembly recorded a 60 percent vote (note: only a majority 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 couples who wish to have lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

#### **Does this mean the ELCA has endorsed the blessing of same-gender unions?**

No, the assembly was not asked to consider and thus took no action concerning a churchwide rite of blessing. The assembly's action means that a congregation, however, is *permitted* to find ways to hold publicly accountable same-gender relationships that intend to be lifelong and monogamous and to surround these couples and their families with prayer and support in a variety of ways. The action adopted does not require any congregation to do so. The fourth resolution does require public accountability of anyone in such a relationship who seeks to be an ELCA pastor, deaconess, diaconal minister, or associate in ministry.

#### **What was the meaning of the final two resolutions regarding pastors and other rostered leaders of this church?**

The assembly again deliberated long and seriously, frequently pausing for prayer, and voted by 56 percent 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 percent 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 ELCA 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. This intent was affirmed by the adoption of an amendment to the fourth resolution that "the ELCA make provision in its policies to recognize the conviction of members who believe that this church shall not call or roster people in publicly accountable, lifelong monogamous, same-gender relationships."

#### **What are the policy documents that must be changed?**

The relevant policies are spelled out in several documents of this church that guide candidacy, call, and discipline. They 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 and approved as appropriate by the ELCA Church Council. The revisions need to be consistent with the governing documents of this church. In addition, other guidelines may need to be developed.

#### **When will these changes begin?**

These policy changes will not take place immediately, although work will begin very soon after the assembly with both a sense of urgency and a commitment to care and due diligence. Specific language must be developed by the appropriate churchwide committees and units in consultation with the Conference of Bishops. The Church Council has the responsibility to approve all final language. It next meets in November, although it is not clear if all necessary work can be completed by that time. Existing policies remain in effect until such time as the policy changes are approved by the Church Council.

#### **What does "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" mean?**

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 guiding documents would be revised through thoughtful and prayerful consultation among offices, units, committees of the churchwide organization, the Conference of Bishops, and global and ecumenical ministry partners before consideration by the Church Council.