

# **A Guide for Talking Together about Shared Ministry with Same-Sex Couples and Their Families**



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

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“A Guide for Talking Together about Shared Ministry with Same-Sex Couples and Their Families”  
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The Office of the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wishes to express deep gratitude to the Rev. Dr. R. Gregg Kaufman whose service as primary writer of this resource truly exemplifies what it means to “go the second mile.” Rev. Kaufman is a retired ELCA pastor and university faculty member. He currently serves as a Kettering Foundation Research Associate and is a member of the National Issues Forums Institute network.

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## WHY THIS RESOURCE: AN INTRODUCTION

This conversation series is provided in response to requests from synods and congregations seeking conversation guidance and resource sharing about the practice of ministry in light of changing family configurations. These requests arise in a context of social change and a background of churchwide conversation regarding views on human sexuality in general and same-sex<sup>1</sup> relationships in particular.

The benchmark of change within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) includes the social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" (HS:GT) and a set of ministry policy resolutions, both adopted by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2009. (See Appendix 2 for important detail.) The benchmark of change within U.S. culture is the 2015 Supreme Court ruling (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015<sup>2</sup>), which made marriage legal for same-sex couples in all 50 states.

The ELCA is learning what an extraordinary challenge it is to live into being a church that recognizes and lives with a range of varied, diverse, even at times contradictory, understandings and practices. These challenges and opportunities continue to call forth the confident and daring faith Martin Luther described, a faith empowered by God to trust the Spirit to see us through as conversations continue.

Prompted by a resolution from the 2013 Churchwide Assembly that lifted up the concern for pastoral response to changing family configurations, the ELCA Church Council in November 2013 authorized formation of a working group. That working group was charged to return a report and recommendations regarding ministry to and with same-gender couples and their families. One of their recommendations included creation of a constructive conversation resource to guide discernment and dialogue about ministry.

It is easy to understand the need for this guide. ELCA members, like many in this society, hold a wide diversity of perspectives on same-gender relations. Those perspectives run from hostility to celebration of same-sex marriage, with many that lie in between. The "in-between" in this case includes, but is not limited to, traditional views, passive acceptance and those who think this is a non-issue now. In the context of ongoing discernment within the ELCA about the Spirit's guidance on how to regard same-gender relationships, our church recognizes that, "faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of Scripture and about what constitutes responsible action" (HS:GT, p. 19). In this context, the social statement identifies a range from traditionalist views to full inclusion as expressions of shared Christian freedom. Likewise, ELCA members and congregations also reflect a range of perspectives, policies and practices in regard to ministry with and to same-gender couples and their families.

Despite this range, all ELCA congregations and members are called as part of the body of Christ "to welcome, care for, and support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection" (HS:GT, p. 19). The presence of same-sex individuals within many congregations, whether quietly or openly, the right to marry, and the increasing concern that gay and lesbian children be accepted for who they are provide challenges and opportunities that congregations cannot ignore.

<sup>1</sup> ELCA documents, reflecting the ongoing shifts in terminology have used a variety of terms, such as "homosexuality," "same-sex" and "same-gender." This study will use these interchangeably since it depends on the wording of previous documents. The term "same-sex" is the most common term as this text goes to publication.

<sup>2</sup> The court held that "the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples by both the Due Process Clause and Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution."

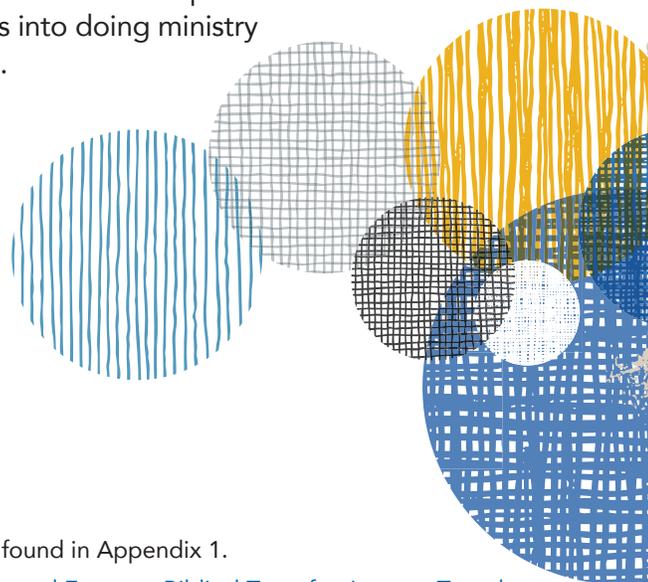
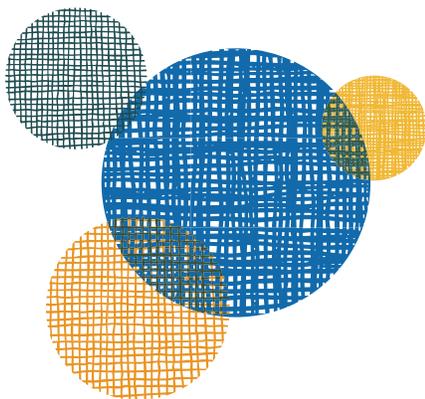
Congregations, then, are being challenged to talk about same-sex issues as never before.

Many congregations have turned to two church-related but independent organizations representing opposite perspectives relative to same-gender marriage and family. Lutheran CORE is a network and voice for Lutherans who advocate traditional views on marriage and oppose religious blessings of same-gender relationships. ReconcilingWorks is a network and voice that promotes inclusion and equity for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) Lutherans and strongly affirms marriage of same-sex couples. Both organizations believe they are being faithful to the spirit of scriptural authority, the Lutheran heritage and Jesus' encouragement to love our neighbors.<sup>3</sup>

However, there is reason to believe that a significant number of congregations as well as their members and leaders are not inclined to affiliate with or use materials solely from either. Many congregations include nearly even mixes of perspectives along the continuum noted above. Many congregations desire to talk about the church's role in a changing cultural landscape through prayerful discernment and respectful dialogue. Many congregations, for the first time, are being challenged by or are seeking opportunities anew to consider ministry practices with and to same-gender couples and their families. This resource is for them.

It is important to stress that this guide to conversation is not designed to revisit questions about personal perspectives regarding same-sex relationships, and it is not intended to change peoples' minds on those issues. It does not focus on the ELCA's decision to permit diverse perspectives or practices. There are other resources for those conversations<sup>4</sup>, and the ELCA social statement frames such discussions.

Rather, this four-part series is intended to help people talk about practical ministry questions that can be challenging in certain contexts. It assumes the diversity of perspectives present in many congregations and is designed to help individuals talk together about how they will live out faithful mission and ministry in the world. It is a resource for the many congregations that exist both with a range of perspectives and with growing numbers of same-gender couples and their families in its pews. It is a resource for congregations that want to ask: How can conversations lead us into doing ministry that is life-giving for all? That is the invitation of this resource.



<sup>3</sup> More information about and links to the resources each provides can be found in Appendix 1.

<sup>4</sup> [Journey Together Faithfully, ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Part Two; Background Essay on Biblical Texts for Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality](#). (Chicago: ELCA, September 2003); [Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust Social Statement](#).