



Human Sexuality: *Gift and Trust* by Roger A. Willer

INTRODUCTION

A DISTINCTLY LUTHERAN APPROACH

- ☞ Justified by grace through faith
- ☞ Christian freedom in service of the neighbor
- ☞ God's continuing creation
- ☞ God's law at work in the world
- ☞ The Ten Commandments
- ☞ Our vocation to serve the neighbor
- ☞ Lutheran social ethics

TRUST AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

- ☞ The complexity of human sexuality
- ☞ Social trust and the common good
- ☞ Human sexuality and our calling to establish trust

SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES THAT ENHANCE SOCIAL TRUST

- ☞ Marriage: shelter and context for trust
- ☞ Lifelong monogamous same-gender relationships
- ☞ Loving families: ground and source for social trust
- ☞ Protecting children & youth in & for trusting relationships

SEXUALITY AND TRUST IN RELATIONSHIPS

- ☞ Sexuality and self
- ☞ Gender and friendships
- ☞ Commitment and sexuality
- ☞ Sexual intimacy and adult cohabitation

SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

- ☞ Sexuality and society
- ☞ Sexuality and public ministry
- ☞ Sexuality in the workplace

CONCLUSION

- ☞ Human sexuality and moral discernment
- ☞ The necessity of mercy, always

The statement can be downloaded for free from www.elca.org/social statements in English or Spanish. A complimentary printed copy can be requested by calling 800-638-3522; multiple copies can be ordered there for a small fee as well (ITEM001504).

If there is one ELCA social statement that would seem to need no introduction, it is *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. The 2009 Church-wide Assembly floor debate about homosexuality—which was actually more related to decisions about ministry policies—generated great

media attention, and its adoption has resulted in much anguish for some and hope for others.

All this attention does not mean people actually know what is in the statement! It remains widely believed that the statement is primarily about same-gender relation-

ships. In fact, that issue is treated in only one section out of 23. So, it is important to ask some key questions while introducing the contents of this broad-ranging statement.

First, we should ask, what do those other 22 sections cover? A quick look at the outline provides

a clue. Marriage is central, but the text also treats sexuality and family, children, divorce, the self, friendship, and sex outside marriage. It covers social issues such as the global sex-trade, the commercialization of sex, internet sex, sexual abuse, clergy misconduct, sexually transmitted diseases, sexuality and the workplace, and more.

Why so much?

The statement informs us that human sexuality is deeply relational and grows out of the web of family ties and social interaction (p. 27)*. It also reports that individual sexuality is shaped by cultural forces and practices. Economics, business and advertising, social roles, medicine and science, and entertainment—these all are relevant to sexuality (p. 26).

God creates human beings as sexual creatures. Sexuality is a marvelous and awesome gift (p. 4) given through a rich and diverse combination of physical, emotional, and relational interactions (p. 28), all of which receive some attention in the statement. Sexuality also is a trust that brings great joy and delight but can be used sinfully to cause great harm. The broad reach of the statement is necessary to address

the many places that sexuality intersects with human life.

In addition to identifying sexuality's goodness and its potential for harm, the statement addresses other key themes. Its theological framework is provided by Jesus' invitation to love God and love our neighbor (Romans 13:9–10; Galatians 5:14). Its moral guidance is situated within a Lutheran emphasis on our Christian freedom through the gospel to serve our neighbor (p. 3).

Trust and harm

Central to our vocation of serving the neighbor is building and protecting trust in human relationships and in social institutions. In accord with Scripture, the statement pinpoints trust as a fundamental character of right relationship. In response to God's faithful (trustworthy) relationship of love through Christ for the world, we are to seek to be trustworthy in our human sexuality and to build social institutions and practices where trust and trustworthy relationships can thrive (p. 5).

These emphases on *building trust and preventing harm* provide the way to assess how social practices and social arrangements treat sexuality. The question is: Do social

practices and structures (such as business practices and economic systems) shelter, sustain, and protect personal, familial, and social trusting relationships? Do they help individuals to flourish? Or do these social forces harm physical, emotional, and social relationships? The

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statement teaches that it is part of the church's calling to speak to these issues, as individual Christians and as an institution in society (p. 33).

How are the themes of building trust and preventing harm reflected in some of the most discussed issues in our culture today—issues such as the nature of marriage? The statement describes marriage as “a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally

by the state and blessed by God. The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting Mark 10:6–9” (p. 15). It goes on to say that marriage is intended to protect the creation and nurturing of mutual trust and love as one foundation of human community: “It is a binding relationship that provides conditions for personal well-being, the flourishing of the partner, and the possibility of procreation and the nurturing of children. It is also intended to be a blessing to the community and the world” (p. 16).

The role of family

The same themes of trust and harm appear in its discussion of family. The family is a primary place of trust-building 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)” (p. 21).

The statement notes that children learn either trust or distrust from their earliest relationships with parents and others in the household. Those who do not learn to

trust face significant obstacles to becoming trustworthy individuals. They also may find that it is difficult to develop a mature and healthy sexuality. For these reasons, “This church regards the family as an indispensable social institution because of its role in establishing conditions of trust and protection of the vulnerable” (p. 22).

Love and respect

It is important to stress—as the statement does—that the ELCA is united in opposing all forms of violence or discrimination and is committed to welcoming all people, regardless of sexual orientation, and their families into our congregations (p. 18). It states clearly that casual or promiscuous relationships between same-gender individuals—as well as heterosexuals—are opposed. The sole matter of whether or how to regard *lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships* is where the statement recognizes different positions among ELCA members.

In response, the statement draws on the foundational Lutheran understanding that the baptized are called to love our neighbor. We also are asked to respect the neighbor, including the neighbor whose convictions depend on a different understanding of Scripture than we might hold (bound conscience). The statement does not prescribe “believe what you want” but establishes boundar-

ies by clarifying four principled and broadly representative positions that have emerged within our church after years of study, prayer, dialogue, and scholarship. Each position has a strong rationale regarding Scripture and theological heritage as well as the meaning of scientific data and appropriate practice in pastoral care (p. 20).

With these in place, the statement concludes: “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 and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of ‘the bound conscience,’ will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.”

While this introduction to *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* can touch on a few of the most important questions regarding sexuality, there is so much more! The complex questions raised by our culture call for a wide-ranging statement that provides guidance for discerning what it means to be faithful to God and to love the neighbor. Bring your own questions to the text and find out what is there. 🌸

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