



July 28 – August 2  
PHOENIX, ARIZONA



## Recommendation:

### Background and Resolution for Recommended, Proposed Edited Social Statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*

#### Background and Executive Summary

The ELCA addresses social concerns in many ways, among them developing and enacting official documents that articulate this church's social teaching and policy. These documents include social statements, social messages, and social policy resolutions that both express and inform the ELCA's moral discernment, teaching, and public witness. They are developed through extensive, inclusive, and accepted processes of deliberation across this church.

These documents and processes are part of a living tradition, open to ongoing dialogue and discernment. For this reason, the ELCA has developed formal procedures for reconsideration of social teaching documents that allow for potential editing, revising, or archiving when necessary. These procedures are described in "Policies and Procedures of the ELCA for Addressing Social Concerns."

#### Background

The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted "to authorize a social statement reconsideration to revise *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009) so that its wording reflects current church understanding, church policy, civil law, and public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender non-conforming couples in accordance with 'Policies and Procedures of the ELCA for Addressing Social Concerns' (2018)" (CA22.01.07). This action authorized reconsideration for potential editing of three specific sections of the social statement. Consistent with the procedure for a reconsideration to edit, the action did not authorize reconsideration of the substantive meaning of the sections. Separately, the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted to authorize a substantive reconsideration of pages 19–21 of the original social statement (CA22.03.23).

The executive committee of the ELCA Church Council seated the ELCA Reconsiderations Task Force in 2024 and directed the task force to handle, first, a reconsideration for possible edits and, second, a reconsideration for possible substantive revision. The recommended, proposed edited social statement represents work on the first reconsideration, for possible edits. This decision balanced the desire for reconsideration work to begin with the capacity of the church for ELCA-wide discernment, given simultaneous work on other important matters, such as the work of the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church, consideration of a social statement on faith and civic life, and development of social messages.

After meeting in person in 2024 and 2025, posting the draft edits, considering feedback from the public comment period (October 2024–January 2025), and engaging in prayerful discernment, the task force reached consensus on a proposed edited social statement. This proposed text was reviewed by the Conference of Bishops and Church Council, and minor corrections were made to the text. The Church Council received the proposed text and voted to recommend it to the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

This recommended, proposed edited social statement is now publicly available through the ELCA website. The 2025 Churchwide Assembly will take action on this text in July or August 2025, after which the task force will begin work on the second reconsideration. Before then, ELCA synods may take action at their own assemblies by sending memorials to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly in response to the recommended, proposed text.

#### Executive Summary

The edits recommended in this document represent the discernment of the ELCA in reconsidering three specific sections of *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. Consistent with the 2022 Churchwide Assembly's authorization for reconsideration, these recommended, proposed edits are not intended to change the substantive meaning of the sections. Rather they respond to the assembly's authorization to update or clarify wording from the original social statement in light of:

- "The import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals."
- "Public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples."
- "[The] diversity of family configurations" (CA22.01.07).

These phrases from the authorization point to broad categories of edits found within the recommended, proposed edited social statement. The paragraphs below offer some examples of these categories.

In several places in the text, language from the original social statement was edited for consistency with the ELCA constitution and more recent social teachings, especially the social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* (2019). For example, in line 291, a reference to “sexual orientation and gender identity” was replaced with the phrase “sex, gender, and sexuality,” which is consistent with the meaning of the original text and with language adopted in *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*. This category of edits updates wording to reflect “current church understanding” as named by the assembly when it authorized the reconsideration.

Another category of edits involved updating language to reflect recognition of legal marriage between individuals of the same gender in the United States. For example, in several sentences describing marriage, gendered language (“husband and wife”) was replaced with nongendered language such as “marriage for both spouses” (line 105) or “the couple” (line 118). In addition, the heading in line 123 was changed to “Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in Marriage” to reflect the legality of marriages between individuals today.

Some of the text in the original social statement was moved within the sections for clarity. For example, a paragraph on “the historic Christian tradition” was moved to lines 151–154 in the recommended, proposed edited social statement. This places the paragraph in a more logical location within the section. Some edits reflect attention to the diversity of families. For example, in lines 65–66, the term “crucial” was deleted when describing the role of physical lovemaking in marriage. This edit reflects attention to married couples for whom physical lovemaking is not possible or not desired. Similarly, conditional language was added to descriptions of procreation. This reflects awareness that not all married couples anticipate or desire children (for example, see lines 113–115).

Some sentences or phrases were edited to reflect current language about sex, gender, sexuality, and marriage. For example, in line 130, the original social statement named “many of our sisters and brothers in same-gender relationships.” Consistent with current language, this was changed to “We in the ELCA recognize that many of our siblings of diverse sexual orientations in relationships....” This does not change the substantive meaning of the passage but reflects current language used in the *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA*.

The task force also recognizes in humility that all language is continually evolving, especially language about human sexuality and relationships. The proposed edits are intended to reflect language that is current and consistent with language used within the ELCA at the time of writing.

The section of the social statement that describes four convictions of conscience regarding same-gender sexual behavior and relationships (lines 169–198) was intentionally left unedited. Discernment of the public feedback on draft edits to this section led the task force to this decision. This section is the focus of the second reconsideration authorized by the 2022 Churchwide Assembly.

## **Recommended for assembly action:**

To adopt the identified changes to the social statement on *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009) as an editorial update to bring wording up to date, to clarify, and to bring it into congruence with subsequent social teaching, as authorized by 2022 Churchwide Assembly action CA22.01.07.

# Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

## Recommended, Proposed Edits and Explanations

The table below lists the edits contained in the Recommended, Proposed Edited Social Statement Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust. This text was posted online in April 2025 and will be considered for action by the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. More information on the reconsiderations process and the authorization for editorial reconsideration can be found at [ELCA.org/reconsiderations](https://elca.org/reconsiderations).

The explanations in the right-hand column are for informational use only and are not part of the Recommended, Proposed Edited Social Statement.

Line Numbers and Proposed Edits	Explanation for the Edit
<p>Lines 32-34</p> <p>Original: “Sexual intimacy, together with promises of fidelity and public accountability, nurtures bonds that allow people to thrive and provides a rich context for the care and support of children.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “Sexual intimacy, together with promises of fidelity and public accountability, is intended to nurture bonds that allow people to thrive. Additionally, marriage can provide a rich context for the care and support of children and dependents.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage and the diversity of family configurations, which may or may not involve having children. This edit proposes adding conditional language recognizing that marriage may not involve having or planning to have children.</p>
<p>Line 35 and accompanying endnotes</p> <p>Original: “Marriage is 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, reflecting Mark 10: 6–9: ‘But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.’ (Jesus here recalls Genesis 1:27; 2:23–24.) (see Addendum)”</p>	<p>Explanation: This paragraph and the accompanying footnotes were moved to lines 151-153. The new location places the original paragraph in a section that more closely focuses on concepts found in the paragraph. References to Mark 10 and Genesis 1 and 2 were moved to a new endnote, which allows for greater detail about the bible passages without changing the substantive meaning of the paragraph.</p>

<p>Lines 36-41 and endnotes</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “In the United States, individual states determine the legal status and definition of marriage and may not discriminate against marriages between individuals of legal age based on race, sex, gender, or sexuality. Within Christianity, marriage is often understood as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope between two individuals, authorized legally by the state and blessed by God. Ongoing interpretation of the Scriptures and the Confessions has introduced complex considerations to moral discernment about sex, gender, and sexuality, about which there is not universal agreement.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization for reconsideration directs the church to consider edits that reflect “current church understanding, church policy, civil law, and public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender non-conforming couples...” In this specific section, the authorization directs consideration “that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals.” The proposed edits in this paragraph reflect these directives.</p>
<p>Lines 43-46</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “As mentioned previously (page 10), this church recognizes that these matters are not central to our salvation, though they are central to the trust, flourishing, and well-being of human relationships. For this reason, they do require our best moral discernment, guided by Scripture, the sciences, and human experience, though this discernment may lead to different conclusions.”</p>	<p>Explanation: This proposed edit references language from an earlier section of the 2009 social statement. The proposed paragraph clarifies the substantive meaning of the subsection and its descriptive role in the social statement.</p>
<p>Lines 56-62</p> <p>Original: “Marriage requires constant care and cultivation. It is intended to protect the creation and nurturing of mutual trust and love as one foundation of human community. It is a binding relationship that provides conditions for personal well-being, the nourishing of the partner, and the possibility of procreation and the nurturing of children. It also is intended to be a blessing to the community and the world. Because of promises of fidelity and public accountability, marriage provides a context of love, trust, honesty, and commitment within which a couple can express the profound joy of relationship as well as address the troubles they encounter throughout life.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The proposed edits reflect acknowledgement that not all spouses intend or desire children. The proposed edits also reflect awareness that not all marriages meet the intentions of mutual trust and love. The conditional language added here does not change the substantive meaning of the paragraph.</p>

<p>Proposed Edit: “Marriage requires constant care and cultivation. It is intended to protect the creation and nurturing of mutual trust and love as one foundation of human community. Because of the promises of fidelity and public accountability, marriage is intended to provide a context of love, trust, honesty, and commitment, within which a couple can express the profound joy of relationship as well as address the troubles they encounter throughout life. It is a binding relationship that should provide conditions for personal well-being and the flourishing of the partner; it also can provide conditions for the raising and nurturing of children. It is intended to be a blessing to the community and the world.”</p>	
<p>Line 64</p> <p>Original: “Christians believe that marriage is not solely to legitimate physical sexual intimacy...”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “Christians believe that marriage is not solely to legitimize physical sexual intimacy...”</p>	<p>Explanation: During reconsideration, edits can be made to clarify without changing the existing text. The proposed change of verb in this sentence was based on requests in public feedback for greater clarity.</p>
<p>Lines 65-66</p> <p>Original: “...the play and delight of physical love are crucial expressions...”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “...the play and delight of physical love <u>are expressions</u>...”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage, the diversity of family configurations, and the “import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals.” The proposed edit acknowledges that this relationship may not involve physical expressions of love, either by choice or circumstance.</p>
<p>Line 72</p> <p>Original: “The public promises of marriage between a man and a woman, therefore, also protect the community...”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “The public promises of marriage, therefore, also protect the community...”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage and the “import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals.” The proposed edit reflects language consistent with those directives.</p>

<p>Lines 92-93</p> <p>Original: “Divorced individuals are encouraged to avail themselves of pastoral care, to be assured of God’s presence, forgiveness, and healing, and to remain in the communion of the church, recognizing the all-encompassing mercy of God.”</p> <p>Proposed edit: “Individuals experiencing marital distress are encouraged to avail themselves of pastoral care; to be assured of God’s presence, forgiveness, and healing; and to remain in the communion of the church, recognizing the all-encompassing mercy of God.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage. This proposed edit expands the sentence to include spouses experiencing marital distress or separation without changing the substantive meaning of the original text.</p>
<p>Lines 97-101</p> <p>Original: “This church will provide supportive pastoral care to those who are divorced. Further, it believes that those who wish to remarry may gain wisdom from the past and may be assured of the Gospel’s freedom, in the midst of brokenness and forgiveness, to enter into their new responsibilities in joy and hope. This church will tend pastorally to the special concerns of blended families, to children of divorced parents, and to the particular tensions that may accompany family breakdown and transition.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “This church will provide supportive pastoral care to those who are separated or divorced. Further, it believes that those who wish to remarry may gain wisdom from the past and may be assured of the Gospel’s freedom, amid brokenness and forgiveness, to enter into their new responsibilities in joy and hope. This church will tend pastorally to the special concerns of blended families, to children of separated or divorced parents, and to the particular tensions that may accompany family distress and transition.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage. This proposed edit expands without changing the substantive meaning of the text to include spouses and children in families in a wider variety of situations.</p>

<p>Lines 104</p> <p>Original: "...marriage for a husband and wife."</p> <p>Proposed Edit: ...marriage for both spouses...</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage and the "import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals." This proposed edit reflects attention to both directives.</p>
<p>Lines 112-114</p> <p>Original: "The legal contract creates a public arrangement within which a couple may safely and equitably share their assets and resources, arrive at joint decisions, anticipate children, protect and nurture them, and plan for a shared future."</p> <p>Proposed Edit: "The legal contract creates a public arrangement within which a couple can safely and equitably share their assets and resources, arrive at joint decisions, and plan for a shared future, and may anticipate, protect, and nurture children."</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage, the diversity of family configurations, and the "import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals," which may or may not involve having children. This proposed edit clarifies the conditional language that was in the original social statement and adds clarifying punctuation.</p>
<p>Lines 117</p> <p>Original: "...God's blessing on a man and a woman..."</p> <p>Proposed Edit: ...God's blessing on the couple...</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings of marriage and the "import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals." This proposed edit reflects attention to both directives.</p>
<p>Line 121</p> <p>Proposed Edit: Deleted paragraph from end of section.</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings and civil law. Much of the original text of this paragraph reflects pre-2015 legal and social understandings of marriage in society and the church. Moreover, the main idea of the paragraph is communicated more clearly and thoroughly in the subsequent subsection.</p>
<p>Lines 122</p> <p>Original: "Lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships"</p> <p>Proposed Edit: "Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in Marriage"</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to "review wording" in this section "in light of public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples." In addition, the general authorization directs the church to review wording in light of current church understanding. The proposed edit to the section title reflects language from the social statement <i>Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action</i> (2019).</p>

<p>Lines 123-125</p> <p>Original: "...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."</p> <p>Proposed Edit: "...in new ways the need or desire of individuals to seek marriage as a relationship of lifelong companionship and commitment, as well as public accountability and legal support."</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to "review wording" in this section "in light of public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples" and current civil law. In addition, the general authorization directs the church to review wording in light of current church understanding. The proposed edit here reflects updated wording consistent with these directives.</p>
<p>Line 126</p> <p>Original: "...understandings of human sexuality in medicine, social science, and corresponding public policy about same-gender relationships."</p> <p>Proposed Edit: "...understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality in medicine, social science, and corresponding public policy."</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to "review wording" in this section "in light of current church understanding. These proposed edits reflect updated wording based on more recent ELCA social teachings.</p>
<p>Line 129</p> <p>Original: "We in the ELCA recognize that many of our sisters and brothers in same-gender relationships..."</p> <p>Proposed Edit: "We in the ELCA recognize that many of our siblings of diverse sexual orientations in relationships..."</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understanding. The proposed edits are consistent with language in more recent social teaching and the ELCA constitution.</p>
<p>Lines 133-135</p> <p>Original: "We have come to various conclusions concerning how to regard lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, including whether and how to recognize publicly their lifelong commitments."</p> <p>Proposed Edit: "We have come to various conclusions concerning how to regard marriage of LGBTQ+ couples, including whether and how to recognize publicly those lifelong commitments within the context of this church."</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings. This proposed edit reflects updated language without changing the substantive meaning of the sentence.</p>



<p>Lines 137-139</p> <p>Original: “While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, this church is united on many critical issues. It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding marriage between individuals of diverse sex, gender, or sexuality, this church is united on many critical issues. It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on actual or perceived sex, gender, or sexuality.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings. This proposed edit reflects more current language without changing the substantive meaning of the sentence. This edit also reflects legal changes since 2009, as identified in the authorization.</p>
<p>Lines 141-142</p> <p>Original: “...support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “...support all couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to “review wording” in this section “in light of public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples” and current civil law. This proposed edit suggests current language that reflects these directives without changing the substantive meaning of the sentence.</p>

<p>Lines 144-149</p> <p>Original: “The ELCA recognizes that it has a pastoral responsibility to all children of God. This includes a pastoral responsibility to those who are same-gender in their orientation and to those who are seeking counsel about their sexual self-understanding. All are encouraged to avail themselves of the means of grace and pastoral care.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “The ELCA recognizes that it has a responsibility to care for all children of God. This includes a responsibility to minister to those with diverse sex, gender, or sexual identities and to those who are seeking counsel about their gender or sexual self-understanding. All are encouraged to avail themselves of the means of grace and pastoral care. This church understands pastoral care to be marked by a gracious affirmation of the value of the individual’s life and by concern for their well-being, regardless of their sex, gender, or sexuality.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to consider current church understandings. The proposed edits in this paragraph reflect updated language consistent with more recent social teachings and clarifying language drawn from other social statements (referenced in accompanying footnote #6.)</p>
<p>Lines 151-154</p> <p>Original: “This church also acknowledges that consensus does not exist concerning how to regard same-gender committed relationships, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful study and conversation. We do not have agreement on whether this church should honor these relationships and uplift, shelter, and protect them or on precisely how it is appropriate to do so.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “The historic Christian tradition has recognized marriage to be a covenant between a man and a woman, reflected in the language of Genesis 1:27; 2:23-24. However, this church acknowledges that consensus does not exist concerning how to regard marriage for couples of diverse sexual orientations, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful study and conversation.”</p>	<p>This proposed edit moves original text from the 2009 social statement from earlier in this section to here. In addition, the proposed edit deletes text that would be redundant in the paragraph given the moved text. This is a clarifying edit that does not change the substantive meaning of the paragraph.</p>

<p>Lines 165-205</p> <p>No proposed edits</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization for editorial reconsideration directed the church to consider updated language within this subsection. However, this subsection is the focus of the second, substantive reconsideration that will begin in Fall 2025. The task force, recognizing this and noting the deep concerns shared in feedback, intentionally did not attempt to edit language in this section. Reconsideration of this subsection will begin Fall 2025.</p>
<p>Lines 208-212</p> <p>Original: “In contemporary society, the term ‘family’ includes a variety of forms, more akin to the older term of ‘household,’ exclusively employed by Luther to include immediate family members, relatives, and others.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “In contemporary society, the term ‘family’ denotes a variety of forms, such as married couples, partners, children, extended relatives, and others who may be part of one’s chosen family. This understanding is more akin to the older term of ‘household,’ employed by Luther to include immediate family members, relatives, and others.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to “consider references to diversity of family configurations” in this section. The proposed edit suggests the breadth intended by the term “family” in the original text and in the authorization. The removal of the term “exclusively” reflects a more accurate description of Luther’s use of the term “household,” a correction that is within the parameters of editorial reconsiderations based on current church understanding.</p>
<p>Line 219-220</p> <p>Original: “...dependence upon parents and others...”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “...dependence upon parents, caregivers, and others...”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to “consider references to diversity of family configurations,” which often include non-parental caregivers. The proposed edit reflects this directive.</p>
<p>Lines 232-233</p> <p>Original: “As such, society properly both regulates and shelters families through family law...”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “As such, society is responsible for both protecting and supporting families through public policy...”</p>	<p>Explanation: This proposed edit offers clarifying language about society’s role in relation to regulating and sheltering families. It also clarifies that public policy affecting families is not limited to family law, an editorial correction that is within the scope of reconsideration and does not alter the substantive meaning of the sentence.</p>

<p>Line 250</p> <p>Original: “Many current social trends in the United States and elsewhere properly raise concerns about the health of families.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “Social trends in the United States and elsewhere properly raise concerns about the health of families.”</p>	<p>This minor edit corrects imprecise language that more accurately reflects awareness of social trends without changing the substantive meaning of the sentence. Such clarifying edits are within the scope of the authorization.</p>
<p>Lines 255-261</p> <p>Original: “In this country and throughout the twentieth century, the legally married, heterosexual ‘nuclear family’ has been supported by strong conventions. The nuclear family is well-structured to foster the development of trust in children and youth. The experience of millions of people and recent social science findings demonstrate its ability to do so. This does not mean, however, that it has always done so effectively. Families can shelter sexism or domestic violence, and, in such situations, the safety of children or others who are harmed is of utmost importance.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “In the latter half of the 20th century, the legally married, heterosexual, nuclear family was supported by strong social conventions. With that strong social support, the nuclear family fosters positive experiences for many people. This does not mean, however, that it has always done so effectively. In fact, families of all kinds can shelter sexism or domestic violence, and in such situations, the safety of children or others who may be harmed is of utmost importance. Moreover, there have always been wide variations in household structure, as stated above, including households with extended family members or non-biologically-related members.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to “consider references to diversity of family configurations” in this section. The proposed edits to this paragraph reflect awareness of the “diversity of family configurations” and recent research into diverse family configurations.</p>

<p>Lines 263-267</p> <p>Original: “In this country and in our congregations, families are formed in many ways. There are natural and adoptive families, foster families, blended families, families with a missing generation, and families where the parents are the same gender. Millions of households in the U.S., and many in our church, are headed by single parents—mostly women—whether widowed, divorced, or never married.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “In this country and in our congregations, families are formed in many ways. Some examples include biologically related and adoptive families, foster families, blended families, families with a missing generation, families without children, and families where the parents are the same sex or gender. Millions of households in the U.S., and many in our church, are headed by single or unmarried parents, whether widowed, divorced, or never married.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization directs the church to “consider references to diversity of family configurations” in this section. The proposed edits reflect this authorization, noting families without children and the diversity of households with single or unmarried parents. In addition, the proposed edit here reflects “current church understanding” and language from more recent social teachings and thus reflects the authorization.</p>
<p>Line 274</p> <p>Original: “...regardless of their family situation.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “...regardless of their family situation or household structure.”</p>	<p>Explanation: This proposed edit reflects the authorization’s directive to “consider references to diversity of family configurations” in this section.</p>
<p>Lines 276-278</p> <p>Original: “It also has the task of addressing and advocating against social and economic trends that counter the development of strong families.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “It also has the task of addressing and advocating against social and economic trends that inhibit the development of strong families.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The proposed edit of the verb from “counter” to “inhibit” is intended to clarify the sentence without changing the substantive meaning of it and so falls within the parameters of reconsideration.</p>

<p>Line 283-284</p> <p>Original: “These practices honor God and, when learned in the context of a loving and committed family, may lead to mature and healthy expressions of sexuality. When trust has been betrayed in such situations, then forgiveness, loving correction, and reconciliation must be attempted.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “When trust has been betrayed in such situations, then forgiveness, loving correction, and reconciliation should be encouraged when appropriate to the specific situation.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization for reconsideration directs the church to consider “current church understanding” and “the diversity of family configurations.” The proposed edit reflects current church understanding of the complexity of forgiveness in situations of abuse as described in more recent social teachings. A footnote referring to the ELCA’s social message on “Gender-based Violence,” which discusses forgiveness, is included in the proposed edits.</p>
<p>Lines 286-291</p> <p>Original: “This church acknowledges with regret the way in which the misuse of historical teachings concerning sexuality has harmed individuals, deepened suffering, or torn families apart. This includes actions that abandon or shun people for unwed pregnancy or for a same-gender orientation. Hate crimes and violence against those who are regarded as sexually different sometimes have been perpetrated publicly in the name of Christ. Not only must such behaviors be denounced, but this church must work toward greater understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity.”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “This church acknowledges with regret the way in which the misuse of historical teachings concerning sex, gender, and sexuality has harmed individuals, deepened suffering, or torn families apart. This includes actions that abandon or shun people for unwed pregnancy, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Hate crimes and violence based on the victim’s actual or perceived sex, gender, or sexuality sometimes are perpetrated in the name of Christ. Not only must such behaviors be denounced, but this church must work toward greater understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality.”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization for reconsideration directs the church to consider “current church understanding.” This proposed edit reflects current church understanding and language as found in more recent social teachings (see the ELCA’s social statement <i>Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action</i>, 2019)</p>

<p>Line 305</p> <p>Proposed Edit: endnote added</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization for reconsideration directs the church to consider “current church understanding.” This endnote refers to more recent social teachings, including the social statement <i>Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action</i> (2019) and the social message “Gender-based Violence” (2015). These references support without changing the substantive meaning of the text.</p>
<p>Line 309</p> <p>Original: “Society at large must ensure that all who are dependent upon others in the family...”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “Society at large must ensure that all who are dependent upon others in the household...”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization for reconsideration directs the church to consider in this subsection the diversity of family configurations. The proposed edit is consistent with that authorization and with language used earlier in this subsection.</p>
<p>Line 317</p> <p>Original: “This church commits itself to continued attention to and discernment about changing family configurations...”</p> <p>Proposed Edit: “This church commits itself to continued attention to and discernment about diverse family configurations...”</p>	<p>Explanation: The authorization for reconsideration directs the church to consider in this subsection the diversity of family configurations. This proposed edit is consistent with this authorization and further clarifies the substantive meaning of the sentence.</p>



## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

### A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

*The social statement Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust was amended and adopted by a two-thirds vote (676-338) by the eleventh biennial Churchwide Assembly on August 19, 2009, at Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

*The edited text below is not official ELCA teaching but rather is the ELCA Church Council Recommended, Proposed Social Statement for consideration by the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.*

**Reader's Note:** The 2022 Churchwide Assembly authorized an editorial reconsideration of three subsections of section IV, from pages 15 to 24 of the 2009 adopted social statement. The task force assigned this work sought to update or clarify wording from the original social statement in light of

- “the import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals”
- “public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples” and
- “[the] diversity of family configurations” (CA22.01.07).

**Green indicates Recommended Proposed Edits, for easy identification.**

*The 2009 social statement is unaltered up to this point on page 15.*

#### **IV. Sexuality and social structures that enhance social trust**

Lutherans believe that God works through social structures for the good of society. The Lutheran Confessions identify marriage and the family as foundational structures that support human community.

##### **Marriage: shelter and context for trust**

Trust is a quality of relationship that, while never perfected, is nurtured and reinforced over time. The trust and mutuality afforded by marriage can make marriage one of the most beautiful, abiding, and transformative forms of human relationship. Depth of care, matched to an intimacy of touch, creates relationships much stronger than simple and momentary erotic interest. Sexual intimacy, together with promises of fidelity and public accountability, is intended to nurture bonds that allow people to thrive. Additionally, marriage can provide a rich context for the care and support of children and dependents.

In the United States, individual states determine the legal status and definition of marriage and may not discriminate against marriages between individuals of legal age based on race, sex, gender, or sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Within Christianity, marriage is often understood as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope between two individuals, authorized legally by the state and blessed by God. Ongoing interpretation of the Scriptures and the Confessions<sup>2</sup> has introduced complex considerations to moral discernment about sex, gender, and sexuality, about which there is not universal agreement.

As mentioned previously (page 10), this church recognizes that these matters are not central to our salvation, though they are central to the trust, flourishing, and well-being of human relationships. For this reason, they do require our best moral discernment, guided by Scripture, the sciences, and human experience, though this discernment may lead to different conclusions.

Lutherans long have affirmed that the public accountability of marriage, as expressed through a legal



contract, provides the necessary social support and social trust for relationships that are intended to be sustained throughout life and within changing and often challenging life situations. In this country, pastors carry both legal and religious responsibilities for marriage. In carrying out these responsibilities, pastors hold and exercise pastoral discretion for the decision to marry in the church. In the community of the church they preside over the mutual promises made between a couple seeking the lifelong, monogamous, and faithful relationship of marriage.

Marriage requires constant care and cultivation. It is intended to protect the creation and nurturing of mutual trust and love as one foundation of human community. Because of the promises of fidelity and public accountability, marriage is intended to provide a context of love, trust, honesty, and commitment, within which a couple can express the profound joy of relationship as well as address the troubles they encounter throughout life. It is a binding relationship that should provide conditions for personal well-being and the flourishing of the partner; it also can provide conditions for the raising and nurturing of children.<sup>3</sup> It is intended to be a blessing to the community and the world.

Christians believe that marriage is not solely to legitimize physical sexual intimacy but to support long-term and durable communion for the good of others.<sup>4</sup> It is a communion within which the play and delight of love are expressions of the depth of trust and in which lovemaking can be a tender and generous act of self-giving that tends to the joy and pleasure of the other.

The public character of marriage also implies a civil responsibility. Marriage is intended not only to protect the people who are married, but to signal to the community their intention to live a peaceful and mutually fulfilling life, even as they endeavor to strengthen the community in which they live. The public promises of marriage, therefore, 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.

The Christian commitment to marriage recognizes that sin enters all relationships, both within and outside the institution of marriage. All marriages fall short of intentions, and difficulties are inevitable, both because of the different needs and desires of the two individuals and because of sin, which places the anxious concern for self before the needs of the other. Infidelity to marriage promises betrays the intimate trust of the partner, the security of the family, and the public trust of the community.

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. Harming another emotionally, physically, or spiritually, including through the misuse or abuse of power, is a profound injury. It also is a betrayal and violation of the shelter and trust that are intended within the marriage relationship. Particular care must be taken to support and find safe haven for all who are at risk within a marriage. This includes those whose sense of self is destroyed or damaged within the marriage relationship and, therefore, whose ability to act or advocate for their own health and safety may be inhibited or lost.

This church recognizes that in some situations the trust upon which marriage is built becomes so deeply damaged or is so deeply flawed that the marriage itself must come to a legal end (Matthew 19:3-12). This church does not treat divorce lightly, nor does it disregard the responsibilities of marriage. However, in such situations, it provides support to the people involved and all who are affected. Individuals experiencing marital distress are encouraged to avail themselves of pastoral care; to be assured of God's presence, forgiveness, and healing; and to remain in the communion of the church, recognizing the all-encompassing mercy of God.

This church will provide supportive pastoral care to those who are separated or divorced. Further, it believes that those who wish to remarry may gain wisdom from the past and may be assured of the Gospel's freedom, amid brokenness and forgiveness, to enter into their new responsibilities in joy and

hope. This church will tend pastorally to the special concerns of blended families, to children of separated or divorced parents, and to the particular tensions that may accompany family distress and transition.

Despite its awareness of the presence of sin and failure in marriage, the Christian tradition places great emphasis on the value of marriage for both spouses. It is in marriage that the highest degrees of physical intimacy are matched with and protected by the highest levels of binding commitment, including legal protection. It is in marriage that public promises of lifetime commitment can create the foundation for trust, intimacy, and safety.

Both the couple's intent in their lifelong promises and the civil requirements for marriage are important. Mutual promises of enduring care and fidelity, made before God, allow a couple to open themselves to each other. They permit the sharing of profound and tender affection as well as deep vulnerabilities and anxieties. The legal contract creates a public arrangement, within which a couple can safely and equitably share their assets and resources, arrive at joint decisions, and plan for a shared future, and may anticipate protect, and nurture children.

The church's historical experience supports its confidence that solemn promises, made before a company of witnesses who ask for God's blessing on the couple, have the power to create a unique framework within which two people, a new family, and the community may thrive. Consistent with that experience, this church has confidence that such promises, supported by the contractual framework of civil law, can create a lifetime relationship of commitment and cooperation.

### **Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in Marriage**

Within the last decades, this church has begun to understand and experience in new ways the need or desire of individuals to seek marriage as a relationship of lifelong companionship and commitment, as well as public accountability and legal support. At the same time, public debates and deliberations have continued regarding understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality in medicine, social science, and corresponding public policy.

We in the ELCA recognize that many of our siblings of diverse sexual orientations in relationships sincerely desire the support of other Christians for living faithfully in all aspects of their lives, including their sexual fidelity. In response, we have drawn deeply on our Lutheran theological heritage and Scripture. This has led, however, to differing and conscience-bound understandings about the place of such relationships within the Christian community. We have come to various conclusions concerning how to regard marriage of LGBTQ+ couples, including whether and how to recognize publicly those lifelong commitments within the context of this church.

While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding marriage between individuals of diverse sex, gender, or sexuality, this church is united on many critical issues.<sup>5</sup> It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on actual or perceived sex, gender, or sexuality. It supports legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services. It has called upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support all couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection.

The ELCA recognizes that it has a responsibility to care for all children of God. This includes a responsibility to minister to those with diverse sex, gender, or sexual identities and to those who are seeking counsel about their gender or sexual self-understanding. All are encouraged to avail themselves of the means of grace and pastoral care. This church understands pastoral care to be marked by a gracious affirmation of the value of the individual's life and by concern for their well-being, regardless of their sex, gender, or sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

The historic Christian tradition has recognized marriage to be a covenant between a man and a woman, reflected in the language of Genesis 1:27; 2:23-24.<sup>7</sup> However, this church acknowledges that consensus does not exist concerning how to regard marriage for couples of diverse sexual orientations, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful study and conversation.

In response, this church draws on the foundational Lutheran understanding that the baptized are called to discern God's love in service to the neighbor. In our Christian freedom, we therefore seek responsible actions that serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the conscience-bound beliefs of others. We understand that, in this discernment about ethics and church practice, faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of Scripture<sup>8</sup> and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of "the bound conscience,"<sup>9</sup> will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.

*The following section will be the focus of the next Reconsideration Process. The task force, recognizing this and noting the deep concerns shared in feedback, intentionally did not attempt to clarify or update language in the following bullet points.*

This church recognizes that, with conviction and integrity:

- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law. They believe same-gender sexual behavior carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin. They therefore conclude that the neighbor and the community are best served by calling people in same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle. Such decisions are intended to be accompanied by pastoral response and community support.
- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that homosexuality and even lifelong, monogamous, homosexual relationships reflect a broken world in which some relationships do not pattern themselves after the creation God intended. While they acknowledge that such relationships may be lived out with mutuality and care, they do not believe that the neighbor or community are best served by publicly recognizing such relationships as traditional marriage.
- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and lifelong loving and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability, but they do not equate these relationships with marriage. They do, however, affirm the need for community support and the role of pastoral care and may wish to surround lifelong, monogamous relationships or covenant unions with prayer.
- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage. They surround such couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God, find strength for the challenges that will be faced, and serve others. They believe same-gender couples should avail themselves of social and legal support for themselves, their children, and other dependents and seek the highest legal accountability available for their 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 in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community. Regarding our life together as we live with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect.

### **Loving families: ground and source for social trust**

One of the places where social trust is most important is in the context of the family. In contemporary society, the term “family” denotes a variety of forms, such as married couples, partners, children, extended relatives, and others who may be part of one’s chosen family. This understanding is more akin to the older term “household,” employed by Luther to include immediate family members, relatives, and others.

Lutherans understand that intimacy, trust, and safety, particularly for those most vulnerable, are best sheltered within families. When safety and trust are eroded or destroyed within the family, it becomes a dangerous or even demonic place where abuse can reign. Thus, Lutherans take great care to support whatever creates and sustains strong families as a foundation and source of trust.

Children learn either trust or distrust from their earliest relationships of dependence upon parents, caregivers, and others in the household. Patterns of loyalty and confidence established in the family can reach into all future relationships. Those who do not learn to trust face significant obstacles to becoming trustworthy individuals in the more complicated relationships of modern life and may find it difficult to develop a mature and healthy sexuality.

The family is a primary source of trust precisely because of the remarkable level of commitment and care that characterizes familial bonds. While Scripture places family as secondary to the community of God’s people (Matthew 10:37; 12:49), it also attests to the family’s foundational role in protecting and nurturing human community (Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1–4). The Lutheran Confessions recognize this role<sup>10</sup> and the connection between family and sexuality in their discussions of the commandments related to each.<sup>11</sup>

This church regards the family as an indispensable social institution because of its role in establishing conditions of trust and protection of the vulnerable. As such, society is responsible for both protecting and supporting families through public policy to ensure that these critical responsibilities will be met and that dependent family members will be protected and treated justly when households dissolve.<sup>12</sup>

Social service ministries of this and other churches work to secure the well-being of families in many ways. They give particular attention to those who have no family or to families with limited resources. They raise their moral voice to affirm and celebrate the life-giving importance of familial covenants of care. They teach others to embrace these callings of responsibility and love.

At the same time, realistic awareness of weakness and sin prevents Lutherans from romanticizing family life or setting up false ideals. In particular, sexual abuse or betrayal of promises and commitments within the family constitute flagrant harm precisely because they occur within the context where trust is most assumed.

This church recognizes its responsibility in congregations and through social ministry organizations to support its members and others in all the difficulties that beset family life and to seek ways to ensure and support the protection of the most vulnerable.

**Social trends**<sup>13</sup> in the United States and elsewhere properly raise concerns about the health of families. While these trends do involve individuals who carry personal responsibility for their choices, they also are driven by economic and social forces that are both complex in origin and significantly resistant to

correction.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the legally married, heterosexual, nuclear family was supported by strong social conventions. With that strong social support, the nuclear family fosters positive experiences for many people. This does not mean, however, that it has always done so effectively. In fact, families of all kinds can shelter sexism or domestic violence, and in such situations, the safety of children or others who may be harmed is of utmost importance. Moreover, there have always been wide variations in household structure, as stated above, including households with extended family members or non-biologically-related members.

In this country and in our congregations, families are formed in many ways. Some examples include biologically related and adoptive families, foster families, blended families, families with a missing generation, families without children, and families where the parents are the same sex or gender. Millions of households in the U.S., and many in our church, are headed by single or unmarried parents, whether widowed, divorced, or never married. The critical issue with respect to the family is not whether it has a conventional form but how it performs indispensable individual and social tasks. All families have responsibility for the tasks of providing safety, shielding intimacy, and developing trustworthy relationships.

This church's first response toward families and households should be one of welcome and support that includes particularly the care for and safety of children. Children are to be invited into the community of the baptized regardless of their family situation or household structure.

This church responds to the needs of families through its ministry and service in various settings. It also has the task of addressing and advocating against social and economic trends that inhibit the development of strong families.

Through the proclamation of God's Word and the sacraments, God creates and strengthens faith and supports believers both inside and outside of families. Family life also is supported when its members strive to meet reasonable expectations to forgive and to seek forgiveness and to bear each other's burdens responsibly. When trust has been betrayed in such situations, then forgiveness, loving correction, and reconciliation should be encouraged when appropriate to the specific situation.<sup>14</sup>

This church acknowledges with regret the way in which the misuse of historical teachings concerning sex, gender, and sexuality has harmed individuals, deepened suffering, or torn families apart. This includes actions that abandon or shun people for unwed pregnancy, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Hate crimes and violence based on the victim's actual or perceived sex, gender, or sexuality sometimes are perpetrated in the name of Christ. Not only must such behaviors be denounced, but this church must work toward greater understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of one's belief, on the complex topics in this social statement, this church must seek that which is positive and life-giving for the neighbor while protecting each other from that which is harmful and destructive (Matthew 22:39-40.)<sup>16</sup>

Since social trust is directly related to social justice, this church must call for justice in matters relating to families and sexuality. Complex and profound changes have occurred in family law over the past fifty years relating to divorce, alimony and child support, custody, adoption, parental rights, and civil unions. The continuing evolution of family law is of vital importance as legislators and courts strive to protect dependent individuals and justly assign responsibility for their care.

These laws have a direct impact on patterns of social trust within households and networks of kinship. Criminal statutes, state enforcement, and judicial handling of matters related to sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual threats, and domestic violence require our close attention.<sup>17</sup> Victims of sexual violation must be able to rely on public institutions for intervention in troubled relationships. They must be able to expect protection when their trust in an individual has been abused.

Society at large must ensure that **all who are dependent upon others in the household** for spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being are protected by social policies and practices. Even social institutions and practices not directly related to family institutions can and should facilitate and support familial care and responsibility. Examples include tax and poverty law, real estate and zoning regulations, and insurance industry policies and practices.

The ELCA will support familial relationships as central to nurturing and sustaining trust and security in human relationships. It will advocate for public policies that support and protect families. This church commits itself to continued attention to and **discernment about diverse family configurations** and the ways they serve to shelter and protect relationships of mutual trust.

*2009 social statement continues unaltered from this point onward, see page 25.*

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<sup>1</sup> In the United States, marriage is defined by state law. The U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015) holds that states may not discriminate against marriages between individuals according to sex, gender, or sexuality, but otherwise the legality of marriage in the U.S. is determined at the state level.

<sup>2</sup> "The Lutheran Confessions are Reformation-era writings, central to Lutheran theology and practice and constitutionally affirmed by the ELCA" (ELCA, *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* [Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019], p. 71, footnote 14). Though the writings that constitute the Book of Concord (commonly referred to as the Lutheran Confessions) engage a range of issues regarding teaching and practice, they do not address every question or topic. Rather they focus on the Scriptures' purpose: to reveal Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> This church acknowledges that there are multiple ways of nurturing children, including but not limited to caring for one's own biological or adopted children.

<sup>4</sup> (formerly footnote 23) Luther's concluding explanation of the sixth commandment says about marriage: "... above all it is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity." Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 219 (BC 200:415).

<sup>5</sup> (formerly footnote 24) See ELCA Church Council minutes for 1993 and ELCA Churchwide Assembly minutes for 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1999 respectively: CC93.03.37; CA91.07.51; CA93.03.4; CA95.6.50; CA99.06.27. These actions may be found at [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org).

<sup>6</sup> A similar approach to pastoral care is evident in other ELCA social teaching; see, for an early example, the 1991 ELCA social statement on abortion, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> While not the only reference in Scripture to marriage, Genesis 1:27; 2:23–24 has been a core source for the historic Christian tradition. It is often cited alongside Mark 10:6–9, where Jesus references the Genesis verses while responding to the male-privileged divorce practices of his day and forbidding all divorce: "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. For this reason ... the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

<sup>8</sup> (formerly footnote 25) "The difference between interpreters should not be understood as a conflict between those who seek to be 'true to Scripture' and those who seek to 'twist the Bible' to their own liking. The disagreements are genuine." This is the conclusion of Dr. Arland J. Hultgren and Dr. Walter F. Taylor Jr. Both are members of the ELCA and both are highly regarded scholars and teachers. The citation is from Arland Hultgren and Walter Taylor, Background Essay on Biblical Texts for Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality. (Chicago: ELCA, September 2003), 18. This essay was written at the request of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. It can be accessed at [resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/journey-together-faithfully-part-2/](http://resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/journey-together-faithfully-part-2/).



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<sup>9</sup>(formerly footnote 26) The Apostle Paul testifies to conscience as the unconditional moral responsibility of the individual before God (Romans 2:15–16). In the face of different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action, the concept of “the conscience” becomes pivotal.

When the clear word of God’s saving action by grace through faith is at stake, Christian conscience becomes as adamant as Paul, who opposed those who insisted upon circumcision (Galatians 1:8). In the same way Luther announced at his trial for heresy, “Unless I am persuaded by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason . . . I am conquered by the Scripture passages I have adduced and my conscience is captive to the words of God. I neither can nor desire to recant anything, when to do so against conscience would be neither safe nor wholesome” (WA 7: 838; *Luther’s Works* 32:112). However, when the question is about morality or church practice, the Pauline and Lutheran witness is less adamant and believes we may be called to respect the bound conscience of the neighbor. That is, if salvation is not at stake in a particular question, Christians are free to give priority to the neighbor’s well-being and will protect the conscience of the neighbor, who may well view the same question in such a way as to affect faith itself. For example, Paul was confident that Christian freedom meant the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not at stake in questions of meat sacrificed to idols or the rituals of holy days (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8:10–14 and 10:23–30). Yet he insisted that, if a brother or sister did not understand this freedom and saw eating this meat as idolatry to a pagan god, the Christian was obligated to “walk in love” by eating just vegetables for the neighbor’s sake (Romans 14:17–20)!

<sup>10</sup>(formerly footnote 27) This social statement draws upon this rich understanding of the role of conscience and calls upon this church, when in disagreement concerning matters around which salvation is not at stake, including human sexuality, to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), honor the conscience, and seek the well-being of the neighbor. 27 This is evident in Luther’s commentary on parental responsibilities. See Small Catechism, Preface, par. 19–20 (BC 2000:350), and Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 167–78 (BC 2000:409–410).

<sup>11</sup>(formerly footnote 28) See, for instance, Luther’s reference to the fourth commandment while discussing the sixth: Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 167–178 (BC 2000:413ff.); see also, par. 206 and 218.

<sup>12</sup>(formerly footnote 29) These include laws governing marriage, dissolution of marriage, inheritance, guardianship, custody, parental rights and duties, property, pensions, social security, taxes, and health benefits. The interdependence and mutual responsibilities of married couples are crucial in welding them into a legal unit as well as a loving household. Parents and guardians are legally compelled to attend to the welfare, support, protection, and education of their children and youth.

<sup>13</sup> Such trends include remarkably large numbers of physically or psychologically absent fathers and teenagers with parenting responsibilities for which they are not prepared. They include the reluctance of some individuals to commit themselves to marriage. Stresses on marriages and individuals in marriages contribute to high rates of divorce with accompanying concerns for children and other extended family members.

<sup>14</sup> Forgiveness and reconciliation can be appropriate responses in certain situations; however, in the context of care, neither can be demanded of victims of violence or betrayal. “Christians are not in a position to demand forgiveness by others for others. Coercing someone to forgive may actually subvert healing and accountability” (“Gender-based Violence,” p. 10).

<sup>15</sup> ELCA social message, “Gender-based Violence,” pp. 2, 6-10.

<sup>16</sup> See *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*, pp. 2-5, 12-14, 28-30, 34-35, 61-62.

<sup>17</sup> For more on domestic violence and gender-based violence, see *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*, p. 76. See also “Gender-based Violence” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2015.)