

Human Sexuality Reconsiderations: Conversation Leader Guide

Dear Friends in Christ,

Fifteen years have passed since the ELCA adopted the social message on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust. In that time, so much has changed, from laws about marriage to the language U.S. society and culture uses to describe sex, gender, and sexuality. With many civil, cultural, and societal changes in mind, the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized our church to revisit the social statement for possible edits. The ELCA Church Council seated a task force in 2024 to help lead the church through this process. The draft edits the task force suggested are now online. Gathering feedback and comments from across the ELCA is the next step in



that process, and leading your group through a conversation about the draft edits is a critical part of that.

This can be done in many ways. Below is a suggestion for how to host conversations to gather feedback within your community. Please feel free to adapt it to meet your needs. On the following page is a list of tips for navigating conversations that we hope will be useful, too.

Thank you for being part of this work.

In Christ,

The Theological Ethics team of the ELCA Churchwide Organization



Before Your Gathering

The key outcome from your gathering is to generate feedback to share with the task force. This feedback can be shared through an online survey, letters, email, or a hard-copy survey that can be mailed to the address below. All feedback will be shared with members of the task force. Remind participants that their perspectives matter. Developing – or reconsidering – social teaching is a calling for the whole church.

Provide materials to participants at least a week ahead so that they have time to read before your conversation. At a minimum, participants should have copies of:

- The draft edits;
- The whole Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust social statement; and
- The list of explanations to the edits.

Ask for a volunteer (or, even better, two volunteers) to take notes during the conversation. These notes can be sent to the task force as feedback from your group. Do not collect identifying information about participants in the notes.

Getting Started

Your plan should meet your community's needs but try to include some of the activities below.

- 1) **Open with prayer.**
- 2) **Invite the group to commit to honest, faithful, and loving conversation.** You may want to use a group covenant to guide your time together. This covenant should include commitments to listen carefully, to share with honesty, to respect each person's perspective, and to show love, even when we disagree.
- 3) **Remind participants of the purpose.** The main focus of your time should be generating feedback on the draft edits. Your group may need to cover the social

statement as a whole, but staying focused on the draft edits can help generate useful feedback for the task force.

- 4) **Read aloud the authorizations from the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly**
(see below.)

Reviewing the Text

- 5) **Organize your conversation.** There are three sections of the social statement with draft edits. Focus your time by reviewing one section or one set of paragraphs at a time.
- 6) **Think-Pair-Share.** Some people will need more time to gather their thoughts. In this activity, read aloud a section of edits. Then, allow people to think silently to themselves for 1-2 minutes. Next, divide the group into pairs to talk about their reactions to the draft edit(s). Finally, invite each pair to share back to the larger group what they talked about together.

7) **Allow for confusion.** This may sound counterproductive but allow space for confusion or uncertainty about the draft edits. If there is a question that is not answered by the explanations sheet, make note of it. If an edit is unclear, the task force needs to know this.

8) **Take notes.** The notetaker should try to capture as best as possible the participants' comments. If a comment is about a specific edit, please note the line number of the edit.

Some Sample Questions to Ask

- What has changed in U.S. society when it comes to sex, sexuality, and marriage since 2009? What has changed in the church since then?
- Does this draft edit make sense to you?
- In what ways is the draft edit clearer than the original text?
- What is the reason for the draft edit in the “Explanations of Draft Edits”? How does the edit fit in the authorization from the ELCA Churchwide Assembly (see addendum below)?

Closing the Conversation

9) **Close in prayer**, giving thanks to God for the many perspectives the group shared.

10) **Review the process for sharing feedback.** Your notes can be sent to the task force directly, but inviting participants to take the survey is important too.

Sharing Feedback

Online survey: Available at www.elca.org/reconsiderations

By email: Reconsiderations@elca.org

By mail: Human Sexuality Reconsiderations Task Force

ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd.

Chicago, IL 60631

THANK YOU FOR BEING PART OF THIS IMPORTANT WORK OF THE CHURCH



Tips for Guiding Discussions

Discussions about sex, gender, and sexuality often involve the deepest parts of ourselves - who we are, our personal stories and experiences (both positive and negative), and our convictions about God and the world. As you begin your conversations, remember that our words matter.

Before you get started, it's important to know that most people participate in moral deliberation because they care about what the church has to say about the issues that affect our lives. That's a good thing. Thinking together about complex moral issues is faithful work.

But thinking together is also hard work. Powerful emotions can be faithful responses to the human realities of the church. As your group shares, remember to care for one another - to listen closely, to affirm each other, and to learn together.

Set the stage. Be sure to set some ground rules for open and respectful conversation. Encourage people to be active listeners to each other and to speak in “I” statements rather than making generalizations. Remind them that the body of Christ is called to be a brave space to share with honesty - and remind them that the church has not always been a safe space for many of us. Setting the stage means being intentional about caring for one another.

Pray. Do not underestimate the importance of coming together in prayer to bring your frustrations, concerns, hopes, fears, anger and pain to God. In prayer, we trust that God hears the cries of those in need and responds in mercy. We also trust that God sends the Spirit to inspire us with wisdom, patience and the will to love and serve in meaningful ways.

Dig deeper – if appropriate. Ask clarifying questions to help people think critically about what they’re feeling and why. What about this upsets you? Why do you think you’re reacting so strongly? What truth or hope has been disappointed for you? Give

space, too, for those who are not comfortable digging deeper. For some, these conversations may not be easy or safe. If someone does not want to share, respect their choice.

Name and connect. Help your participants to name their emotion. Is it disappointment? Frustration? Fear? Anger? These emotions can be painted in a negative light in church, but there are good examples in the Bible where each of those powerful emotions was lifted up as appropriate, useful or virtuous. Invite your participants to draw connections between what they're feeling, and try to think of places in the Bible where that emotion was used in a positive way.

Defuse. You can be the best example for the participants. By calmly responding to people's comments and allowing them the space to share their thoughts without judgment, you can set the tone for a good conversation. If someone is becoming very heated, try to direct the conversation toward other participants. And remember,

silence can be a great conversation partner! Give space for quiet reflection during the discussion.

Thinking critically about faith is important but rarely easy. We each bring distinct experiences, identities, and stories to these conversations. Planning carefully to create a space where people can feel comfortable being honest is critical to this work of faithful deliberation about who we are as church together.

Addendum: 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly Actions

Wording of Reconsideration #1 -- editorial (Memorial C3)

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). While references would be reviewed throughout the whole statement, the following sections are designated for reconsideration as described here: [reference may be found at www.elca.org/socialstatements]

- “Marriage: shelter and context for trust” p. 15. This would not reconsider the idea of marriage as shelter and context for trust but would consider the import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals;
- “Lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships” p. 18f. Revision here would not change this church’s current understanding that recognizes four identified positions of bound conscience within its life. p. 19, but would review wording about “publicly accountable, lifelong monogamous same-sex relationships” in light of public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples;
- “Loving families: ground and source for social trust” p. 21f. Review here would consider references to diversity of family configurations; and

To authorize the Office of the Presiding Bishop and Church Council to approve the parameters and expense budget of this process and identify the revenue source(s) to provide for this revision to be considered as early as the 2025 Churchwide Assembly.

Wording of Reconsideration #2 – substantive (Motion K)

To authorize a possible revision of the social statement on *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* which reconsiders the church’s current concept of the four positions of bound conscience. This revision would focus on pages 19-21 (“lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships”) and any other references to the four positions of bound conscience.