



## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The public character of marriage also implies a civil responsibility. Marriage is intended not only to protect the people who are married, but to signal to the community their intention to live a peaceful and mutually fulfilling life, even as they endeavor to strengthen the community in which they live. The public promises of marriage, therefore, also protect the community by holding people accountable to their vows. Fidelity to promises blesses all who depend on this trust within and beyond the marriage.

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

Precisely because marriage is the place where deep human trust and needs abide, it also can be a place of great harm. Many experience neither love nor trust within marriage. Harming another emotionally, physically, or spiritually, including through the misuse or abuse of power, is a profound injury. It also is a betrayal and violation of the shelter and trust that are intended within the marriage relationship. Particular care must be taken to support and find safe haven for all who are at risk within a marriage. This includes those whose sense of self is destroyed or damaged within the marriage relationship and, therefore, whose ability to act or advocate for their own health and safety may be inhibited or lost.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This church recognizes that, with conviction and integrity:

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

Although at this time this church lacks consensus on this matter, it encourages all people to live out their faith in the local and global community of the baptized with profound respect for the conscience-bound

belief of the neighbor. This church calls for mutual respect in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community. Regarding our life together as we live with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

correction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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