

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

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I. Introduction

Invited to answer the question, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:36–40). Christians respond to these commands in the confident hope that by God’s grace alone we are set free to worship God and love our neighbor.

This social statement addresses the question: how do we understand human sexuality within the context of Jesus’ invitation to love God and love our neighbor (Romans 13:9–10; Galatians 5:14)?

II. A distinctly Lutheran approach

Our first response to this question is to remember that, as Lutherans, we are the inheritors of a rich theological tradition that assists us in discerning how to live faithfully in a complex world. Our starting point is the foundational

Lutheran understanding that we read and understand the Bible in light of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This “good news” of the Gospel that we are freed from captivity to sin (justification by grace through faith on account of Christ) allows us to respond to God’s mercy through love for and service to the neighbor¹ (our vocation in the world).

As Lutherans, understanding that God’s promised future is the transformation of the whole creation, we believe that the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is engaged deeply and relationally in the continuing creation of the world. We anticipate and live out the values of this promised future concretely in the present. It is therefore in the midst of daily life in the world that we are given the vocational task of serving the neighbor.

Central to our vocation, in relation to human sexuality, is the building and protection of trust² in relationships. As justified and forgiven sinners, our efforts to create trust are in response to God’s faithful (trustworthy) relationship of love for the world in Christ. We are called therefore to be trustworthy in our human sexuality and to build social institutions and practices where trust and trustworthy relationships can thrive.

Justified by grace through faith

As Lutherans, we believe that we are justified by grace through faith. The Lutheran Confessions guide us in our understanding of justification by identifying three intersecting affirmations: *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* (Christ alone, grace alone, and by faith alone).³ Deeply grounded in Scripture, understood as the living Word of God, these together proclaim Jesus Christ as central to the Gospel:

- *Solus Christus* (Christ alone) insists that the purpose of Scripture is to reveal Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. Scripture is to be interpreted through the lens of Christ’s death and resurrection for the salvation of all.
- *Sola gratia* (grace alone) affirms that we are saved by grace alone. As with *solus Christus*, *sola gratia* means that there is nothing a person can do through his or her action that will create a right relationship with God. Only God’s grace can do that.
- *Sola fide* (by faith alone) affirms that, through the hearing of God’s Word, the Holy Spirit ignites faith (trust) in God within us.

These three emphases also tell us that sin does not have to do simply with the keeping or breaking of rules or laws. Rather, we sin when we turn away from God and look to ourselves. Sin turns us toward obsessive self-concern, with disastrous consequences for ourselves and others.

We live therefore within the paradox that in our sexuality, as in other aspects of life, we always encounter both our own sinfulness and God's grace. It is only through Christ that we can turn in faith to trust God, which leads immediately to our baptismal vocation to love and serve the neighbor.

Christian freedom in service of the neighbor

Lutherans are not reluctant to live confidently within the difficult, complex, and ambiguous realities of daily life. Lutherans understand that active engagement in the world is integral to Christian identity. They are able to remain secure in Christ in the midst of the confusions, lack of clarity, and struggle that God's calling entails. "Did we in our own strength confide," sang Luther, "our striving would be losing." In Christ, "God is making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20; 1 Peter 4:11). Lutheran theology prepares us precisely to hold in creative tension the paradoxes and complexities of the human situation. This is also the case with regard to human sexuality. God has created human beings as part of the whole creation and with the intention that we live actively in the world (Romans 12–13; Ephesians 5–6).

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul testifies that the foundation of Christian identity is what God has done for us through Christ (Galatians 2:20; 3:24–28). Luther echoes this affirmation in his treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian," claiming that Christians are at one and the same time radically freed by the Gospel and called to serve the good of the neighbor:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.⁴

Luther believed that these two affirmations were the key to understanding the entirety of Christian life in the world. Following Paul, he understood freedom to be the basis for Christian life and ethics.⁵ Luther believed that this understanding of Christian freedom flowed from the doctrine of justification as that which "preserves and guides all churchly teaching and establishes our consciences before God."⁶

In other words, because we are radically freed in Christ, we are called in that freedom to love and serve our neighbor as Christ loved and served us (Galatians 5:1, 13). Only in the freedom from preoccupation with the self and the burden of unworthiness before the perfection of God's law can such concern for the neighbor become possible.

The Lutheran theological understanding of God's salvation and our utter dependence on God's grace, grounded as it is in Scripture (Romans 3:21–26; Ephesians 2:8–10), has crucial implications for Christian ethics and discernment:

- In emphasizing that salvation is not a reward for morally approved behavior, Lutheran theology teaches that salvation is by God's grace alone and not dependent upon human action. We receive in trust, as Paul declares, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Romans 3:21–22).
- Justified by faith, Lutherans understand that, because of God's gift, their freedom in Christ leads to a vocation of responsible and humble service to the neighbor (Romans 13:8–10).
- Our vocation of service leads us to live out our responsibilities primarily in light of and in response to the neighbor's needs, often in complex and sometimes tragic situations.
- God's mercy and compassion instill in us the capacity to empathize with others as “the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Corinthians 5:14). They teach us to walk with each other in joy, humility, and tender care.
- The love of God and neighbor, fulfilled by faith alone, are the two commandments by which Christ taught us to measure and interpret every other commandment in Scripture (Matthew 22:36–40).

God's continuing creation

Christians believe that God is the creator of all that is and that this ongoing handiwork is good, good, and very good! (Genesis 1:31). Both narratives of God's creative activity in the book of Genesis (Genesis 1 and 2) reveal God's goodness and desire for close relationship with human beings as integral to the ongoing handiwork of creation. In Genesis 1, this desire is expressed in humanity's creation—male and female—in the image of God. In Genesis 2, that close relationship is revealed as God scoops up and breathes life into earth to form humankind. As a mark of personal confidence, the Creator even entrusts to human beings the task of naming

and tending the inhabitants of the earth God so clearly loves. The tender love and goodness of God's creative activity includes sexuality and gendered bodies (Genesis 2:23–25).

Just as both creation narratives reveal how God intends a relationship of trust with humanity, so also the creation of male and female (Genesis 1) and the companionship of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2) reveal that human beings are created for trusting relationships with each other. In these narratives of God's creative activity, we understand from the beginning that love and trust are at the heart of God's relationship with human beings. We also understand that creation is God's ongoing activity and not yet complete.

The biblical narratives also depict how people violate God's trust, turning away from God (Genesis 3). They want to be like God. They make excuses and apportion blame. They hide from God. They cover their nakedness. The full breakdown of relationship enters, complete with curses and exile, as depicted in the betrayal of brother against brother (Genesis 4). The relationship of trust with God and each other, entailed in the image of God, is broken. People sin; that is, human beings resist their own God-given identity and destiny.

Nevertheless, God remains faithful, seeking out and inviting all into intimate relationship as sons and daughters. This dignity of the human being reflects God's deep love and stands against all forms of violence, discrimination, and injustice. Scripture reveals to believers that just as God does not abandon that which God loves, neither should we.

We recognize, therefore, our need for God's law to order and preserve the world, to expose our sins, and to show us the depth of our capacity to turn away from God and neighbor.

And yet we are consoled and encouraged because, even in the face of broken trust, God includes all of creation in the unfolding of the human community and the world. As human beings, we participate in creation's work that continues even now in fruitfulness and productivity.⁷

For believers, it is hope in God's future, not in an idealized past,⁸ that inspires participation in God's changing, open, and inexhaustible creation. Christians believe that God's promised future includes the transformation of the whole

creation (Romans 8:19–25). Guided by this vision, Christians anticipate and live out the values of God’s promised future concretely in the present.

Through the saving work of Jesus Christ, we understand how Scripture ultimately is future-oriented and filled with promise; creation is fulfilled in new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Revelation 21:1–5; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Isaiah 43:16–21). Even now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives may reflect the love of Christ crucified and risen. “The life I now live in the flesh,” declares Paul, “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Thus, Christlike love for the neighbor informs all our activities, sexual and otherwise, now and into God’s future. In anticipation of that future, the ethics of sexuality is thus not purely a personal matter but one that affects the witness of the Christian community and the well-being of the larger community (1 Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 6:10; Revelation 21:8).

God’s law at work in the world

As Lutherans, we believe that God has given the law not only to reveal sin and order society (1 Timothy 1:9) but also to point us to God’s intentions and promises for our lives.

Luther described two functions of the law, one theological and the other political or civil.⁹ The theological use of the law reveals sin, confronting us when we have broken our relationship with God and driving us to the forgiveness offered in the Gospel. When the law forces us to examine the extent to which we are ensnared—individually and collectively—in patterns of self-serving, exploitation, abuse, and shame, we experience the power of the theological use of the law in revealing to us the brokenness of our relationship with God. Knowing that we can do nothing to bring about our own salvation, Lutherans reject the notion that we can perfect either ourselves or society.

The civil use of the law, at the same time, provides order in society to support the maintenance of peace and justice in this imperfect world. The function of the civil law is, in a sinful world, to protect from harm all those whom God loves, particularly the most vulnerable.¹⁰

Lutherans understand that God’s law, in its civil use, permeates and undergirds basic structures of human society to support life and protect all

people in a world that remains under the sway of sin. Such social structures,¹¹ as the Lutheran Confessions identify them, include ministry, marriage and family, civil authority, and daily work.¹² Because these structures are temporal, anticipating the arrival of God's promised future, they must respond continually to human needs for protection and flourishing.

The Ten Commandments

When asked to summarize what God requires in the law, most Christians will turn first to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) as God's guide for their own behavior and that of others. What is distinctive about these commandments for Lutherans is that we understand them in light of faith, which confesses God as creator and redeemer of the world. Thus, in addition to revealing human sin, they constrain wrong behavior and point the way for us to serve the neighbor and care for the world.

The first three commandments together point to our need as sinful human beings “to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” The remaining seven describe our responsibility to serve the neighbor, especially the most vulnerable. They identify those actions that violate trust and destroy relationships between people and within community. They also instruct us how to protect and nurture relationships and build up the community: to honor those wielding legitimate authority (fourth); preserve and enhance life (fifth); support boundaries, decency, and faithfulness in sexual relations (sixth); prevent exploitation (seventh); and put the best construction on the actions of all (eighth).

The ninth and tenth commandments “fence the heart.” They show us that not only individual acts but also thoughts, words, and legal actions done for base motives are wrong, and they invite us to right action. All these things honor God by loving the neighbor.

The sixth commandment relates in a particular way to human sexuality. To this end, as Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “We are to fear and love God so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.”¹³

When this commandment is violated, many things are adulterated—relationships are damaged, people are betrayed and harmed. Promiscuity and sexual activity without a spirit of mutuality and commitment are sinful

because of their destructive consequences for individuals, relationships, and the community. The apostle Paul's list of vices (e.g., fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry) warns believers of the dangers of gratifying "the desires of the flesh," thereby turning away from belonging to Christ and God's kingdom (Galatians 5:19–21). The breakdown of trust through the sexual adulteration of the bonds of the committed, intimate, and protected relationship of marriage wreaks havoc for the family and the community, as well as for the people involved.

When this commandment is kept, however, care and attention are given to all aspects of life and behavior, including sexuality, which creates marriage relationships and practices of trust. "There is no law against such things," declares Paul, because "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" are the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22–26).

We are called to participate in God's continuing creation as people who seek to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. As such, we strive to lead lives that uphold relationships and a social order where human beings can thrive and to support one another in those endeavors. As sinners justified through the Gospel, we are able to receive creation fully as gift so that we can serve our neighbor in need freely.

Our vocation to serve the neighbor

We do not live in private worlds without thought or consideration for historic events or the impact of our actions on individuals, the community, or the environment. Rather, the responsibility to serve the neighbor through our daily callings seeks to shape human relationships and a world community that honors God and anticipates God's future transformation of all of creation. In so doing, all people, in whatever situation they find themselves, are called to promote actively the good of the neighbor.

We recognize the complex and varied situations people have relative to human sexuality: being in relationships, being single, being a friend, living in a young or aging body, being male or female, being young or old, or having different sexual orientations and gender identities. In whatever the situation, all people are called to build trust in relationships and in the community.

The way we live out these callings, of course, will be flawed and imperfect. As forgiven sinners, we recognize through faith that our imperfect lives are means by which God cares for and sustains creation. We can live both humbly and boldly, knowing that our efforts are still infused with God's love and blessing for ourselves, our neighbors, and the world. By the mercy of God, in the midst of evil, betrayal, brokenness, loneliness, and loss, we dare to believe that opportunities do open, forgiveness is sought and tendered, good may be rescued, and trust can be restored.

Lutheran social ethics

Lutherans understand human sexuality, and ethics in general, to be part of God's rule in this world, in contrast to God's rule in the coming world through the Gospel. "We know," declares Paul, "that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22–23). Therefore, we believe that the way we order our lives in matters of human sexuality is important to faithful living, but is not central to determining our salvation. We are able to be realistic and merciful with respect to our physical and emotional realities, not striving for angelic perfection as if our salvation were at stake. Even marriage is an earthly blessing on this side of heaven (Matthew 22:30).¹⁴

A Lutheran approach to ethics makes use of Martin Luther's understanding of the two realms of God's action.¹⁵ With the left hand (worldly realm), God rules in this world, maintaining order and restraining evil through the law and reason. With the right hand (spiritual realm), God brings in the coming world of Christ's rule where sin, death, and evil will reign no longer. This new world is experienced by faith alone, most clearly when God announces in Word and sacraments the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Set free by the death and resurrection of Christ (the spiritual realm), Christians are sent back into this created world, which is experienced no longer as a threat but as God's gift. There we are called to love and serve the neighbor and to uphold and promote human community and the preservation of creation. This is work we undertake not only with other Christians but together with all people of goodwill.

As we determine how to love and serve the neighbor in a complex world, Lutherans rely on Scripture. We also are guided by the Lutheran

Confessions, and we bring to this task a particular appreciation for the gifts of knowledge and learning. We believe that God also provides insights to us through reason, imagination, the social and physical sciences, cultural understanding, and the creative arts (Philippians 4:8). One reason Lutherans have engaged so deeply in education and research is that we believe God works through such means to guide us in reading Scripture and in understanding how we will live in a world of continuing complexity and change.¹⁶

Thus, we recognize that this church's deliberations related to human sexuality require our best moral discernment and practical wisdom in the worldly realm, even though these matters are not central to determining our salvation. We also understand that in this realm, faithful people can and sometimes will come to different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action. Therefore this social statement seeks to assist this church in discerning what best serves the neighbor in the complexity of human relationships and social needs in the midst of daily life.

III. Trust and human sexuality¹⁷

God loves human life so much that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). We know, therefore, that God's love embraces us totally, including our sexuality. We also know that God created each of us not only as individuals but also as people who live in a variety of social communities and contexts. In response to God's love for us, we seek life-giving relationships with others and create social structures and practices that support such relationships.

The complexity of human sexuality

God created human beings to be in relationship with each other and continually blesses us with diverse powers, which we use in living out those relationships. These include powers for action, reasoning, imagination, and creativity.

Sexuality especially involves the powers or capacities to form deep and lasting bonds, to give and receive pleasure, and to conceive and bear children.

Sexuality can be integral to the desire to commit oneself to life with another, to touch and be touched, and to love and be loved. Such powers are complex and ambiguous. They can be used well or badly. They can

bring astonishing joy and delight. Such powers can serve God and serve the neighbor. They also can hurt self or hurt the neighbor. Sexuality finds expression at the extreme ends of human experience: in love, care, and security, or lust, cold indifference, and exploitation.

Sexuality consists of a rich and diverse combination of relational, emotional, and physical interactions and possibilities. It surely does not consist solely of erotic desire. Erotic desire, in the narrow sense, is only one component of the relational bonds that humans crave as sexual beings. Although not all relationships are sexual, at some level most sexual relationships are about companionship. Although some people may remain single, either intentionally or unintentionally, all people need and delight in companionship, and all are vulnerable to loneliness.

The need to share our lives with others is a profound good (Genesis 2:18). The counsel to love and care for the neighbor is not a command that is foreign to our created natures; rather, reaching out in love and care is part of who we are as relational and sexual beings. Even if we never have sexual intimacy, we all seek and respond to the bonds and needs of relationships.

Sexual love—the complex interplay of longing, erotic attraction, self-giving, and receiving defined by trust—is a wondrous gift. The longing for connection, however, also can render human beings susceptible to pain, isolation, and harm. The desire for sexual love, therefore, does not by itself constitute a moral justification for sexual behavior. Giving and receiving love always involves mixed motives and limited understanding of individual and communal consequences.

The sharing of love and sexual intimacy within the mutuality of a mature and trusting relationship can be a rich source of romance, delight, creativity, imagination, restraint, desire, pleasure, safety, and deep contentment that provides the context for individuals, family, and the community to thrive.

Though sexual love remains God's good gift, sin permeates human sexuality as it does all of life. When expressed immaturely, irresponsibly, or with hurtful intent, then love—or its counterfeit, coercive power—can lead to harm and even death. Too often lust is mistaken for love, which in turn becomes the rationale for selfish behaviors. When infatuation, lust, and self-gratification take the place of the responsibilities of love, cascading

consequences result that can be devastating for partners, children, families, and society.

In recognizing the many ways in which people misuse power and love, we need to be honest about sin and the finite limitations of human beings. We also recognize the complexity of the human and societal forces that drive the desire for companionship, for intimate relation with another, for belonging, and for worth. The deep interconnectedness of the body with the mind and spirit suggests the complexity of such situations. The biblical narratives both rejoice in the splendor of sexual attraction (Song of Songs 4) and are candid about the harm that can result from human sexuality (2 Samuel 11, 13; Matthew 5:27–30).

Social trust and the common good

Trust is a critical element that holds together couples and relationships, households and families, social structures and institutions. We normally relate concepts of trust, promise, loyalty, and reliance to individual relationships. These concepts, however, also describe economic life, political arrangements, social policies, and social structures. Contemporary social scientists call attention to these almost invisible bonds of trust and reliance that are necessary for a well-functioning society.¹⁸ They are beginning to articulate what close-knit communities have long known: social trust undergirds healthy societies.

Trust is essential for the good of society. This is true in general terms for the proper functioning of communities and pertains especially to the social practices and institutions that affect and are affected by human sexuality. The development of social trust must be a central concern for all who seek the good of the neighbor in the pursuit of justice and the common good. Lutherans understand that social structures cannot create faith, hope, and love, but they trust that God does bless and provide appropriate gifts through such structures and, in some cases, in spite of them.

The concept of social trust has long been central to both Jewish and Christian social and political thought through the focus on the common good and the need of the neighbor. As the apostle Paul writes, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all” (Galatians 6:10).¹⁹

When human beings serve their neighbor rather than themselves, they are acting in ways that enhance social trust. However, the challenge of establishing, maintaining, and fostering social trust involves more than private actions. It also requires shaping legal, commercial, technological, and civic structures for the common good. Examples include the social institutions of the family, the conduct of commerce, laws enacted and enforced by government, and community standards. A justice-oriented legal code, social contracts and institutions that protect the weak and most vulnerable, and the protection of human rights all illustrate the kinds of things that can contribute to and support social trust.²⁰

Social trust is grounded in the practice of mutual respect for the dignity of all people and their consciences. Strong communities ensure social trust when they provide social support for disagreement and dissent, and nurture the values of mutual respect and regard for the opinions of others. Within the church community, we contribute to respect for the understandings and experiences of others by living out the eighth commandment: “We do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we ... come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”²¹

As this church and its members engage the changes and challenges of contemporary society related to human sexuality, careful thought must be given to which changes enhance and which erode social trust. The development of social trust must be a central concern for Christians who seek the good of the neighbor in the pursuit of justice and the common good. This church must be a leader in refocusing attention on practices and attitudes that build social trust. Likewise, it must contribute to the development of responsible economic and social policies and practices that shape the expression of sexuality within social life.

Human sexuality and our calling to establish trust

Sexual relationships may be among our most profoundly intimate, crucial, and self-giving expressions of trust. Here our human lives are vulnerable to joy and delight and to hurt and exploitation. From spiritual intimacy with God to the closest physical intimacy with another, relationships flourish according to the depth and trustworthiness of commitments. In the arena of human sexuality, no human relationships can thrive in the absence of trust.

Human beings learn about trust from God. When the Lutheran Confessions discuss faith in God, they understand it fundamentally as trust²² or absolute confidence in God. In faith nurtured by the Holy Spirit through Word and sacrament, we entrust our whole lives to God. We experience God's unfailing trustworthiness in God's relationship with us through the Gospel and through God's deep mercy and compassion in response to our human frailty. In response, as forgiven and justified people, we seek to respond to God's love for us through care for the neighbor, fostering trust in order that individuals and society might flourish.

What, then, does trust in relation to human sexuality look like when understood in terms of service to the neighbor? In responding to this question, we reflect on God's love for and continuing involvement in creation and on the saving action of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. We look to Scripture, to the Lutheran Confessions, to the social and physical sciences, and to human reason, mercy, and compassion. In so doing, we boldly but humbly affirm that trustworthy relationships and social structures will:

- Promote, value, and respect the human dignity of each individual.
- Protect all from physical, emotional, and spiritual harm.
- Demonstrate mercy, compassion, and justice for all, especially the "least of these"—those who are most vulnerable in relationships and in society.
- Ensure accountability and responsibility in relationships and the community.
- Promote the welfare of individuals and the common good of society.
- Value the security and protection afforded through the making of promises, including social and contractual commitments.

These foundational and protective conditions provide the necessary context and support for trusting relationships that are:

- Loving, that include and reflect an abundance of *agape* (unlimited love, forgiveness, compassion, care, and concern), *eros* (passion, excitement, and joy), and *philia* (care for the neighbor).
- Life-giving, where affirmation is mutually shared, encouragement is given and received, and individual talents are nurtured and supported.

- Self-giving in the face of both opportunities and challenges.
- Fulfilling, that is, a place where a spirit of joy and an atmosphere of peace prevails.
- Nurturing of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.
- Marked by truth-telling and honesty.
- Faithful in word and deed, including sexual fidelity.
- Committed, demonstrating loyalty in the face of difficult as well as good times.
- Supportive for all who grow old, are vulnerable, or are weak.
- Hospitable, offering support and encouragement to others.
- A blessing to society and serve the good of the neighbor.

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.²³ 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 Confessions²⁴ has introduced complex considerations to

moral discernment about sex, gender, and sexuality, about which there is not universal agreement.

As mentioned previously (p. 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 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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, such as opposing all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on actual or perceived sex, gender, or sexuality; supporting legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services; and calling upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support all couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection.²⁷

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.²⁸

The Christian tradition has historically defined marriage as reflected in the language of Genesis 1:27; 2:23-24.²⁹ 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 Scripture³⁰ and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of “the bound conscience,”³¹ will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.

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.
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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 of “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 role³² and the connection between family and sexuality in their discussions of the commandments related to each.³³

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.³⁴

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 trends³⁵ 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 unmarried or single parents, whether widowed, divorced, or never married.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.³⁸

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).³⁹

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 50 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.⁴⁰ 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.

Protecting children and youth in and for trusting relationships

A strong and healthy family is a significant factor in the development of healthy individuals. The context of a healthy family nurtures growth, enhances trust, and offers protection. This is especially true for children and youth as they grow into sexual maturity.

Safety within and outside the family is of overriding importance because the damage done to children and youth through sexual abuse or molestation can be remarkably deep and lasting. Such harmful behavior may include inappropriate touching, exposure to pornography, exposing genitals to children or inducing children to do the same, and sexual or genital relations involving minors.

Criminal statutes prohibiting abuse and molestation contribute to the protection of children and youth. This church supports the prosecution of any individual who commits a sexual crime against a minor, including people in leadership positions in the church. Further, this church affirms appropriate laws requiring the reporting of suspected child abuse to authorities in order to prevent future harm to vulnerable minors who cannot protect themselves.

The ELCA also recognizes that congregations and other ministry sites must continue in their efforts to be safe places for children and youth. Much work already has been done to help congregations protect children. This church will continue its efforts for the protection of minors who participate in church-sponsored events and programs. This church calls for the adoption of preventive measures, including educational programs, appropriate policies, and screening of individuals who care for, supervise, or work with children within this church. It expects that all church leaders will report all instances of suspected child abuse.

Matters of concern to both society and the church extend beyond abuse and molestation to organized sexual exploitation. Commercial sexual exploitation is widespread throughout the United States and around the world. It continues to grow and involves surprising numbers of youth by taking advantage of their vulnerabilities.⁴¹

This church strongly reaffirms its 2001 message “Commercial Sexual Exploitation,” which states: “Sexual exploitation in any situation, either personally or commercially, inside or outside legally contracted marriage, is sinful because it is destructive of God’s good gift [of sexuality] and human integrity.” This message notes that this is especially true with respect to the demonic harm sexual exploitation causes to children and youth.⁴²

Children and youth live in a highly sexualized world. They are exposed early to patterns of adult sexuality and are pressured to associate their bodies with practices that devalue them. Examples include child beauty contests, sexually suggestive clothing, sexually charged prime-time and cable television programs, and movies. At an early age, children listen to sexualized music that is deliberately marketed to them. They “date” as couples and engage in genital activity at earlier ages. Children and youth are targets of sexual bullying, destructive language, and vicious humor.

The ELCA regards the over-exposure of emotionally maturing children and teens to adult sexuality as a failing on the part of adults and society. It challenges all individuals and institutions in society to fulfill their responsibility to protect and nurture children and youth and provide for their appropriate development. Congregations should offer opportunities for adults to express these concerns and explore solutions together.

Expanding cyberspace and other electronic media create new challenges to the protection of children and youth. It is important that parents, society, and lawmakers continue to be extremely vigilant to protect the well-being of children and youth in this electronic world with its often-hidden dangers. The widespread electronic availability of violent and degrading pornography threatens children and youth as well as adults. It has the capacity to damage the normal sexual development in those who view it, often obsessively and in secret. How to address this problem is one of the most important child-protection issues of our time, and our church will be an active participant in this important conversation.

The sexual education of children and teens will be supported as a priority by this church. Anecdotal evidence among teens suggests that few parents or congregations meaningfully engage young people in either sex education or healthy conversations about sexuality, even though teens would welcome them.⁴³ This lack of engagement is remarkable, especially considering the associated dangers. This church will give particular attention to how children and youth are supported, nurtured, and accompanied in their sexual and relational formation.

Toward that end, this church reaffirms what it has said previously about providing comprehensive sex education within the context of Christian faith.⁴⁴ This education must begin early and emphasize responsibility and mutuality. Such education should focus on sustained conversation about what is good and what is harmful in ways appropriate to growing maturity levels. It should avoid simply requiring compliance with approved or rejected behaviors. Rather it should emphasize the exploration of why certain behaviors are rejected because they are damaging, why and how some pressures should be resisted, and what differentiates mature and rewarding sexual love from exploitative and demeaning forms.

Information about birth control, including the encouragement and support of sexual abstinence, is an important component of responsibility. Such education should engage all in conversation about the shared responsibility of couples to ensure the physical, emotional, and spiritual protection of each person.

It therefore follows that the ELCA reaffirms its interest in and responsibility for the care and protection of vulnerable children and youth. It understands itself as called to this mission through the vocations of its members, its own institutional practices, and its public policy positions. This work involves all adults, not only parents, since all contribute to the well-being of children and youth in untold creative ways. It understands that all children and youth, both inside and outside the church, are deserving of this church's concern.

V. Sexuality and trust in relationships

Sexuality and self

Both sexuality and trust are fundamentally relational and grow out of the web of family ties and social interaction. Healthy, trusting relationships shape confident, healthy, and responsible people. We bring our failings, imperfections, and sin with us into our relationships, but part of living out the calling and freedom of the Christian in those relationships includes being the best we can be as individuals. This requires appropriate care for all aspects of a person, including the body.⁴⁵

We are sexual beings from the beginning of our lives. The ancient psalmist envisioned the divine mystery of our embodied lives long before science investigated our biological and genetic complexity: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). The realities of our sexual bodies are visible in physical features and powerful in less visible characteristics.

This means much more than that we are born with male, female, or sometimes with ambiguous genitalia.⁴⁶ Our cells carry sex chromosomes, and our endocrine systems infuse our bodies with hormones. In ways that are still not fully understood, we develop strong gender identities at a very early age. While there is still much to be learned about the biological complexity of human beings, we have come to understand that this complexity suggests a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities.

Sexuality and gender are features of each person’s very being. This is both a discovery and a gift, and a perplexity and a challenge at all life stages and in all relational situations. The medical and social sciences continue to explore how the range of human sexual identities and behaviors are understood, cared for, and regulated in various cultures and religions.

Sexual capabilities and experiences are part of life for all ages and physical abilities. One can experience the sexual in music, art, literature, and the beauty of people and nature. One can take sensual pleasure in food, touch, sound, smells, and activities. One can find expression for the self and for sexuality through the spoken word, touch, dance, music, and movement.

One does not need to be in a relationship to experience one's sexuality. Bodies do not suddenly become sexual at puberty and do not cease to be sexual when, for example, there are physical or developmental limitations, menopause, erectile dysfunction, or the absence of a sexual partner. This means that throughout our lives, we need to find life-enhancing and appropriate ways of giving expression to this complicated dimension of ourselves.

We all have sexual identities that will find expression in our lives. We have sexual feelings that we are aware of and sometimes need to be negotiated when we are interacting with friends, courting a potential life partner, working closely with colleagues, or sharing our lives with another. Moreover, we must evaluate and respond constantly to the ways in which the sexuality of others is expressed. We must respond to sexual stimuli in the environment, including the varieties of human touch, which may vary from casual contact through flirtatious appreciation to invitations to intense physical intimacy.

A healthy sense of sexuality is related to having a healthy body image. This church teaches that caring for the body and following practices that lead to physical and emotional wellness are part of the stewardship of created goodness.⁴⁷ It recognizes that a positive sense of one's own body supports a healthy sense of one's gender identity and sexuality.

Sexually mature, healthy individuals learn to be comfortable with their bodies and are able to entrust themselves to others. They call frankly upon others to respect and honor their privacy, their bodily integrity, and their wishes concerning welcome and unwelcome touch.

Sometimes it can be very hard to develop and maintain positive attitudes about one's body. Too many people struggle for a healthy sense of body as a result of experiences of degradation or shaming by others, including family members and intimate partners. This church will support all in affirming and reclaiming a sense of healthy sexuality.

This church calls attention to the danger of embracing standards of physical attractiveness that exclude many, including the aged and people with disabilities, and that distort the understanding of what it means to be healthy. The young, whose bodies are changing and growing, may be especially vulnerable to idealized and commercialized images of a "perfect body" that play on insecurities and destructive self-loathing.

A holistic understanding of the interrelationship of body, mind, and spirit challenges such narrow understandings of beauty. It enables us better to affirm the many dimensions of beauty and to celebrate human variety and particularity. This church is committed to affirming throughout life the value, beauty, and health of the human body and human sexuality. It is mindful that physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual wellness contribute to a lower incidence of at-risk behaviors for all people, including youth.⁴⁸

Gender and friendships

This church also calls attention to the immense value of friendship for people in all stages of life. Human life in relationship includes many different forms of rewarding human companionship. Friendships express our longing for human connection, touch, and growth. They allow space for self-revelation in the shelter of various degrees of mutual commitment and regard. The ELCA encourages and celebrates all situations and initiatives that engage people in relationships of friendship and trust, both inside and outside the church community. It also recognizes the importance of strong social support for friendships.

Many of our understandings of our own sexuality and sexual relationships may be formed or nurtured through conversations and confiding in friends. Friendships may help us develop a sense of our own beauty and the integrity of our bodies. As with parents or family members, we may learn from friends a sense of caring and safe touch in trusting relationships. Friendship, like family life, is a trust that can be betrayed, abused, and violated. It also must be recognized that dysfunctional friendships may be detrimental to health, development, and well-being.

This church calls people to be good, trustworthy friends who support one another in mature self-understanding and healthy companionship. Friends together have the shared power and responsibility to contradict demeaning and demoralizing messages from the media about sexuality and to overcome the effects of physical and emotional abuse. Friends also have the responsibility to respect one another's physical and emotional boundaries.

Community and workplace relationships are spheres of human life in which friendships and companionship can and do thrive. They are also places where trust and distrust mix in complicated ways.

Sometimes friendships become sexual in the narrower sense of giving rise to overtly erotic impulses and stimulation. Erotic interest between adults open to a romantic relationship can be a desired part of the growth of trust and intimacy. Erotic interest can also create conflicts and danger. These have to be faced honestly when one or both of the people involved already have made promises of fidelity to another. The conflicts and dangers have to be recognized, also, whenever one of the involved individuals does not welcome a deeper and more complicated closeness.

Reintroducing distance into such friendships or breaking them off may entail an acceptance of loss that requires courage and maturity. The violation of trusting relationships for sexual purposes is offensive and unacceptable, and, when criminal, should be punished accordingly. A particularly egregious violation of friendship is acquaintance rape.

Commitment and sexuality

Human beings remain sexual creatures for life. As a result, they must cultivate and manage relationships along a spectrum that runs from casual associations to intense intimacy. The deepening of trust and commitment is a lengthy process that requires deliberate attention and effort. Recognizing this provides a way of thinking about how people come to select life partners and about their sexual conduct in that process.

Couples, whether teenage, young adult, mature, or senior, move from a first acquaintance into a journey of increasing knowledge, appreciation, and trust in each other. This journey involves spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions of self-understanding. When these dimensions develop at similar rates, trust and entrusting are established and secured. When they are out of balance, trust may either not exist or disintegrate.

As trust and entrusting are established in a relationship, physical expression naturally becomes more intimate. That is, sexual intimacy would be expected to follow the same pattern of growth marked by the other dimensions of mutual self-understanding.

For this reason, this church teaches that degrees of physical intimacy should be carefully matched to degrees of growing affection and commitment. This also suggests a way to understand why this church teaches that the greatest sexual intimacies, such as coitus, should be matched with and

sheltered both by the highest level of binding commitment and by social and legal protection, such as is found in marriage. Here, promises of fidelity and public accountability provide the foundational basis and support for trust, intimacy, and safety, especially for the most vulnerable.

This is why this church opposes nonmonogamous, promiscuous, or casual sexual relationships of any kind. Indulging immediate desires for satisfaction, sexual or otherwise, is to “gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16–19). Such transient encounters do not allow for trust in the relationship to create the context for trust in sexual intimacy.

Such relationships undermine the dignity and integrity of individuals because physical intimacy is not accompanied by the growth of mutual self-knowledge. Absent the presence of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual trust and commitment, such sexual relationships may easily damage the self and an individual’s future capacity to live out committed and trustworthy relationships. Fleeting relationships misuse the gift of sexual intimacy and are much more likely to be unjust, abusive, and exploitative.

Although this church strongly discourages such relationships, it nevertheless insists that every sexual relationship entails responsibility. All sexually active people have the responsibility to protect their sexual partner from both emotional and physical harm as well as to protect themselves and their partners from sexually transmitted diseases and the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy.

Sexual intimacy and adult cohabitation

Many contemporary pressures encourage adult cohabitation. When marriage is delayed for years beyond the age of physical sexual maturity, the emotional and physical pressures for intimacy may grow. Social trends in this society, such as extensive schooling, downward wage pressure, and even the desire for expensive weddings, may further encourage that delay. While some of these trends are the result of individual choices, they also may be influenced by broader social forces: the increasing number of failed marriages, social acceptance of casual sex, and the strong cultural influence of individualism that largely ignores social responsibility and accountability. All are examples of why many may question the need for—and sometimes even the rationale for—binding relationships.

In addition, certain laws and economic realities in this society may create extreme economic hardship for some, including older adults, who desire to be legally married. This church calls for altering laws and the factors that create a significant impediment to marriage for such people.

Because this church urges couples to seek the highest social and legal support for their relationships, it does not favor cohabitation arrangements outside of marriage. It has a special concern when such arrangements are entered into as an end in themselves. It does, however, acknowledge the social forces at work that encourage such practices. This church also recognizes the pastoral and familial issues that accompany these contemporary social patterns.

In cases where a decision is made for cohabitation, regardless of the reasons, this church expects its pastors and members to be clear with the couple regarding the reasons for the position of this church and to support the couple in recognizing their obligation to be open and candid with each other about their plans, expectations, and levels of mutual commitment.

It should be noted that some cohabitation arrangements can be constructed in ways that are neither casual nor intrinsically unstable. In earlier generations, betrothal carried obligations similar to those of marriage. In certain situations, conventional or even legal obligations accompany cohabitation arrangements. In some states, for instance, laws govern “common-law marriages.” Such arrangements may differ markedly from more transitory forms of cohabitation.

This church believes, however, that the deepest human longings for a sense of personal worth, long-term companionship, and profound security, especially given the human propensity to sin, are best served through binding commitment, legal protections, and the public accountability of marriage, especially where the couple is surrounded by the prayers of the congregational community and the promises of God.

VI. Sexuality and social responsibility

Sexuality and society

Neither individuals nor families can succeed alone; they need healthy and supportive communities.⁴⁹ Individuals are deeply social and therefore profoundly shaped by these communities, even in their most private and

intimate moments. Given this reality, we must appreciate the significant influence, both positive and negative, of social forces and social contexts on human sexual behavior.

This church must be prepared to speak out where such forces cause harm. In particular, it will oppose all forms of sexual exploitation within and outside this church. Justice for women in church and society must continue to be an important dimension of Lutheran concern and action.

This church also will attend to the need for equal protection, equal opportunities, and equal responsibilities under the law, and just treatment for those with varied sexual orientation and gender identity. Such individuals are disproportionately and negatively affected by patterns of stigma, discrimination, and abuse. Likewise, it will attend to the particular needs of children and the families of those with actual or perceived differences in sexual orientation or gender identity because they are especially vulnerable to verbal, physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, and sexual abuse.

This church notes with grave concern the public commodification⁵⁰ of the human body as an economic asset. The sexual body is never to be used as an object for commercial purposes, and this church will speak against the public idolatry of pleasure, freedom, and wealth that undergirds such practices.

Especially deplorable are the billion-dollar global sex market and the economic systems that thrive on it, both in the United States and abroad.⁵¹ The people trapped in this system are damaged and often destroyed by degradation, abuse, and, sometimes, torture. Companies that profit from this enterprise need to be identified and strongly denounced. This church supports building international agreements and national laws to prevent these practices.

The possibility of profit is not a sufficient moral basis to use human sexuality for purposes that harm individuals or undermine social trust.⁵² The ELCA opposes the sale and purchase of pornography. It also objects to commercial and technological efforts to sell sex, including mass media and commercial marketing, since these negatively impact individuals and society in significant ways.

Christian responsibility includes naming economic forces and monitoring the ways in which they constrain or support healthy individual choices and social structures. This church will advocate against all that systematically undermines efforts to raise healthy children and to build solid marriages and trusting relationships, including the portrayal of responsible sexuality as abnormal and burdensome and promiscuous sexual activity as normal and consequence-free.

This church will respond in situations where business and corporate enterprises seek profit through disrespectful treatment of the human body. This church will work with public and private institutions⁵³ to create structures, policies, and practices of accountability to support social norms of protection. These include codes of practice that protect society, especially children and the most vulnerable, from the misuse and abuse of sexuality for profit.

This church will work with all people to craft fair and comprehensive laws particularly aimed at protecting the weakest and most vulnerable among us, especially children, from sexual harm.

This church supports the development and use of medical products, birth control, and initiatives that support fulfilling and responsible sexuality. This church also recognizes the important role that the availability of birth control has played in allowing women and men to make responsible decisions about the bearing and rearing of children.

This church, in its concern for the neighbor, has a responsibility to be concerned about public health issues. All people who have contracted a sexually transmitted disease have an absolute responsibility to inform their sexual partners and all who are at risk.

Care must be taken in sex education materials and processes to inform about the dangers of diseases without teaching that sexual expression is intrinsically dirty and dangerous. Efforts at public education and protection from disease should be supported. This includes efforts that challenge stigma and discrimination, especially against those living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. This church, including its institutions and agencies, should be an active partner in discussions about how to address and contain epidemics of such diseases.

This church supports social policies and practices that encourage the growth of healthy relationships and will question publicly those that erode social trust or undermine the structures within which trust is learned and preserved. The traditional concerns of this church for social justice and the protection of the vulnerable also will guide its teachings and practices in relation to social trust and sexuality.

Sexuality and public ministry

This church does not tolerate the abuse of the ministerial office for personal sexual gratification. This church holds high expectations for those individuals called to serve as rostered leaders. Pastors, associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers who abuse the trust placed in them by engaging in promiscuity, infidelity, adultery, or forms of sexual abuse violate those high standards. Such violations severely damage the credibility of the public ministry to which this church and its leaders are called.

Sexuality in the workplace

In all workplaces, supervisors, co-workers, professionals, and clients must negotiate complex relationships. The sexual dimension of these relationships, both in the general sense and in the sometimes more specifically erotic sense, needs to be honestly recognized.

Employers and supervisors, including within this church, must pay particular attention to work relationships between colleagues, especially where there are power differentials, and where the workplace environment is rendered sexually offensive or hostile by the conduct of co-workers.

The workplace requires appropriate boundaries that are maintained through respect, good sense, best practices, and legal protections. This church remains committed to its own efforts to help make congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization safe and healthy places to live and work. The ELCA will not tolerate sexual harassment within the workplace.

VII. Conclusion

Human sexuality and moral discernment

This social statement grows out of the foundational theological understanding that Lutherans read and understand the Bible in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The “good news” of the Gospel

that we are freed from bondage to sin (justification before God) allows us to respond to the Triune God's mercy through love for and service to the neighbor (vocation in the world). The social statement further affirms that because God's promises are trustworthy, each of us is called in Christian freedom to be trustworthy in our relationships with one another and to build social institutions and practices that create trust.

Because of the love of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are a people set free for lives of responsibility committed to seeking the good of all. This statement responds to this church's call for a foundational framework⁵⁴ that will help it discern what it means to follow faithfully God's law of love in the increasingly complex sphere of human sexuality. It does not offer once-and-for-all answers to contemporary questions. Rather it seeks to tap the deep roots of Scripture and the Lutheran theological tradition for specific Christian convictions, themes, and wisdom that will assist people of faith to discern what is responsible and faithful action in the midst of the complexity of daily life. It proposes guideposts to direct this church's discernment as it tries to be faithful. It provides markers by which individual and communal decisions can be tested under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It seeks to describe the social realities of this age and to address them pastorally. Insofar as it is possible, it also seeks to speak in ways that can address both religious and secular discussions of these matters.

The necessity of mercy, always

Human lives are littered with broken promises and betrayed trust. Not everyone knows how to trust, and not everyone is trustworthy. Relationships end because trust has been broken. Given finitude and sin, many things happen that threaten trust in even the strongest relationships. Forgiveness and reconciliation, then, join with mutuality and justice to support trust and trustworthiness in relationships.

Seeking the Spirit's guidance, we discern direction for living faithfully in terms of human sexuality. We do this not in some abstract ideal realm but amid all the complexities, conflicts, sorrows, discoveries, and joys of actual social and individual life. It is a task that this church accepts as a redeemed community. As simultaneously captive to sin and yet liberated and forgiven people of faith, we walk together both humbly and boldly toward God's promised future.

Addendum

“An addendum summarizing differing points of view shall be added to those statements that elicit significant division in the Churchwide Assembly.” *Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns* (2006), page 16.

An amendment (as shown below) received significant support at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly but did not receive the vote needed for approval: “. . . The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have taught taught and recognized recognize marriage as a normative, lifelong 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.)” Marriage thus provides the possibility for the added blessing of children and the joy and responsibility for raising them in the faith.

End Notes

¹“Neighbor,” as used in this statement, includes various meanings. It often follows the use in Matthew 22, where Jesus clearly intends family, friends, co-workers, and local acquaintances. But it also can be enlarged to include groups and broad social networks, which are important in Scripture also (Galatians 6:10). The meaning here depends on the context.

²“Trust,” as used in this statement, is a fundamental characteristic of right relationship. God is unfailingly trustworthy to us and all of creation. Just as we learn by faith that a right relationship with God is a relationship of trust rather than rebellious self-assertion, a right relationship with the neighbor is one in which each seeks to be truly worthy of the other’s trust. The trustworthiness that fosters and can bear the weight of the other’s trust emerges as a central value to cherish and promote. Broken promises and betrayed trust through lies, exploitation, and manipulative behavior are exposed, not just as an individual failing but as an attack on the foundations of our lives as social beings. Trust is misunderstood if reduced to an emotion, an abstract principle, or a virtue of one’s disposition, although these all suggest its multidimensional role as an axis in human life.

In *The Responsible Self* (1963), H. Richard Niebuhr set Christian ethical reflection on a new course by treating trust as the center of Christian thinking, based on the question of trust or distrust of God as the fundamental option in human existence. In terms of human relationships, he wrote, “Faith as trust or distrust accompanies all our

encounters with others and qualifies all our responses” (118). Philosophers and theorists such as Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, 1958) and Michael Polanyi (*Personal Knowledge*, 1958) have advanced reflection on the centrality of promise and networks of trusting reliance in human affairs and knowledge. Some social scientists have begun to identify social trust as an indispensable feature of healthy organizations, institutions, and whole societies, and social distrust as one of the destructive forces at work in the breakdown and dissolution of organized social arrangements. Such reflections operate in the background of this statement.

³ Each “*sola*” points to the same saving event. That is, they together proclaim Jesus Christ as central to the Gospel, each perceived from a different dimension. Other dimensions of God’s saving work, other “*solas*,” also have been associated with Lutheranism. Especially in the 19th century, Lutherans began to emphasize *sola Scriptura*, although the Confessions rarely used that phrase. Luther more often spoke of the Word of God alone (*solus Verbo*), by which he meant fundamentally the oral proclamation of the Gospel. For a key source suggesting the *solas* listed here, see “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” IV. 120 in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), hereafter referred to as “BC 2000.”

⁴ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” in *Luther’s Works*, 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344. This treatise also is available as part of *Three Treatises*, a printing of three key essays from 1520 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 277.

⁵ Luther wrote that this book “contains the whole of Christian life in a brief form, provided you grasp its meaning.” Ibid., 343. See also the editor’s introduction, 329.

⁶ This citation is taken from Martin Luther’s preface to the published doctoral thesis on justification for Peter Palladius, who defended it before Wittenberg’s theological faculty on June 1, 1537 (*Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe/ [Schriften/]*, 65 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993. [Hereafter identified by “WA.”] 39 I, 205, 2–5). For the Lutheran Confessions, the article on justification is central for all church teaching. See, for instance, *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration, III.6 (BC 2000:563), quoting the *Apology*, IV.2–3 (BC 2000: 120) and Luther’s comments on Psalm 117 (*Luther’s Works* 14:37). The connection to ethics is demonstrated in the *Augsburg Confession*, IV–VI and XX, and the *Apology*, art. IV, especially par. 122–182 (BC 2000:140–49).

⁷ For one example of how Martin Luther describes creatures as the hands, channels, and means through which God continually creates and blesses, see Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 26 (BC 2000:389).

⁸ “The attempt—with the origin and nature of humankind in mind—to take a gigantic leap back into the world of the lost beginning, to seek to know for ourselves what humankind was like in its original state and to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually created is hopeless. It fails to recognize that it is only from the Christ that we can know about the original nature of humankind. ... Only in the middle, as those who live from Christ, do we know about the beginning.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 62.

⁹ See Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed” in *The Christian in Society, Luther’s Works*, 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 75–129.

The term “third use” of the law, not named here, indicates the law’s role in guiding Christians as they seek to orient and conduct their lives; it receives significant attention in the *Formula of Concord*. This social statement streamlines its discussion of law by focusing solely on the “two uses” but does recognize the role of law as a guide for Christians. Since the third use is defined in the Confessions as the civil use of the law by the repentant and reborn who keep the law with a willing spirit, this practice seems warranted. See *Formula of Concord*, Epitome, VI.6 (BC 2000:502).

¹⁰ *Smalcald Articles* III.2 (BC 2000:311–312).

¹¹ In Lutheran theology, these structures have often been called “orders of creation” to express the point that they exist as structures that God uses to order human life. The origin of the term “orders of creation” and its original conceptualization can be traced to Christoph Adolf von Harleß (see *Christliche Ethik*, 7th ed. [Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1875], 491), who proposed this term to highlight the provisional nature of human social arrangements. It soon became linked to a static notion of creation, and the idea of “orders” began to be understood as fixed, one-time acts of God in the past.

As such, they came to indicate the establishment of human society in a hierarchy of fixed and unchanging social arrangements. On this basis, at various times some Lutheran theologians have objected to the democratic developments in modern states on the grounds of the divine right of kings, defended the legitimacy of Hitler’s regime, or rejected the ordination of women as contrary to nature. While “orders of creation” also has been theologically enriching within Lutheran tradition, the concept of social structures is used here because it is less technical and more suggestive of God’s ongoing creative activity to shape and reshape social structures for human protection and good.

¹² *Augsburg Confession*, XVI (BC 2000:48–52); *Apology*, XVI (BC 2000:231–233); Small Catechism, Household Chart (BC 2000:365–367); Large Catechism, Ten Commandments (BC 2000:400–425).

¹³ Small Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 12 (BC 2000:353).

¹⁴ “The Lutheran reformers developed a helpful approach to dealing with matters of morality and ethics. It serves both to safeguard the Gospel against the temptations for additional requirements than the grace of God, and to see within which context the issues of family, marriage, and human sexuality can be addressed from a Lutheran point of view. Hence, we suggest that the doctrine of the two kingdoms can be applied as a useful tool to deal with these matters.” Lutheran World Federation: Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality “Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue,” LWF Report, 6, www.lutheranworld.org/Council/2007/20070322-Council.html (February, 1, 2009). This report was received at the LWF Council in March 2007 and commended to LWF member churches.

¹⁵ This teaching about the two realms of God’s action often is called the “doctrine of the two kingdoms.” See *op cit. Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, especially 88–93.

¹⁶ The long-standing Lutheran emphasis on education stems, in part, from understanding it as an arena for service to the neighbor. See “Our Calling in Education” (Chicago: ELCA, 2007), 7–10.

¹⁷ This statement attempts to maintain the distinctions frequently made between “sexual/sexuality,” “sex,” and “gender.” Generally speaking “sexual/sexuality” here refers to biological facts, while “sex” refers to behavior, as in “having sex.”

“Gender” is reserved, most often, to designate the social and cultural classifications and constructions of biology and behavior. These distinctions are, of course, hard to maintain with precision but are consistent with dictionary definitions. The following selected definitions are taken from William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1969–1970.): *Sexuality*: “The quality of possessing a sexual character or potency.” *Sex*: “The sexual urge or instinct as it manifests itself in behavior” or “Sexual intercourse.” *Gender*: “Classification of sex.”

¹⁸ One excellent source in the literature is theorist Niklas Luhmann. See *Trust and Power: Two Works by Niklas Luhmann*, trans. Howard Davis, John Raffan, and Kathryn Rooney Chichester (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979).

¹⁹ Scripture uses the words “obedience” (Romans 13) or “honor” (Exodus 20) to refer not to the slavish following of rules but to the relationship of mutual trust spoken of here, in which the repentant sinner willingly responds to God’s commands. Luther captures this scriptural attitude well in his exposition of the fourth commandment in Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, especially par. 167–178 (BC 2000:409).

²⁰ It is no accident, for example, that in economics, “credit” plays a crucial role and uses a word from the same Latin root as “creed.” *Credit* literally means “he or she believes” that a person will repay a loan.

²¹ Small Catechism, Ten Commandments, par. 16 (BC 2000:353).

²² The Latin version of the *Augsburg Confession* uses the word *fiducia* (trust).

²³ 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.

²⁴ “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.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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 2000:415).

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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.”

³⁰ “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 (Feb.1, 2009).

³¹ 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)!

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.

³² 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).

³³ 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.

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ In 2023, 8.242 million single-parent households with children—over 80 percent of single-parent households with children in the U.S.—were maintained by single mothers, while single fathers maintained 2.037 million households with children. U.S. Census Bureau, “Table FG5. One-Parent Unmarried Family Groups with Own Children Under 18, by Labor Force Status of the Reference Person: 2023,” *America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2023*, www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/families/cps-2023.html, accessed on July 30, 2025.” The U.S. Census data do not reflect the many single nonparent adults who maintain households with children across the U.S. and within this church.

³⁷ 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” ELCA, “Gender-based Violence” (Chicago: ELCA, 2015).

³⁸ ELCA social message, “Gender-based Violence,” pp. 2, 6-10.

³⁹ See *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*, pp. 2-5, 12-14, 28-30, 34-35, 61-62.

⁴⁰ For more on domestic violence and gender-based violence, see *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*, p. 76. See also “Gender-based Violence.”

⁴¹ “Commercial Sexual Exploitation” (Chicago: ELCA, 2001), 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴³ Reports were quite consistent on these points both anecdotally and in informal polls among youth and youth leaders attending workshops in 2007 and 2008 for *Free in Christ to Care for the Neighbor: Lutheran Youth Talk About Human Sexuality* (Chicago: ELCA, 2007).

⁴⁴ The ELCA social statement *Abortion* (Chicago: ELCA, 1991), 4–5.

⁴⁵ See Luther’s brief but pointed comments regarding how care for one’s body should be understood as a Christian work in “The Freedom of a Christian” in *Career of the Reformer: Vol. I, Luther’s Works* 31 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 365.

⁴⁶ Some experts estimate that as many as 1 in every 1,500 babies is born with a disorder of sex development (DSDs). See www.apa.org/topics/intersex.html (February, 1, 2009). The phrase used here, “ambiguous genitalia,” is one form of DSD and indicates a birth defect in which the outer genitals do not have the typical appearance of either a boy or a girl. See www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003269.htm (February, 1, 2009).

⁴⁷ *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor* (Chicago: ELCA, 2003).

⁴⁸ A variety of research supports this claim in relation to sexual activity. See, for

instance, Peter C. Scales, et al., *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development* (Minneapolis: Search Institute Publications, 2004).

⁴⁹ Statistically, the healthier that family and community institutions are, the higher the number is of developmental assets found among its members, especially youth. Strong community institutions have a significant impact on lowering the incidence of at-risk behaviors among young people, including intimate sexual activity at young ages. The relative health of a community's institutions, such as schools, churches, and civic organizations, matters significantly. *op. cit.* Benson.

⁵⁰ Public commodification can be understood as the transformation of any created blessing of God into a commodity to be bought and sold.

⁵¹ This multibillion-dollar system often is perpetuated by slaverylike conditions and outright slavery.

⁵² "While a market economy emphasizes what individuals *want* and are willing and able to buy, as people of faith we realize that what human beings want is not necessarily what they *need* for the sake of life." *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* (Chicago: ELCA, 1999), 3f.

⁵³ This includes many varieties of social, economic, and business institutions.

⁵⁴ The development of this social statement was mandated by the 2001 Churchwide Assembly. Reference can be found in the 2001 Churchwide Assembly minutes, CA01.06.36 and CA01.06.45.

Implementing resolutions for the social statement

1. To embrace as a church our legacy of a rich theological tradition that proclaims God's gracious love expressed in Jesus Christ as the basis of our salvation, hope, and unity, and to call upon members of this church on this basis to commit themselves to finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements;
2. To call upon this church to affirm the various studies created for the Journey Together Faithfully series as resources for ongoing deliberation and discernment, and to direct the program unit for Church in Society to maintain their availability as long as demand continues;
3. To request the Office of the Presiding Bishop to explore the feasibility of developing liturgical resources for use by rostered leaders, individuals, and families at the time of divorce;
4. To encourage Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, to consider developing education curricula with particular attention to the needs of children, middle school and high school youth, and their parents for understanding Christian values and making responsible choices;
5. To recognize that organizations like Women of the ELCA, Lutheran Men in Mission, Lutheran Youth Organization, and campus ministries foster and support friendships; to encourage them to lift up and celebrate the value of strong friendships and to support the formation of voluntary associations for nurturing them;

6. To call upon all congregations, pastors, and other rostered leaders to reach out in welcome to all in accord with previous Churchwide Assembly actions as reaffirmed by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly [CA05.05.18], and to assist members to understand what it means to be hospitable to all in the name of Christ regardless of sexual orientation;
7. To call upon the ELCA to amend the eligibility provisions of the ELCA Pension and Other Benefits Program, consistent with the policies of this church;
8. To call upon this church to encourage the availability and funding of comprehensive sex education programs in public schools, as well as in Lutheran private schools;
9. To affirm the 2001 ELCA social message “Commercial Sexual Exploitation” and its continuing value for the mission and ministry of the ELCA;
10. To call upon this church’s advocacy and corporate social responsibility ministries to support and advocate measures consistent with this social statement;
11. To express appreciation for the work being done by the churchwide organization, synods, institutions, and congregations to prevent sexual harassment and misconduct; to encourage strengthening these efforts by all expressions and ministries of this church; and to ensure the availability of effective resources for dealing with sexual misconduct and sexual harassment within this church;
12. To call upon teaching theologians, bishops, pastors, diaconal ministers, associates in ministry, deaconesses, educators, and others to continue to extend theological and biblical reflection as well as theoretical and practical understanding of human sexuality through intellectual discourse, moral deliberation, continued research, discussion, and writing;
13. To recognize that the ELCA has adopted a strategy that will guide its response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic, and to call upon all units and expressions of this church to support that strategy;
14. To call upon all congregations, synods, early childhood education centers, elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, seminaries, campus ministries, outdoor ministries, social ministry organizations, public policy advocacy ministries, and all churchwide units to carry out the substance and spirit of this statement; and
15. To call upon Church in Society and other appropriate churchwide units to oversee a process of implementation and accountability for this social statement and to report on implementation to the Church Council in early 2012.

A Social Statement on
Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

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