

THE CHURCH
AND
HOMOSEXUALITY

Journey Together
ELCA STUDIES ON SEXUALITY: PART TWO Faithfully

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Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality

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Journey Together
THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY *Faithfully*
STUDY GUIDE: PART TWO

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BACKGROUND

At the 2001 Churchwide Assembly, voting members from congregations across the ELCA adopted resolutions that call upon this church

- 1) to study homosexuality with reference to two issues: the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex unions, and
- 2) to develop a social statement on sexuality.

Appendix I contains the full text of these resolutions.

JOURNEY TOGETHER FAITHFULLY: PART ONE

The overall theme for these studies is “Journey Together Faithfully.” At the direction of the Church Council of the ELCA, *Journey Together Faithfully: Part One* studies “A Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” (ELCA, 1996). This message deals with a wide range of topics, but does not discuss the church and homosexuality. The present study focuses on that topic. *Journey Together Faithfully: Part One* and other ELCA publications referred to in this study are available on-line at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney



JOURNEY TOGETHER FAITHFULLY: PART TWO

This study asks members of the ELCA to consider how this church should respond to the requests to bless same-sex unions and to ordain, consecrate, or commission people in committed same-sex unions.

All ELCA members are invited to look at **biblical teaching, church doctrine**, and present-day **experience** and **knowledge** concerning homosexuality. After finishing the study, participants will complete a response form. These forms will be returned to the director for ELCA studies on sexuality and tabulated so that the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality can use them as they determine what recommendations to send to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly.

The work done in this church and by the task force on *Journey Together Faithfully: Parts One and Two* will contribute to a social statement that deals with our church’s teaching on a wide variety of topics on sexuality. The target date for submitting this social statement to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly is 2007.





LETTER FROM THE BISHOP

August 2003

Dear Partners in Mission and Ministry:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is on a six-year journey. The direction for this journey was set by the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The assembly's actions mandated that this church engage in a study on homosexuality and a study on sexuality. The first study is to deal with the blessing of same-gender unions and the rostering of persons in committed gay or lesbian relationships. The second study is to lead to the development of a social statement on sexuality.

These two closely-intertwined studies have been organized under the banner of "Journey Together Faithfully." Dr. James Childs, director for the studies, has written, "This is both a *call* and a *goal*. Some are eager to get on with this work. Others are not. Many are apprehensive. However, our church has called upon us to share in this journey and we pray that it will be a faithful expression of our unity in Christ."

For each of us, whatever our personal opinions, this resource is an invitation to conversation. "Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality" can help this church consider matters that have elicited intense debate within and beyond this church. The study is also important because responses to it will help form the recommendations that will come to future churchwide assemblies.

As a parent and pastor who has served congregations and in synodical leadership, I am very mindful of how difficult it is for all of us to have conversations on human sexuality in the context of our faith and life. I believe the task force has produced a resource for these conversations that is faithful, honest, respectful, clear, and well balanced.

We can be confident that our Lord will be with us on this journey and that the Holy Spirit will lead us through it faithfully. God bless you as you participate in these studies.

In God's grace,

Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop

CURRENT ELCA POLICY AND PRACTICE

All people are welcome in ELCA congregations. This study does not raise the question of welcoming homosexual people into the full communion of this church.

The ELCA has no policy on the blessing of same-sex unions. In 1993 the Conference of Bishops stated that they did not approve an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of same-sex unions because they found no basis for it in the Bible or in tradition. Statements of the bishops do not establish policy for the church but do shape its understandings and practice.

ELCA practice on ordination, consecration, and commissioning is governed by the ELCA Constitution and by documents adopted by the ELCA Church Council (“Definition and Guidelines for Discipline,” 1989, rev. 1993, and “Vision and Expectations...,” 1990). **It is the policy of the ELCA that all single rostered people, including those who understand themselves to be homosexual, are expected to abstain from sexual relationships.**

HOW DO WE “JOURNEY TOGETHER FAITHFULLY”?

“Journey” calls us to walk with God along a path of learning and discernment, confident that God’s Word will be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105).

“Together” reminds us that we are doing this work as a community of faith, a church. We are people whose ideas and experiences may differ, even radically, but we remain in community.

“Faithfully” means being faithful to God, the Bible, Christian teaching, and who we are in the body of Christ and what God calls us to do.

PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSION IN A SPIRIT OF MUTUAL RESPECT

As members of a community formed by Baptism and sustained by the Eucharist, we enter the conversation as equals. We contribute different experiences, sensitivities, joys, sorrows, skills, and abilities. These diverse gifts can enrich conversations, but they can also cause tension, especially when the subject matter is controversial. Conversations about existing or future church policies on the blessing of same-sex unions and admitting people in such committed unions into ELCA rostered ministries will raise controversial and deeply personal issues. For the members of this church to engage these issues productively we will need to trust each other. One effective way to build trust is to listen respectfully to one another.

Below is a list of behaviors that can help ensure that all members of the body of Christ listen and all are heard.

- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—even when they disagree with you.
- Be sensitive to the fact that comments received as simply information by some will be received by others as far more personal, perhaps even threatening or hurtful.

Churchwide Assembly Actions

“To affirm that gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (1991)

To affirm the prior action of the 1991 Churchwide Assembly, “gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America...” (1995)

To encourage discerning conversation about homosexuality and the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons “in our common life and mission.” (1999)

—www.elca.org/faithfuljourney

CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS

October 5–8, 1993

Blessing of Homosexual

Relationship

CB93.10.25

We, as the Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, recognize that there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship. We, therefore, do not approve such a ceremony as an official action of this church’s ministry. Nevertheless, we express trust in and will continue dialogue with those pastors and congregations who are in ministry with gay and lesbian persons, and affirm their desire to explore the best ways to provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister.

—www.elca.org/sr/blessing_homosexual_relations

Excerpts from the social statements of the two predecessor churches can be found in Appendix II. These statements guide ELCA policy. They are also available in their entirety on the Web at www.elca.org/dcs/sex.alc and www.elca.org/dcs/sex.lca Links to other ELCA policy statements can be found at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/policy

BEFORE BEGINNING THE STUDY

Consult

- Appendix IV, “How to Use this Study Guide,” pages 40–41
- Appendix V, “Frequently Asked Questions,” pages 42–44

The glossary (inside back cover) may also be useful.

- Listen as much or more than you talk. Genuine listening is not a passive activity, but an active, demanding one. Listen not only for the content of what is said, but also for the way it is said. Observe carefully the emotion, body language, and other clues about how people are feeling.
- When what someone says makes you uncomfortable, try not to be in a hurry to move on in the conversation. Give the other a full hearing and full consideration.
- State your own thoughts and feelings honestly. Even passionate conversation can be civil and constructive.
- Let people speak for themselves and do not presume to speak for others or know what others believe or think. Therefore, use “I” statements and avoid “You” statements.
- Keep an open mind and heart. Try to understand others as much as possible and be attuned to what you might learn. Try to put yourself in another’s place. Look for shared values even though there are serious disagreements.
- Appreciate each other’s faith and faithfulness.
- Realize that the Holy Spirit is present and active among all in the conversation. Each participant has a part of the truth you are seeking to discern.

Portions of this section are taken from: “Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues,” ELCA Division for Church in Society, 1999. See Appendix III or go to www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources for other relevant resources and ordering information.



MESSAGE FROM THE TASK FORCE FOR ELCA STUDIES ON SEXUALITY

In each session of this study guide, we have made every effort to provide examples of the various views people of the church hold. We cannot be exhaustive, but we hope that we have been discerning in our selection. Please give us your feedback on the response form provided in the back of this booklet. This form will also be available on-line at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney

It is important that matters of serious dialogue and deliberation in the church take place in an environment of worship and prayer. We seek God’s guidance and blessing on our efforts at every step of the way. Worship suggestions are included at the beginning of each session because worshipping together anchors us in Christ. In addition, each session emphasizes one of the major themes of our faith. These themes remind us of the ways our study together is based in our relationship to God and to each other. Finally, prayers for understanding and discernment close each session.

SESSION ONE: OUR IDENTITY

Hymn: Lutheran Book of Worship #194 “All Who Believe and Are Baptized”

Scripture Reading: Galatians 3:26–29

Prayer: Gracious Lord, through water and the Spirit you have made us your own. You have forgiven all our sins and brought us to newness of life. Continue to strengthen us with the Holy Spirit, and daily increase in us your gifts of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and the spirit of joy in your presence; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

We study sexuality together as **the baptized**, the communion of saints, a people justified by grace for Christ’s sake through faith. Such study is a response to our call to engage in moral deliberation that is guided by God’s word in law and gospel. In mandating this study, the ELCA voting members indicated that ELCA members should consider the many ways in which our experience of sexuality affects our sense of identity in the body of Christ.

SEXUALITY AND FAITHFULNESS: OUR EXPERIENCES

We are part of God’s good creation. We are created as sexual beings and we are redeemed as sexual beings. Our sexuality is part of our identity, but only part. Another vital part of our identity is our being in the baptismal fellowship that is the body of Christ. In Christ we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), for God, out of love for us and for all creation, sent the Son that we might be redeemed from the destruction of sin. **Regardless of our different sexual orientations or views about sexual orientation and sexual conduct, our unity comes from Christ and his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.**

Read: Below is a list of views from within the ELCA about sexuality and its relationship to our life in the Church. As you read the list, remember to try to understand others as much as possible and to appreciate the faith and faithfulness that informs each view. Look for shared values even though there are serious disagreements.

- Some in our church who experience a homosexual orientation have struggled with questions of self-worth and acceptance because of social and religious disapproval.
- Some in our church who experience a homosexual orientation are not comfortable with their sexuality. They may seek help to reorient their sexuality.
- Some in our church who experience a homosexual orientation understand it as their natural sexuality and want to affirm it as normal and healthy for them.
- Some in our church who have come into close contact—in family and in friendships—with people of homosexual orientation, who are Christians, come to share that positive view. When they share in the pain of censure that may be the experience of their family members or friends, they are often motivated to advocate full acceptance of homosexuality.
- Some in our church who have experienced homosexuality and homosexual activity as contrary to God’s intentions for humanity view those who have worked at reorientation or maintained celibacy as inspiring examples.
- Some in our church have experienced homosexuality and homosexual activity as contrary to God’s will. For them, this experience upholds the authority of the Bible and the teaching of our church.



But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works or righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

—Titus 3:4–6¹

Helpful Hints

1. Have people in the group read the bulleted points aloud.
2. Remember, all the people expressing these views identify themselves as people of faith.

Justification, the assurance of God's forgiveness in Christ, is a joy to the person whose conscience is troubled. Those who are blind to their own need for God's forgiveness do not have this experience and therefore misunderstand or look down on the teaching of justification.

"Moreover, although [justification by faith alone] is despised by those without experience, nevertheless devout and anxious consciences find by experience that [justification by faith alone] offers the greatest consolation. This whole teaching must be referred to that struggle of the terrified conscience, and it cannot be understood apart from that struggle. That is why those who are wicked and without experience judge it badly."

—Augsburg Confession—Latin Text— Article XX, 15–18, from *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

- Some in our church, including some of homosexual orientation, believe that homosexuality may be something other than the ideal of God's creation. However, they believe that a gay or lesbian person in an active homosexual relationship can still lead a faithful Christian life, even if such a relationship cannot be affirmed as the ideal.
- Some in our church who are gay or lesbian and active in the church wish to have committed same-sex unions recognized and honored by our church and desire to be accountable for living faithfully, lovingly, and generously in faithful union with a partner.

Questions: Discuss the understanding of "faithfulness" that each of the above views assumes. How would the holder of that view understand him or herself to be part of the body of Christ? Can you think of other ways experiences of sexuality affect our identity in the body of Christ? Record the responses so you can refer back to them later in this study and when filling out the response form.

THE BIBLE AND EXPERIENCE

As the baptized, united in the body of Christ, we humbly seek to understand God's will for our lives as it is expressed in the Bible. The ways we understand the Bible are influenced by our experiences. Likewise, our understanding of the Bible influences how we understand our experiences. We need to be aware of how our experiences in life and the opinions they shape affect our interpretation of the Bible, and we need to examine our life experiences based on our understanding of what the Bible says.

The core experience of new life in baptism is God's affirmation of us through the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, experiencing God's grace in Christ is, for Lutherans, the center of the Bible and the key to its interpretation. The main confession of all Lutheran churches, the Augsburg Confession (1530), indicates the importance of this experience of grace in understanding the Bible's central message of justification by faith alone. (See sidebar.) Justification is not simply a doctrine we know or teach, but something we experience. And that experience of justification by grace through faith guides Lutherans' attempts to understand God's Word.

In addition to the core experience of justification, other life experiences affect our understanding of God's will for us. The experiences of life that we have as male or female, as members of a social class, as rural or urban dwellers, as people who have known suffering or suffered prejudice, as members of the Lutheran church or another, represent a few of the forces that shape the opinions and perspectives we bring to our understanding of the Bible. Our understanding of a biblical text will be a product of the interaction of our experiences, the words in the Bible, and the Holy Spirit working in and through our study of those words. (See sidebar page nine for a discussion idea.)

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION: LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVES

We turn to the Bible for insight on our experiences, including our experiences of sexuality, because the Bible is authoritative for the faith and life of this church. Both the ELCA's constitution and the writings of Martin Luther and the other reformers emphasize its authority. (See sidebars on page 10.) The Bible is centered in Christ and the message of God's salvation in Christ. This is the culmination of God's self-revelation recorded in the Bible.

For Lutherans, the meaning of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is spelled out in the relationship of law and gospel. God uses the law to reveal our sin, our estrangement from God and each other. The law also provides norms that govern life in this sinful world. The gospel assures us of God's forgiveness and of the renewal of our relationships with God and each other.

Both the law and the gospel are continually at work in our lives because, though we are the baptized children of God, we are still sinners who hear the judgment of the law and the continual need for repentance and forgiveness. Furthermore, we seek to follow God's will as revealed in the commandments of the law out of love for God and for the neighbor.

Because the Bible is authoritative for the faith and life of this church, only the best principles of interpretation will do. Below are some of the principles Lutheran and many other Christian students of the Bible use. Once again the Bible is our foundation as we consider the questions of sexuality before us.

Discussion Idea: Divide the participants into four groups. Each group will read through and discuss one of the following principles of biblical interpretation that Lutherans use. When the groups come back together, each group will explain to the others that particular interpretative principle. The discussions and explanations will be more productive if you refer to specific biblical passages.

Scripture interprets Scripture.

Unclear passages are understood in the light of those that are clear, and all teaching of Scripture is interpreted in terms that are consistent with its witness to Christ and the teachings of law and gospel. Luther and other reformers insisted that the Bible alone is the authority for the church's teaching. For them the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture helped to ensure that the central message of the gospel, rather than an outside authority such as the pope, would govern our understanding of the Bible.²

The principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture is reflected in what the Bible itself tells us about some passages being of greater value than others. Jesus speaks of the "weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23, see also Micah 6:8) and declares the love commandments to be "the greatest," on which "hang all the laws and the prophets" (Matthew 22:36–40). In other words, some commandments, especially the love commandments have priority over others (Galatians 5:13–15). In addition, Paul recognizes that some things are more important than others. For example, Jesus' death and resurrection is "of first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

Following the Bible's lead in emphasizing God's mercy and grace in Christ makes Psalm 23, for example, a more important text than Paul's advice to Timothy that he take a little wine for his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23). Similarly, what Paul says about forgiveness of our sins is more important than what is said about speaking in tongues or eating food offered to idols.

Relevance for this study:

Some interpreters in this church have pointed to the relatively few passages directly addressing the matter of same-sex conduct as an indication of its relative unimportance. However, traditionally, these passages have been seen as part of a very weighty case for God's intention that human sexuality be heterosexual.

Interpret texts in their literary context.

Biblical passages do not have authority for our faith and life in isolation from one another. Context is crucial. Individual texts must be interpreted in the light of the literary context in which they stand. Bible verses pulled out of their contexts could be used to demonstrate almost anything.

Discussion Idea

Divide into two or more groups. The members of one group will imagine they are very wealthy. The members of another group will imagine they are living in poverty. Other groups can take on other identities. Imagined identities need not be based on economic status. In your groups, describe to each other your daily experiences as a wealthy or poor person, e.g., when you get up, how you get to work, what you think of your co-workers, etc. Then read and discuss Matthew 5:3–12 from the perspective of those experiences.

Questions

In your role as a wealthy/poor person, discuss the following.

1. What do you already know about these passages? Where have you learned what you already know? (Remember to stay in character!)
2. What does this passage mean to you as a wealthy/poor person?
3. Are there other passages in the Bible that relate to this one? Do those other passages help or complicate your understanding of this passage?
4. How does the experience of this passage affect your life? What are you going to do, think, believe, or feel because of reading this passage?

After discussing the above questions in your group, join the other group(s) and share your responses. Remain in character until all the responses have been shared. Then answer the following questions from your own perspective.

5. Are there any differences among the responses? If so, what accounts for them? Try to be as specific as possible in your answers.
6. Sometimes experience helps us see the biblical message more clearly. Sometimes it's the opposite. How might studying the Bible together be helpful?
7. Review the bulleted list at the beginning of this session. Discuss how the particular experiences described in the list might contribute to the attitudes described.

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Confession of Faith

2.02. This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

- a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
- b. The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

2.03. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

—from the *ELCA Constitutions, Bylaws, & Continuing Resolutions* (rev. April 2003), §2.02.
www.elca.org/os/constitution/intro

Here [in the Scriptures] you will find the swaddling cloths and manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.

All genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ...Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, and Pilate were doing it.

—*Luther's Works*, vol. 35, Theodore Bachmann, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 236 and 396.

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

—Romans 7:19–25

Relevance for this study:

This study guide does not treat Leviticus 18:22 all by itself; it takes careful account of the literary context. There is a similar concern for literary context in the later discussion of Romans 1:18–32.

Interpret texts in their historical context.

Understanding the historical and cultural setting of the texts helps us understand their meaning. Knowing the ups and downs of the history of Israel helps us appreciate the message of the prophets who spoke to different circumstances in that history. Knowing something of the cultural and social conditions of the various cities to which Paul wrote his letters is important to our understanding of his concerns.

Knowing something of the historical conditions in which texts were written helps us see whether the situations addressed by the biblical writers are comparable to our own circumstances, knowledge, and experience. We have much in common with the people of biblical times. However, our lives also differ. For example, we have a very different understanding of nature and the universe from that of the biblical world. At the same time, we share with the people of that time a sense of awe at the wonder of God's creation.

Relevance for this study:

Interpreters looking at the context of the biblical writers debate whether or not factors in that biblical context might have been different from our own and thus do or do not speak directly to all the concerns of gay and lesbian Christians. Other sessions explore this issue more thoroughly.

Recognize that the Bible has many different kinds of literature.

The truth of the Word comes to us in different forms. The Bible contains narratives, poetry, parables, and many other literary forms. Knowing the form helps to understand the message and can preserve us from taking a wrong turn in our interpretation. For example, parables express truth and so do historical accounts. Nevertheless, we would not treat a parable as an historical account, nor would we treat an historical account as though it were a parable.

To take the parable of the prodigal son as an historical account might simply provide one example of a loving father. However, as a parable, set against the backdrop of Jesus' person and work, it opens our eyes to the wonder of God's love and forgiveness. Likewise, to regard the resurrection account as simply a story without historical content would be to undermine the central event of Christianity. So, discerning the literary form of a scriptural passage is critical to its proper interpretation.

Relevance for this study:

"Law" is a special literary form in the Bible. The Ten Commandments are one example. Another example are the laws written in Leviticus 17–26 called collectively the "Holiness Code." The later discussion on the passages from Leviticus (Session Two) pays attention to the particular features and functions of law in relation to the focus of this study.

Discern the point being commended.

Bible readers need to understand not only what the words say in a given text, but also what is being taught. What is the point the author wants to get across? For example, in Paul's letter to Philemon regarding his slave, Onesimus, Paul does not demand that Philemon release him from his slavery. Does that mean that Paul is commending slavery? Or is Paul really teaching that Philemon should receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ?

Relevance for this study:

Refer to Romans 1:18–32. Some would argue that what Paul is really teaching in this passage is that many sins flow from idolatry. The fact that same-sex intercourse is included as one of those sins simply reflects the view of his time that same-sex intercourse was a sin. According to this argument, Paul's main point is not that same-sex intercourse is a sin, but that idolatry leads to many sins.

Some would reject the implications of that interpretation, pointing out that other sins listed are certainly behaviors that we continue to recognize as sinful. So, why would same-sex intercourse be different?

Questions:

1. What insights have you gained from this session on interpretation? How might these insights help you in your application of the message of the Bible for your everyday life?
2. Did anything surprise you?
3. As we struggle with questions about homosexuality and its meaning for our identity as the baptized, how might studying the Bible together be helpful?
4. Return to the bulleted list at the beginning of the session. This list describes some of the many experiences faithful people have had and some ways they have responded. In light of what you have learned about the ways Lutherans interpret or understand the biblical texts, try to identify the interpretative principles for each perspective. Discuss the ways in which the people responding in this way are faithful.

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Closing Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for the Word of our salvation in Jesus Christ. As we continue to gather in the study of your Word, grant us the gift of the Spirit that we may be strengthened in faith and faithfully discern your will. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



SESSION TWO: OUR COMMUNITY

Hymn: Lutheran Book of Worship # 369 “The Church’s One Foundation”

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:19–22

Prayer: We thank and praise you, gracious God, for the salvation and the community that is ours through the merits of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Give us the guidance of your Spirit as we gather around your Word that we may understand and teach it truly and faithfully, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Another way to speak of our unity in Christ through baptism is to use the language of the Apostles’ Creed where we confess that we believe in the “holy catholic church, the **communion of saints.**” This confession reminds us that we are not only a community in one particular congregation or in the ELCA but also in communion with the saints, the redeemed, throughout time and space. Once again, it is God who comes to us and by grace makes us who we are.

The previous session focused on experience and the interpretation of scripture and noted the important role the Holy Spirit plays in discerning a correct interpretation. The Holy Spirit clarifies the meaning of biblical texts through dialogue in the church—the communion of saints. In this session we will look at the scripture passages most often involved in discussions of same-sex intercourse. Each passage is briefly summarized and followed by common interpretations and their implications for this study.

THE CREATION ACCOUNTS

The creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 describe God’s creation of a good world—a universe filled with a marvelous diversity of creatures great and small. Sexuality is one dimension of God’s wise and wonderful world. These texts tend to assume matters of human sexuality rather than dwell on the details. God created male and female, blessed them, and commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28; a blessing and command also given to the animals, Genesis 1:22). Genesis 2:24 says, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” The words, “one flesh,” do not merely focus on sexual relations; they speak more broadly of the unity of man and woman as a fundamental and enduring unit of humankind. Jesus will use that understanding of this text as a basis for his response to a question about divorce (Matthew 19:1–9; Mark 10:2–9).

Interpretation

The creation accounts take for granted that sexual relations will be between a man and a woman. The creation stories assume that the male and the female, who complement each other biologically and in other ways, are God’s only given structure for human sexual relationships.

Implications

Because of this straightforward point, some interpreters understand these creation texts to put an end to the conversation about any positive understanding of homosexual practice. Other interpreters, however, claim that the creation accounts in themselves are not the only factor in creation that needs to be considered in thinking through this issue. Some point out that part of God’s intent in the creation is to provide for companionship, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18). While the partnership portrayed in Genesis 2 is a heterosexual one, the basic need for companionship reflected here is one that seems relevant to the lives of gay and lesbian people as well.

Interpretation

The following two points are usually made together and may be agreed to by people holding different views on homosexuality:

1. *God's creation is not presented as a finished product, but leaves room for further creative developments.* God evaluates the created world as "good," not perfect, or never in need of change or development. God has not created a static and mechanistic world. There are many consistencies over time (day and night, heat and cold), but God has created a world with a certain openness with respect to its future. Such an understanding correlates well with the actual history of a developing natural order across the centuries, including the emergence of new viruses, insects, animals, mountain ranges, and river valleys. God's created order is not fixed in stone; it is still in the process of becoming.
2. *God involves created beings in the ongoing process of the creation.* In Genesis 1:11–12, God speaks with the earth and involves it in further creative activity. Later God commands human beings to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28), to bring order out of continuing disorder in this good but not perfect world, and in Genesis 2:18–25, God evaluates the creation as not yet good. God then involves the man in discerning what is still needed. The decisions of the man, against the animals and then for the woman, have shaped the future of the creation in a decisive way. Human beings continue to be involved in the processes of discernment that shape the development of creation in numerous ways, both positive and negative.

Implications

Many interpreters stress the fact that, given irregularities in natural processes and the presence of sin and its wide-ranging ill effects, developments in creation have not always been good. Thus, other types of sexual relationships that may develop over time are "unnatural," against the will of God in creation, the result of the fall into sin, and a threat to God's established order for male and female.

Other interpreters honor the male-female relationship as fundamental to God's purposes in creation, but they interpret the creation accounts as open to other possibilities regarding the nature of human relationships. For example, single people are not foreseen in the creation accounts, but we do not consider them "unnatural" human beings because of that. Likewise we do not regard married couples without children as "unnatural." And so a simple appeal to the creation texts cannot determine that which is "unnatural." It may be that changing sexual orientations are a part of the ongoing creative process and we will need to study them carefully to discern whether they have an appropriate place within God's good creation.

Question: The creation stories present the male-female relationship as "foundational." Re-read Genesis 1–2 and discuss whether other relationships might also be allowed. On what basis would you decide if a relationship was right, moral, or allowed?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

SPECIFIC PASSAGES REGARDING SAME-SEX INTERCOURSE

The following biblical passages are usually understood to speak directly to the issue of same-sex intercourse. This section of the study includes brief accounts of the different ways in which they have been interpreted. Principles of interpretation introduced in Session One will be evident in the discussion of these texts. The background paper on biblical interpretation provides a fuller discussion.

Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.

—Genesis 1:11–12
(See also Genesis 1:20 and 24.)

Genesis 19:1–11 and Judges 19:16–30

These two stories are similar accounts of attempted homosexual rape. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 has been the focus for discussion, not least because the cities are destroyed and the Bible often mentions that fact. The stage is set by the visit to Sodom of two angels, disguised as men (Genesis 19:1, 5, 10), to whom Lot offers hospitality. But all the men of Sodom surround the house and demand that Lot make the angels/men available for rape (Genesis 19:4–5; similarly, Judges 19:22). Aware of his responsibility as host, Lot offers his virgin daughters in place of the angels, thinking that the men of Sodom might be satisfied with heterosexual rape. (A similar offer in Judges 19 is reluctantly accepted and a woman is raped and later killed.) But before anything can happen to Lot’s visitors or his daughters, the men of Sodom are struck with blindness and the city is shortly destroyed.

Interpretations

For many interpreters of the Bible, these stories have traditionally counted as a witness to Israel’s condemnation of homosexual conduct, especially between males. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has been thought to be specific evidence of God’s anger at such behavior. Moreover, the mention of the destruction of these cities in Jude 7 is specifically linked to “sexual immorality” and “unnatural lust.”

For some interpreters, homosexual rape does not make consensual homosexual conduct wrong any more than heterosexual rape makes heterosexual sex wrong. Since every male in Sodom (19:4) threatened to rape the angels/men, these would-be rapists would have to have been mostly heterosexual men. Their motive was to demonstrate who was in charge, a motive shared by other rapists. These interpreters also use the principle of Scripture interprets Scripture when they point out that while there are more than twenty-five biblical references to Sodom, only Jude 7 explicitly mentions that Sodom’s problem was sexual in nature (and, in view of Jude 6, the issue seems to be intercourse with angels). The sins of Sodom are most explicit in Ezekiel 16:49: pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and not aiding the poor and needy—sins often ignored in this conversation. In addition, Jesus uses the Genesis 19 passage to condemn inhospitality (Matthew 10:14–15), not same-sex conduct.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

The laws regarding homosexual practice are part of an extensive list of laws regarding sexuality (Leviticus 18:1–30) and associated penalties (Leviticus 20:1–26). This section of Leviticus is especially concerned with Israel’s life of holiness (see 19:2), that is, lives pleasing to God and set apart from their neighbor’s practices (Leviticus 18:1–5; 20:23).

Interpretations

In the interests of the good order of the human community, Christian communities through the centuries have affirmed the continuing applicability of the law regarding male same-sex intercourse (Leviticus 18:22). The Leviticus text (vv. 22–30) repeatedly calls such intercourse an “abomination,” that is, a detestable practice. The condemnation of male same-sex intercourse is supported by other biblical texts such as Romans 1:18–32. While the creation stories are not specifically referred to in Leviticus, concern for preserving God’s male-female design for creation may lie behind this view that male same-sex intercourse is a detestable practice.

More recently, some interpreters have asked whether the law in Leviticus 18:22 is as straightforward as it appears to be. All other sexuality laws in Leviticus 18 deal with behaviors on the part of heterosexuals. Is that not also the case in 18:22? Consensual homosexual relationships do not appear to be in view, they argue.³ Moreover, the

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

—Leviticus 18:22

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

—Leviticus 20:13

word “abomination” covers a wide range of human behaviors, including intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period (Leviticus 18:19, 30; Ezekiel 22:10), remarriage after divorce (Deuteronomy 24:4), and cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5).

Question: Is every law in Leviticus 18:19–23 equally applicable to Christians today? Why or why not? On what basis do you decide?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

The Purpose of Law Then and Now

God gives the law “that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess” (Deuteronomy 5:33); this divine purpose is echoed in Leviticus 18:5. In other words, God’s laws are grace-filled, manifesting a basic concern for the life, health, and good order of the community. Put negatively, they are concerned to shelter the community from disease, instability, violence, and premature death. The sexuality laws in Leviticus participate in this divine purpose.

Question: In what ways do each of the sexuality laws contribute to the good ends for the community? Christians often disagree in the way they respond to this question, but most agree that the concerns that generated the law in the first place continue to be important. Those concerns, most would agree, have to do with the life and health of our communities and not individual rights.

👉 Remember to record your responses.

All interpreters understand that some Old Testament laws have been set aside for Christians. This is the case especially when the New Testament itself makes such a claim (e.g., the food laws; see Mark 7; Acts 10), but the Old Testament already shows the way (cf. Deuteronomy 23:1–8 with Isaiah 56:1–8⁴). Moreover, widespread agreement exists regarding the obsolescence of many laws to which the New Testament does not speak (e.g., laws regarding agriculture and clothing, e.g., Leviticus 19:19), and even some to which it does (e.g., remarriage of divorced people, Mark 10:11–12). Regarding the sexuality laws, most agree that the laws regarding intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period (Leviticus 18:19) and capital punishment for homosexual behavior (20:13) no longer apply. However, interpreters agree that most sexuality laws continue to be applicable to Christians, including those regarding incest, adultery, and bestiality. Because these behaviors, unlike some of the others named, adversely affect good order in the life of the community, they cannot be set aside.

Interpretations

For some interpreters, the law stated in Leviticus 18:22 continues to be applicable because setting it aside would adversely affect the institution of marriage, a cornerstone of our society, and undermine the heterosexual plan of God’s good order of creation.

For other interpreters, setting the law aside would nurture responsible sexuality and faithful relationships in the homosexual community, thus contributing to the sexual stability of our society and to its health.

Questions:

1. Beginning with trying to understand God’s purpose in giving a law, what criteria should we use to determine whether a specific law continues to apply to Christians today?
2. What action on the part of this church would best contribute to the life, health, and sexual stability of our communities?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites...

—1 Corinthians 6:9

... fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching...

—1 Timothy 1:10

1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

In these two passages some form of male same-sex conduct is condemned along with other sinful activities.

Interpretations

The precise meaning of the two Greek words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (translated in the NRSV as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites”), one of which also occurs in 1 Timothy 1:10, has been disputed by Bible scholars. The terms have been variously translated. See the discussion of this text in the background paper by Hultgren and Taylor. (Distributed with this booklet and available on-line at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney)

Clearly, the two words refer to some form of male same-sex behavior that is regarded as sinful. The nature of that activity is not clear. Could it refer to the sort of same-sex relationships between men and boys that was characteristic of the surrounding Greek culture? Possibly, but not necessarily. Do the passages condemn all expressions of same-sex conduct without exception? Some say, yes. Others say that the uncertainties of the word meanings make this sweeping a censure risky. Still others say that, despite the alleged uncertainties of translation, the combination of these passages with others that reject same-sex intercourse guarantees that they are part of a clear and larger picture of biblical disapproval.

Question: What principles of biblical interpretation would help you to determine the importance of these passages for the issues of blessing same-sex unions and the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex relationships?

📌 Remember to record your responses.

Romans 1:18–32

In Romans 1:18–32 Paul speaks of God’s judgment of the Gentiles. These people should have known God from the realities of creation and given honor and gratitude to God (Romans 1:19–22). They turned to the worship of idols instead (1:23, 25, and 28). Therefore, God “gave them up” (1:24, 26, and 28) to judgment. This divine action is referred to as the wrath of God in 1:18. This divine judgment included a long list of twenty-three behaviors of “impurity...degrading passions...a debased mind and things that should not be done” (1:24, 26–27, and 28–31), and which have taken control of their lives.

Interpretations

Almost all students of the Bible agree that this passage is the most important of all for the Bible’s assessment of homosexuality. First of all, this is the only place where both gay and lesbian sexual conduct is mentioned (1:26–27). Secondly, because Paul decries same-sex intercourse as one manifestation of sinful behavior—sexual and otherwise—among the many that display the fruits of idolatry, we see homosexual conduct placed in a clear theological context of universal human sinfulness and need for God’s redemption that goes back to Adam (Romans 5:12–19).

Some interpreters would emphasize that Paul’s description of same-sex intercourse as exchanging “natural intercourse for unnatural,” seems to indicate an appeal to God’s intention that the norm for sexuality in creation is heterosexual. What is “natural” is God’s will for what the creation ought to be. The idea some have had that Paul is condemning only certain forms of same-sex behaviors because they are promiscuous or exploitative is questioned because the basis for condemnation is that the acts are unnatural. His appeal to what is “natural” versus what is “unnatural” expresses his conviction that all have a basic knowledge of divine will in creation. To this some

would add that Paul is also drawing on his familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures by reflecting Leviticus 18 in his prohibition of same-sex acts.

Other interpreters contend that “natural” refers to what is conventional rather than to the structure of creation. The Greek word for natural is not a synonym for creation. This would open the door to the suggestion that Paul’s evaluation of such behavior was reflective of his cultural context and not the timeless design of God’s creation. Furthermore, some would argue, Paul’s idea of “exchanging” natural for unnatural relations conveys the notion that same-sex conduct is a willful act, like the other sins listed, and not the expression of a given orientation.

Finally, some interpreters would add that Paul’s strategy in this whole section is to make the point that all, even the Jews, are sinners and without excuse. His real concern is not to focus on the evil of same-sex activity. Rather, Paul is showing the world’s need for grace (law) and leading up to the proclamation of justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith in Romans 3:24–26 (gospel).

Question: Consider Romans 1:26–27 in the context of 1:24–32. Make a list of the sins that Paul enumerates. Are they all of equal seriousness? Why or why not?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Conclusions

Despite some differences of opinion on the precise message of some of these texts, there is general agreement that the Bible has nothing positive to say about same-sex intercourse. For some homosexual people among us this negative biblical evaluation of their sexuality has been a source of pain and sometimes an incentive to seek help in changing their sexual orientation.

For other homosexual people among us their experience of themselves does not seem to correspond with what the Bible calls an abomination. They appeal to the experience of their own sexuality as natural for them and to their devotion to Christ and commitment to a faithful and loving union. Others looking at the Bible are persuaded by this appeal.

Questions:

1. What surprised you in this session of the study?
2. In your view, is disagreement about the blessing of same-sex unions a disagreement over the interpretation of biblical passages and their application, or a disagreement over the authority of the Bible? What does the character of the disagreement mean for how the church should deal with this controversy?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Closing Prayer: Creator God, we praise you for the wonder of your creation and for its blessings of intimacy and companionship that are a part of our life together. Show us the way and give us the grace to order our sexual lives in accordance with your will, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SESSION THREE: OUR PARTICIPATION

Hymn: Lutheran Book of Worship #214 “Come, Let Us Eat” or
With One Voice #710 “One Bread, One Body”

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 10: 16–17

Prayer: Almighty God, you provide the true bread from heaven—your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Grant that we who have received the sacrament of his body and blood may abide in him and he in us, that we may be filled with the power of endless life, now and forever. Amen.

2.04. This church accepts the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church.

2.05. This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

2.06. This church accepts the other confessional writings in the *Book of Concord*, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.

2.07. This church confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scripture and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God’s mission in the world.

—from the *ELCA Constitutions, Bylaws, & Continuing Resolutions* (rev. April 2003), §2.04–§2.07.
www.elca.org/os/constitution/intro.html

“... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

—Matthew 28:20

The church gathers as a community of faith around the scriptures, the source of the church’s teachings. Through interpretation, these teachings are handed down in a process called “tradition.” **Tradition** as a true expression of biblical teaching has a place of authority in this church. Tradition’s authority is recognized in the constitution of the ELCA by our acceptance of the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the other documents of the *Book of Concord* as true expressions of the faith. With the Bible they witness to the gospel, which creates and sustains the Church for God’s mission in the world. (See sidebar.)

While the Lutheran Confessions in the *Book of Concord* are a particular expression of our Lutheran heritage, the reformers who wrote those documents believed that they were expressing the true faith of all ages. The ELCA also sees itself as part of this larger Christian witness. Therefore, in the discussion of sexuality and homosexuality, we want to listen to the whole of tradition, not just our own.

As we gather at the Lord’s table to share in his body and blood we participate with one another in a “foretaste of the feast to come” that unites us with all Christians throughout time and space. As Paul has said, “We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (1 Corinthians 10:17) As we participate in the church’s calling to study the Word and preserve its teachings faithfully, we are sure that the Lord is with us as promised.

CHRISTIAN TRADITION, SEXUALITY, AND MARRIAGE

A timeline highlighting the history of the church’s teachings on sexuality and marriage gives us a glimpse of how those teachings have developed.

The Early Centuries

Celibacy was considered the higher spiritual path. Sexual intercourse was to take place only in marriage and then only for procreation. For many teachers of the church, sexual intercourse, even in marriage for procreation, was tainted with sin through the Fall.

Fourth and Fifth Centuries (300–400 AD)

The theologian Augustine allowed that **marriage** had certain values: procreation, a bond of fidelity as a hedge against fornication, and a sacramental character symbolizing the bond between Christ and the Church. However, he still believed that sexual desire in marriage was a sin that could be forgiven if the intercourse involved was for procreation.⁵

Eleventh Century (1000s)

By the 11th century the church was clear that **marriage**, essential as it was seen to be to regulate the sexual drive, was to be **monogamous, indissoluble, and not between**

immediate family members. Though this was the norm for the church's teaching, it was sometimes difficult to regulate.

Thirteenth Century (1200s)

The movement to make a **celibate priesthood the norm** within the Western church was eventually successful. This development reflected the generally dim view taken of sexual desire in all circumstances. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), an influential medieval theologian whose writings shaped Roman Catholic theology after the Reformation, reflects this outlook in his teaching that the sexual drive is part of our lower animal nature. Sexual pleasure is not wrong in itself but needs to be justified by being oriented to the higher end of procreation.⁶

Same-sex intercourse, along with all non-procreative heterosexual intercourse, was deemed **morally illicit and sinful**. Thomas Aquinas regarded same-sex intercourse, masturbation, and bestiality, as sins against nature. As such, same-sex conduct was a graver sin than fornication and adultery for he considered unnatural vices to be a greater offense.⁷

Sixteenth Century (1500s)

Luther and the Reformation affirmed **marriage** and sexual relations in marriage as **natural and good, ordained by God in creation**. Breaking with late medieval thought, they set a high value on the personal relations between husband and wife. The Lutheran Confessions uphold the goodness of marriage and reject the requirement of celibacy for priests. Celibacy is an extraordinary gift for the very few, not something that should be forced on someone. (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XXVII, 51)

Though seldom mentioned in the literature of the Reformation, it seems apparent that a negative valuation of same-sex intercourse was carried over from the Middle Ages without much revision. The Lutheran Confessions do not mention same-sex activity, but Luther does briefly state his acceptance of its sinfulness in commenting on the story of Sodom and in his early work on Romans 1:25–29 (*Lectures on Genesis 15–20* and *Lectures on Romans*).

Twentieth Century

The ELCA “Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” (1996)⁸ says the following: “**Human sexuality was created good** for the purposes of expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure.” The message goes on to speak of the impact of sin. However, sexuality and sexual desire in marriage as God's good creation have far more positive aspects than in much of what we read from the earlier tradition. The document further emphasizes the importance placed on the right understanding and use of our sexuality by noting that no fewer than six of the Ten Commandments speak to our sexuality.

Despite some softening in recent times of the relative severity of the sin of same-sex intercourse, nevertheless in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, with few exceptions, it is viewed as sin.

In addition, even though it recognizes the values of love and companionship in the sexual intimacy of marriage, the Roman Catholic Church maintains the position that the purpose of marriage and conjugal love is to produce and nurture children. It has required celibacy for most priests and others in holy orders as the ideal.

With regard to homosexuality, the ELCA has followed the teachings and practices of its predecessor church bodies. People of homosexual orientation are no more sinners than all other people and are welcomed into the life of the congregations of this church. The ELCA recognizes that for some people homosexual orientation is a given and not in itself blameworthy. People who are homosexual who abstain from homosexual intercourse may therefore serve in the rostered ministries of the church. (Refer to page five of the introductory section for further information on current ELCA policies.)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling.

—Ephesians 6:5–6

The slave is the owner's property.

—Exodus 21: 21

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

—Galatians 3:28

Questions:

1. Did anything in this brief timeline surprise you?
2. Given what you now know about the history of the way the church has viewed human sexuality, what contributes to our reluctance to discuss sex and sexuality in the context of our faith?
3. In which ways do we celebrate our sexuality as a gift from God? How does our culture help or hinder our appreciation of this gift?
4. Discuss the fact that celibacy is considered a spiritual gift. How does abstinence differ from celibacy?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

BIBLE, TRADITION, AND CHANGE

The brief review of sexuality and marriage in Christian tradition shows that there has been some development in how the church evaluates sexuality, marriage, sexual intercourse and desire in marriage, and celibacy. At the same time, judgment of same-sex intercourse has been and remains negative. Although in present-day thinking we recognize that homosexual orientation is not itself blameworthy and we welcome people who are homosexual into this church, to many people homosexual relations remain morally unacceptable. The fact, then, that there has been both change and resistance to that change in the history of the church's outlook on matters of sexuality raises certain questions.

Discussion idea: As you consider the following views, identify the strengths and weaknesses of each position, paying particular attention to biblical authority (Session One) and Lutheran tradition.

The Possibility of New Developments

A principle of our Lutheran heritage is that our witness to the gospel and the teachings of the Church arise out of an ongoing process of study and discernment. We continually need to examine our teachings and practice and be open to appropriate change.

Implications

Some say that the changes we can observe in the history of the church's views on sexuality, marriage, and celibacy suggest the possibility of change also in our outlook on homosexuality.

Others argue that the changes toward a more positive view of sexuality in marriage since the Reformation are simply a return to good biblical teaching and that the traditional rejection of homosexual relations is an example of consistent faithfulness to the Bible. (Recall the discussion of biblical texts in Session Two.)

The Shift in Attitudes About Slavery and The Role of Women

The tradition does show changes in our understanding of the meaning and implication of biblical truths. For example, the Church held for many centuries that slavery was an acceptable practice with good biblical justification.

Similarly, it was a traditional practice of the church for centuries to adhere to Paul's admonition that "women should be silent in [all] churches" (1 Corinthians 14:33–36). These texts do reveal social realities that were in place in biblical cultures and to which the Bible offers no explicit objection. However, through much discussion and close examination of other biblical texts that witness to the larger message about freedom and equality (for example, Galatians 3:28) there is now widespread agreement that these biblical injunctions no longer apply to the Church. (Session one introduced the interpretation principles of "Scripture interprets Scripture" and "Interpret texts in their historical context.")

Implications

Some who raise the question of change in our church's policies concerning committed same-sex unions and the rostering of people in such unions cite these changes as examples of how the church needs to reevaluate its teaching from time to time. This is such a time, they claim.

Others argue that in those cases—slavery and the role of women in the church—there are biblical resources to support the change. These are examples of how Scripture interprets Scripture—at times modifying its own message. In the case of homosexuality, they would argue, no such resources exist.

The Shift in Attitudes toward Divorce and Remarriage

Another development in the church's thought and practice has been a shift in attitudes toward divorce and remarriage. In Mark 10:2–12 Jesus seems to say that there are no grounds for divorce. In Matthew 5:31 and 19:9 he offers the exception that one may divorce if one is the victim of an unfaithful spouse. Remarriage outside that exception appears to be precluded. In 1 Corinthians 7:15 Paul allows another exception: divorce is acceptable if an unbelieving partner refuses to remain with a Christian spouse because of his or her faith.

Given the consistent strictures against divorce and remarriage in the New Testament, the church has often been very reluctant to tolerate divorce. Pastoral decisions about remarriage were often based on determining if the party seeking a new marriage had been the “innocent” or “guilty” party in accordance with the Matthew texts. Clergy who got divorced were often forced to resign from the ministry.

In recent times the church has revisited the texts on divorce and remarriage and looked at them in the light of law and gospel. The law clearly reveals the reality of sin in the failure of marriage—there are really no “innocent” parties—but the gospel promises forgiveness and new beginnings to those who repent and seek grace for the amendment of life. Thus, though we continue to hold up God's intention that marriage should be permanent, we also recognize that in a sinful world divorce, though tragic, may be the lesser of evils in some cases. And we turn then to Christ in repentance for renewal.

Implications

Some argue that the more generous reading of biblical statements about divorce and remarriage in the light of the gospel is a good example of how the gospel helped the church overcome its legalistic attitudes and practices. This way of letting the central doctrine of the Bible—law and gospel—lead us in interpreting the application of certain texts could well be applied to those texts that seem to condemn all same-sex acts. Just as there can be responsible Christian marriage after divorce, by the same grace of God there can be responsible same-sex unions.

Others counter that a new marriage following divorce and repentance represents a new beginning in a heterosexual union that fits with God's design in creation. This design is evident in the creation accounts and supported in the Ten Commandments where marriage and family are a clear concern. Same-sex unions do not conform to this divine design. So, while the gospel frees us from the condemnation of the law, it does not free us from the requirements of the law.

Despite some development in Christian thinking about sex and marriage, there is no denying that for many people the basic structure of our existence as male and female is given in creation as a revelation of God's will for us. This is what we are created to be, what is “natural.”

Establishing the practice of blessing same-sex unions sets up a new order of creation not given by God or taught by the Bible. For some with this perspective, establishing a blessing for same-sex unions also represents a threat to the institution of marriage and to the stability of the God-given order of marriage and family.

Others argue that the heterosexual perspective of the Bible can be supplemented by our modern understanding of homosexuality as an orientation and, therefore, “natural” in its own right. They might also point out that some biblical interpreters say the Bible does not present creation as a finished product. Creation is ongoing and we should be open to new insights in the developing history of God’s creating (See the discussion of creation texts in Session Two). Marriage and family will remain central, they point out, and people in same-sex unions will make their Christian witness by pledging themselves to uphold the same standards of love, fidelity, and public accountability we expect in marriages. In other words, we should remain firm in the high standards set for marital relations but extend those same standards to same-sex couples as we recognize their unions.

Resistance to Change for the Sake of the Faith

Although the church has undergone some changes in its thinking, for most of its history it has faithfully resisted changing the core doctrines of its faith. In the face of challenges from a reason-driven worldview, the church has stood fast over the centuries in upholding such core doctrines as the Trinity, the historical resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of everlasting life—none of which can be proved according to the standards of human reason.

Implications

Some would contend that blessing same-sex unions and ordaining, commissioning or consecrating people in such unions is so out of step with the Bible’s judgment on same-sex conduct and its teaching on creation that to do so is idolatry. Such changes are therefore a threat to maintaining the core doctrines of the faith and not simply a matter of justice as in the case of women in the church and the institution of slavery.

Others respond that it is not a matter of accepting the authority of the Bible but rather a question of how the Bible speaks to our present understanding of homosexuality as a fixed orientation rather than a perverse choice. To this they may add that the genuine Christian faith and devotion to Christian service they observe among so many people of homosexual orientation in the church refutes the charge of idolatry.

Conclusion: All would agree that respecting the Church’s tradition is important to the continuity of this church’s witness to the Christian faith. Though changes happen for good reasons, the burden of proof is on the proposal to change traditional teaching.

Questions:

1. Does history of the Church and its traditions help you clarify what you think about the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination, consecration or commissioning of people in such unions? Why? Why not?
2. From your perspective, are the different views faithful people hold about the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordaining, commissioning, or consecrating of people in such unions based in core doctrine or in something else? Explain.
3. If the ELCA were to change its policies regarding blessing same-sex unions and welcoming people in such unions into our ordained, commissioned, and consecrated ministries, on what basis should that change be made? Likewise, on what basis should a decision not to change ELCA policies be made?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have promised to be with us to the end of the ages. Be with us now in our study and deliberation as you have always been with your people in times past. Give us wisdom and courage to be faithful witnesses in our time as the saints who have gone before us were in their time. In your name we pray. Amen.

SESSION FOUR: OUR CENTER

Hymn: Lutheran Book of Worship #293 or #294 “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less”

Scripture Reading: Romans 3:19–28

Prayer: Gracious God, we give you thanks and praise for the salvation that is ours through our Lord, Jesus Christ. By the power of the Spirit strengthen our faith in your promise and increase our love for one another, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

As Lutheran Christians we emphasize God’s grace in the proclamation of the Word, in Baptism, and in the Lord’s Supper. The good news of God’s mercy in the sacraments fits with our central confession that we are **justified by grace through faith** for Christ’s sake. Just as Christ is at the center of the Bible, so the doctrine of justification is at the heart of our Lutheran Confessions.

A BIBLICALLY BASED CHRISTIAN ETHIC

The biblical themes of justification and law and gospel so central to our Lutheran heritage are the beginning of a biblically based Christian ethic.

Justification by Grace through Faith

The very possibility of the Christian ethic as a lived reality of the Christian life begins with justification—the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ. Because our sins are forgiven and we have new life in Christ, we are freed from the condemnation of the law and our faith is the source of love for our neighbor. (See sidebar.)

Christians are called to love as we have first been loved (John 13:34). God’s love for us is the source of our faith and in faith we share that love with others. Christian life, therefore, is faith active in love (Galatians 5:6). Jesus shows us what that love is all about when he commands us to follow his example, loving even our enemies, and putting others’ needs ahead of our own. (Matthew 5:44–45 and Philippians 2:4ff.).

People sometimes have the impression that this strong Lutheran emphasis on justification by grace through faith *without the works of the law* in combination with an ethic based on “love” might be interpreted as a license to do virtually what we please. For example, advocates of blessing same-sex unions might be thought to be saying, “If you have love, anything goes.” However, that statement is not true of the biblical ethic based on Jesus’ love commandment, and it is not true for all who advocate blessing same-sex unions. Moreover, love of neighbor does not eliminate the possibility of having to confront the neighbor with their sin as Paul did in his letters and as we are told to do when sinned against (Matthew 18:15).

In the freedom born of God’s love (our justification) our love embraces the teaching of the law as a blessing. The law continues to judge us because we remain sinners at the same time that we are the justified, baptized children of God. Since we are new in Christ, our relationship to God’s law is transformed. We see the law not simply as judgment but as revealing God’s loving will for all creation and for our own lives as God’s children.



Likewise, [the churches] teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness (Rom. 3[:21–26] and 4[:5]).

—Augsburg Confession, Article IV

I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.

—Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520), from *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957).

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

—John 13:34

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

—Matthew 5:44–45

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

—Philippians 2:4

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

—Matthew 18:15

You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess.

—Deuteronomy 5:33

You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD.

—Leviticus 18:5

Law

The law is good and points to God's will for humankind. Law is a gift expressing God's concern for life, health, good order, and community. (Deuteronomy 5:33)

The sexual laws of Leviticus 18 have the same rationale. (Leviticus 18:5) The Ten Commandments were given to the people after the Exodus from Egypt as a key part of their new life as God's chosen people. The good things the law exists to serve are also those good things revealed in Jesus' promise for God's reign: life, wholeness, equality among people before God, reconciliation with God and one another, and everlasting peace.

Questions:

1. Consider Luther's teaching that we are free from the condemnation of the law to give ourselves freely to our neighbor. How do Christians demonstrate that freedom in our everyday lives?
2. Discuss the idea that love of neighbor may need to be "tough love" confronting them with their sin? Can people who believe all homosexual acts are sinful and also those who believe that some are not when done in a committed union share this idea of tough love?
3. How does Matthew 18:15 relate to this study of homosexuality, the blessing of same-sex unions, and the ordination, consecration, or commissioning of people in such unions? Before answering this question, review the section on "Productive Discussion in a Spirit of Mutual Respect" (page five).

👉 Remember to record your responses.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THE QUESTION OF BLESSING SAME-SEX UNIONS

Justification, love, and law are very much intertwined in the Christian life. The ethics of love is never an "anything goes" ethic. Indeed, those who advocate the blessing of same-sex unions often argue that they do so in obedience to the same standards of love and fidelity that the law in the Bible, in the teaching of Jesus, and in the tradition of the church imposes on heterosexual marriage. They reject the promiscuous life so often attributed to the homosexual sub-culture just as heterosexual Christians are called to reject the heterosexual promiscuity so often uncritically accepted in our culture.

Many accept the good intentions of their gay and lesbian sisters and brothers in Christ, but they still oppose such blessings. People who hold this view say that this church cannot bless an arrangement involving sexual activity that is condemned by the Bible as sinful. Such a blessing would undermine the values associated with marriage and family as grounded in creation and honored in this church's teaching.

There are some who do not believe that the Bible is condemning those who live out their homosexual orientation in faithful love and service to God and the neighbor. They maintain that the biblical writers did not have an understanding of sexual orientation as a given condition. (Some interpreters question whether or not we can be certain of what the biblical writers did or did not know about sexual orientation despite the fact that the concept is modern.) There are things we know and experience today that were unknown then. Lifting up a model of love, fidelity, and justice in same-sex unions would contribute to good order, health, equality, and other values that are the aim of God's law.

Some people who believe that homosexual conduct is sinful are nevertheless willing to consider blessing same-sex unions. For them homosexuality, as a given orientation, not a perverse choice, is an imperfection of the creation, a flaw in the fallen world. However, since the spiritual gift of celibacy is for the very few, the encouragement of Christian devotion to a faithful, just, and loving relationship is preferable to a life of promiscuity or great loneliness. People who hold this view may allow pastoral discretion in finding ways to bless same-sex unions without elevating such blessings to a public rite of this church.

SIN, GRACE, AND SEXUAL ETHICS

Our understanding of sin is important in this discussion of faith and homosexuality. If the Christian ethic is faith active in love, embracing the direction of the law for the good of the neighbor in obedience to God after the example of Christ, then how do we understand sin in the Christian life?

Luther said that sin is unfaith. It is lack of trust in God and therefore a lack of willingness to embrace God's will for our lives. One expression of unfaith, or sin, is trusting in one's own virtue and moral character rather than God's grace and power. Another is self-centeredness, which alienates us from God and each other. Concern for our own desires rather than trust in God and love for our neighbor is at the bottom of lustful and exploitative sexual conduct.

We may say, then, that things that are morally wrong and sinful are those actions and impulses directly contrary to God's loving purposes for our flourishing. In effect, things that are morally wrong and sinful are a violation of the command to love God and the neighbor on which hangs all of God's law and is the fulfillment of the law (Matthew 22:38–40; Romans 13:8–10). This is key to understanding the meaning of explicit moral instruction in the Bible and discerning how it does or does not apply to us.

All of us recognize that we are sinners and that sin touches our sexuality as part of our whole life. We confess that we cannot overcome sin and fulfill the will of God by our own efforts. In Christ we have forgiveness of sins, justification, and new life. We hold to these truths with the hands of faith and they unite us in our identity, in our community, and in the center of our faith. They form the basis for welcoming all people into the communion of this church regardless of sexual orientation. They also form the basis of the two distinct positions discussed after the following question.

Question: Did anything in the above explanation of sin surprise you? Would you say something different or add to that explanation?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

In Support of Blessing Same-Sex Unions

For some people these theological convictions concerning sin and grace are sufficient basis for blessing same-sex unions and for extending the ordained, commissioned and consecrated ministries of this church to qualified people who are in committed same-sex unions. The reasoning goes like this:

Since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and none of us can live a God-pleasing life of obedience apart from God's grace and favor, the question of sin in homosexual relationships pertains to whether or not they are lived in faith active in love. If they are lived in 1) a commitment to fidelity, 2) with public accountability

Blessing

Since the ELCA has no policy regarding the blessing of same-sex unions, the question of what such a blessing would mean arises in this conversation. A few comments on blessing might give us a start in answering that question.

"Weddings and the married estate are worldly affairs," Martin Luther said in the preface to his Marriage Booklet. But he went on to say that when couples "request of us [pastors] to bless them...to pray over them, or even to marry them, we are obligated to do this." Thus, a Christian blessing is different from the worldly estate of marriage or even the exchange of vows in a wedding—both of which exist in this created world separate from the authority or work of the Church. What the world cannot provide is the hope and proclamation of God's blessing. The Church's role is not to legalize marriages but to provide comfort and strength in God's name for the couples that come asking for God's blessing.

The Bible gives many different examples of blessing. For example, God's blessing comes on all creatures (Genesis 1:22, 28), on Abraham and his descendants through whom all people will be blessed (Genesis 12:1–3), and on virtually all the resources and activities of God's people (Deuteronomy 28: 3–13). God brings blessing and commissions people to bless in and with God's name (Numbers 6:22–27). In the New Testament Jesus is one who blesses (Mark 10:16; Luke 24:50) and in Jesus, the Christ, we receive from God every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3). In the practice of the Church, blessing comes at various stages of life—at baptism, at confirmation, at the time of marriage, at the blessing of a house, in the context of regular worship, and, finally, at the time of death. In all events of Christian blessing, that which is sought and that which is offered is a reaffirmation of the promise of new life in Christ and the grace to live it faithfully in all facets of this life.

As noted, there are those who would consider the blessing of same-sex unions as incompatible with Christian life based on scriptural witness and Church teaching. For those who advocate the blessing of such unions there may be more than one understanding.

- a) Some would like to see the blessing of same-sex unions as the equivalent of marriage. (This view is complicated by the fact that there are few places where there is a civil recognition of same-sex unions comparable to the recognition of marriage.)
- b) Others might say that the diverse use of "blessing" in the Bible and church practice allows us to think of the blessing of same-sex unions as a separate category.
- c) Opponents of this option say that the act of blessing a same-sex union as a sanctioned church practice automatically changes the church's theology of marriage as involving a sexual union of man and woman.
- d) Still others would like to see some formal way to convey the blessing of God to the lives of same-sex partners without sanctioning their unions as a matter of church practice.

that shows concern for the importance of stable relationships for a healthy community, and 3) marked by the sort of care and mutual respect love demands in heterosexual marriage, then we can celebrate them. They are consistent with the purpose of God's law for our flourishing. They are relationships that represent something other than the homosexual conduct condemned in the Bible.

Because the foundation for the Christian moral life is justification, or being a new creation in Christ, one may take this position whether one believes that homosexual orientation is part of God's good creation or a defect of the fallen world. (The question of whether or not homosexuality can be considered an expression of God's good creation is addressed in Session Five.)

In Opposition to Blessing Same-Sex Unions

Some reject the view that same-sex unions can be blessed. Because of their conviction that the Bible and the historical teaching of the Church regard same-sex intercourse as sinful, the public affirmation of such conduct through rites of blessing or the ordination, consecration, or commissioning of one who is in a committed same-sex union is a rejection of God's command against same-sex conduct and God's heterosexual order of creation.

What happens between God and us when we confess our sins is one thing; to declare publicly that something that is sin is not sin is another thing. Justification is justification of the sinner, not justification of sin. Paul's comments on the new life in Christ call for a renewal of our moral life based on a love of God and neighbor that is obedient to God's revealed will. (Romans 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11)

Questions:

1. Discuss the ways people who hold these two different views on the blessing of same-sex unions would consider themselves faithful Christians.
2. From your perspective as a faithful Christian, what are the strengths of each of the above positions? What are their weaknesses? Which approach to the question of blessing same-sex unions do you take?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Closing Prayer: We thank and praise you, O Lord, that in Christ we are free from the condemnation of the law. By your Spirit confirm our faith in that promise, so that with a joyful heart we may serve you and our neighbor. May trust in you and love for others shape all our decisions under the guidance of your Word, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SESSION FIVE: BAPTISMAL VOCATION AND MORAL DELIBERATION

Hymn: Lutheran Book of Worship #353 “May We Your Precepts, Lord, Fulfill”

Scripture: 1 Peter 2: 9–10; Acts 15: 1–29 (The apostolic church in deliberation)

Prayer: Lord God, you taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending them the light of your Holy Spirit. Grant that we, by your Spirit, may have a right judgment in all things and evermore rejoice in the Spirit’s holy counsel; through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Baptism brings us into the communion of saints, the Church. In Baptism we are made members of **the priesthood of all believers**. As such we are called, as individuals and as a faith community, to witness to the gospel. Christians live out this baptismal calling in a variety of ways. One way we do so is by being a community of moral deliberation.

As Christians, when we examine the difficulties of life in this world, we do so in the context of the gospel of Jesus Christ that we are called to serve. When an issue is controversial and there are differences of opinion and disputed facts, the community becomes involved in a process of deliberation.

This moral deliberation is part of our calling in Baptism. It continues when we bring the Bible into dialogue with science and an understanding of life that is grounded in reason. Reason and its use are a gift of God. Of course, reason and scientific research have limits; they cannot determine what is ultimately a matter of faith and morals. However, they can help us better understand the human situation and thereby discern how the Word of God helps us understand what is good.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH: LIMITS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The idea that people have a certain *sexual orientation* is a conclusion of modern psychology. Prior to this discovery, talk about sex centered on practices. Sexual orientation certainly existed in previous times, but was not understood as an expression of one’s personal sexual formation or “sexuality.” Modern researchers also recognize that our sexual orientation—our attraction to the opposite sex or our own sex—varies from person to person along a continuum from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. Between these extremes, then, are people who are or have been attracted to both sexes to some degree.

Numerous studies have been done to discover the causes of sexual orientation. Researchers have looked for genetic clues by studying the development of sexuality in twins. They have also used the techniques of molecular genetics to seek genetic markers that are common to people of homosexual orientation. Other researchers have tried to discover if the influence of hormones is a factor. Psychological and social influences have also been investigated. All these studies shed light on the development of homosexual orientation but none is conclusive. The best conclusion appears to be that homosexual orientation is a result of some combination of these influences.

Regardless of the fact that the exact cause of homosexual orientation is unclear, some in this church who are homosexual experience their sexuality as a given, not a choice. Their experience needs to be taken seriously.



Deliberation in this church gives attention both to God’s Word and God’s world, as well as to the relationship between them. This church sees the world in light of God’s Word, and it grasps God’s Word from the context of the world. This church must rely upon God’s revelation, God’s gift of reason, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Transformed by faith, this church in its deliberation draws upon the God-given abilities of human beings to will, to reason, and to feel. This church is open to learn from the experience, knowledge, and imagination of all people, in order to have the best possible information and understanding of today’s world.

As a community of moral deliberation, the Church seeks to “discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2)

—from the ELCA Social Statement: *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, 1996.

Homosexual Orientation is not a Choice for Some

Even researchers who take a conservative view of the data and support this church's traditional position on homosexual conduct agree that there is a percentage of people for whom homosexual orientation is not a matter of choice. There is some disagreement among researchers on how prevalent this orientation is in the population. Estimates have ranged from two to ten percent.

- Some argue that a high percentage suggests that homosexuality is too widespread to ignore as simply an aberration.
- Others say that the lower percentage, once recognized as the more accurate figure, undermines that argument.
- Still others say that percentages do not decide matters of morality.
- Finally, some say that the experience, rights, and needs of individuals who are homosexual are the primary concern, regardless of percentages in the population.

Reorientation Therapy

Another area of disagreement is over the relative value of reorientation therapy or "reparative therapy" as it is sometimes called. Can some form of psychological and/or spiritual therapy enable people to change their homosexual orientation?

- One answer to this question is, "No." People who hold this view point out that such efforts can, in fact, be psychologically damaging to homosexual people who should be affirming their own sexual identity instead.
- At the other end of the spectrum are those who are optimistic about the possibilities of change and who, therefore, advocate such therapies.
- Others are more modest in their claims but do assert that these therapies can help some people. They recognize that some who undergo treatment may only be helped to break free of their sexual impulses while others will claim complete change.
- Even some who are skeptical of reparative therapy acknowledge that counseling can help those who are struggling with questions of sexual orientation.

Some in our church who are homosexual have found therapy ineffective. Others have been driven by the church's teachings to seek therapy and spiritual healing, and have felt a sense of agony and despair when this did not work. Still others have embraced therapy and spiritual healing and feel that they have overcome the homosexuality they did not desire.

View of the American Psychiatric Association (APA)

Much has been made of the American Psychiatric Association's 1974 decision to remove homosexuality from its list of pathological psychological conditions. Many regard this decision as an indication that homosexuality should no longer be regarded as a perversion. Others argue that social and political pressures rather than scientific convictions motivated the decision of the APA. They point out that some who supported this decision have since changed their minds. The difference of opinion here is reflected to some extent in differences over what the research says about the quality of homosexual relationships as compared to heterosexual relationships.

- Some, while they acknowledge that there is no conclusive proof that homosexuality is pathological, emphasize that evidences of promiscuity and unstable relationships raise serious questions about how healthy life is for many people of homosexual orientation. They recognize that there is no one pattern of life among people of same-sex orientation—some are obviously healthy—yet there is still reason to be concerned about endorsing homosexuality as a healthy alternative that is no more prone to bad behavior than heterosexuality is.⁹

- Others see the research showing generally more positive indicators of stability and satisfaction in committed relationships and a higher percentage of commitment to one partner among homosexual males than had once been thought. In addition these interpreters see more common characteristics than differences between homosexual and heterosexual couples and many shared values. For example, some studies of children who live with a homosexual parent show no significant impact on child development related to the sexual orientation of the parent.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the importance of the research, some in our church who are homosexual remind us all that the lifestyle they want to commend and model is one of loving, publicly acknowledged and sanctioned commitment to one partner anchored in shared Christian faith.

Questions:

1. Even though the research is not conclusive, do we know enough to make moral judgments about homosexual conduct? Why or why not?
2. If we knew more about the “causes” of homosexuality would it make a difference in our moral judgment of homosexual conduct? Why or why not?
3. If the church were to offer pastoral guidance and help for those who desire reorientation therapy, would that mean a rejection of those who affirm their homosexual orientation and do not feel willing or able to change?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND THE BIBLE

We have already looked at the texts that are most frequently cited in connection with homosexuality. For the present, then, we will focus on Romans 1:26–27 since it is usually considered Paul’s strongest and clearest statement against same-sex acts. Furthermore, the reference to men and women exchanging natural relations for unnatural ones leads to a consideration of what the Bible teaches about our created sexuality.

Interpretation

There are those who believe that, even if some claims of modern research that certain people have a virtually innate homosexual orientation were true, the Bible’s judgment against homosexual conduct would remain.

For some it is questionable that the biblical writers knew only about same-sex conduct and not about same-sex orientation. However, even if the idea of orientation is new to our era, it does not mean that people have no choice. We can choose not to follow those seemingly innate impulses that are contrary to God’s will.

For many the term “nature” refers to the God-given structure of creation. According to this view, same-sex relations violate the order of God’s creation. God gave them up to this sinful violation and to the other sins mentioned in Romans 1:24–32 because of the people’s idolatry. Same-sex orientation is therefore not another form of what is “natural,” but another manifestation of how sin can create disorder in the order of creation.

Interpretation

There are also those who believe that our present understanding of sexual orientation through the work of modern behavioral science was unknown in biblical times. This they contend should lead us to rethink what the Bible teaches us.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

—Romans 1:26–27

According to this view, contemporary concepts of “sexuality,” “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” and “sexual orientation” were unknown to the biblical writers, even though there were doubtless people of homosexual orientation. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, given its inclusion with other sins (Romans 1:24–32) and the absence of any idea that people have a given orientation, same-sex activity was regarded as an act of willful indulgence.

In our present understanding of sexual orientation there are some in our church for whom homosexuality is a given and who want to live with their partners in unions based on love and fidelity like the ideal of heterosexual marriage. Such a union would be a significantly different situation from the self-indulgent same-sex acts being addressed in the Bible.

Some have argued that for Paul “natural” does not refer to our biological makeup or the “way we were created” but to what was considered “normal” or “conventional” behavior according to the social and religious traditions of his culture. Thus, Paul’s use of “natural” cannot be regarded as a synonym for creation.¹¹ Some have also argued that “unnatural” in this case refers not to acts against created nature but to unbridled or excessive sexual passion of any kind.¹²

Many people who propose one of these interpretations rely on the biblically supported idea that creation is ongoing. God is active in the world to create new understanding and new possibilities of what we see as “natural.” (This perspective was noted in Session Two in the discussion of the creation texts.)

Questions:

1. Based on your experience, your reading of the Bible, and the discussions from the preceding sessions of this study, is creation to be considered God’s given order, or is there an on-going creation in which we participate?
 2. Discuss how different views of the nature of creation result in different views on the acceptability of same-sex conduct.
- 📌 Remember to record your responses.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND TRADITION

All people are welcome into the communion of this church regardless of their sexuality. This welcome is based on God’s invitation to all people in the gospel of Jesus Christ and is not affected by scientific findings or speculation. To welcome all people is also consistent with our Lutheran focus on God’s free gift of grace in the doctrine of justification discussed in Session Four. However, other aspects of our theological tradition should be considered alongside what science can tell us.

Responses

Those who uphold the traditional teaching that homosexual conduct is a sin and that heterosexual marriage is God’s intention for us in creation may respond to scientific research in the following ways.

- Recognizing that homosexual orientation is a given for some in this church, the church has properly not regarded homosexual orientation in itself as blameworthy.
- Some would allow that we should not expect celibacy from everyone in this church who is homosexual. It is a matter of pastoral concern to help people work with this issue in their lives. At the same time, we should not publicly affirm homosexual conduct by blessing same-sex relations or ordaining, consecrating or commissioning people in such committed relations.
- Those in our church who are homosexual and who aspire to the church’s rostered ministries should be required to abstain from homosexual intercourse.

- The church should be more proactive in leading people who desire it to reorientation therapy.
- The church has a special responsibility to its youth when they are struggling with sexual orientation to help them cultivate their heterosexuality.
- The church needs to uphold the strength of marriage and family against the potentially weakening effects of alternatives like the blessing of same-sex unions. Monogamous heterosexual marriage with the blessing of the church finds clear support in the Bible.

Responses

For those who think that the modern evidence of sexual orientation has opened the church to change, the following are likely views.

- The tradition of the “orders of creation,” which has been invoked to support heterosexual marriage and family life as God’s original and immutable will has undergone some reinterpretation in the tradition itself. Lutheran theologians understand these “orders” to be something God has providentially established to bring order to a sinful world. Thus, marriage and family are hedges against promiscuity and a protection for children. The same purposes could be extended to same-sex unions.
- The acceptance of sexual intercourse in a loving marriage for other than procreative purposes and the acceptance of marriages without children have already modified older understandings of the tradition. These changes in outlook could be extended to homosexual couples who did not choose their sexuality but want to live faithfully within it.
- If some people are homosexual by orientation and not by choice and, as our Lutheran Confessions state, celibacy is a spiritual gift not a requirement, then it is wrong to insist on celibacy for a gay or lesbian person who enters one of the rostered ministries of this church.
- Despite misgivings about the influence of same-sex unions on the values associated with our traditional understanding of marriage, some would claim that there is considerable social research to show that gay and lesbian people are quite capable of stable, faithful, and loving relationships and, where there are children, the children display no adverse effects.¹⁰ Traditional values of heterosexual marriage and family will remain the norm, but similar values can be realized in same-sex unions. The tradition should be expanded to include them.

Questions:

1. Do you think that the blessing of same-sex relationships would undermine or strengthen our traditional teachings about marriage? Discuss why.
2. Did anything in this session surprise you?
3. As we have seen, faithful people have very different views on the acceptability of homosexual conduct. Science also provides differing views. What resources do we have as people of faith with God’s gift of reason to make moral decisions on this issue?

👉 Remember to record your responses.

Closing Prayer: Good and gracious God, giver of all good gifts, we thank you for the gift of each other in the priesthood of all believers. Sustain us in that calling. In our moral deliberations give us discerning minds eager for your truth. In the often-confusing patterns of our changing world, be our guide. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



SESSION SIX: GOSPEL MISSION

Hymn: Lutheran Book of Worship #392 “O Lord, Send Forth Your Spirit”

Scripture: Matthew 28:18–20

Prayer: Almighty God, grant to your Church your Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from heaven, that your Word may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and enlightenment of your holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve you in the confession of your name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Church is the church in mission with **a call to proclaim the gospel**. An emphasis of the “faithful” part of *Journey Together Faithfully* is faithfulness to our call to proclaim the gospel. As we gather up the insights of our discussion in this study, we prepare ourselves to ask the question, “How do the questions some in this church have raised about the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex unions relate to the mission of the church?” After finishing this session, fill out the response form included with this booklet and available online at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney

POSSIBLE POSITIONS REGARDING THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX UNIONS AND THE ORDAINING, CONSECRATING, AND COMMISSIONING OF PEOPLE IN COMMITTED SAME-SEX UNIONS

As we have seen, the questions of whether to bless same-sex unions or to ordain, consecrate, and commission people in committed same-sex unions are complex, and faithful people in this church respond to the issues these questions raise in a variety of ways. The following descriptions are typical approaches to answering the specific questions about blessing and ordination, commissioning, and consecration. Each position could have many nuances and variations. They are presented in this simplified form to assist in understanding and conversation.

1. We should neither bless same-sex unions nor ordain, commission, or consecrate people in such relationships.

Blessing

Blessing same-sex unions would contradict the Bible’s judgment against same-sex conduct and undermine the institution of marriage. Redeemed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, people of homosexual orientation should be encouraged to seek spiritual and therapeutic help when needed and to abstain from sexual relations.

Ordination, Commissioning, and Consecration

As in the current policy of the ELCA, homosexual people could be admitted to the rostered ministries of the church only if they abstain from sexual relations. Ministers of the church are not without sin. But admitting people into the public ministries of this church who are involved in same-sex relationships, even though committed, would be to condone behavior that the Bible and the teachings of the church regard as sinful.

Refer to page five for the ELCA’s present policies

2. Even as we acknowledge that homosexuality is an expression of sin's effects in our fallen world, our redemption in Christ gives us grounds for blessing same-sex unions and perhaps ordaining people in such unions.

Though the exact cause of sexual orientation is not clear, there is some reason to believe that for some people their homosexual orientation is a given and not a choice. Scripture's negative judgment on same-sex acts leads to the conclusion that homosexual orientation is a defect in the creation attributable to the effects of sin in a fallen world. Nevertheless, homosexual people are redeemed in Christ by grace. This redemption provides us with our perspective in all our judgments as a Christian church.

Blessing

Since celibacy is a spiritual gift for the very few and there is a natural need for companionship and love, we should bless same-sex unions in support of the partners' commitment to a covenant of fidelity and Christian love. Some would extend this blessing as a matter of pastoral discretion and evangelical concern. Others would be more positive in saying that blessing should be a general practice because in Christ our relationships are redeemed.

Ordination, Commissioning, and Consecration

- Some who would support pastoral discretion in blessing same-sex unions would not support commending people in same-sex unions for the church's rostered ministries.
- For others, people in committed homosexual relationships would be suitable candidates for the church's rostered ministries by virtue of the righteousness that is theirs in Christ and in view of their readiness to meet the same standards of faithfulness in a committed relationship expected of married ministers.

3. Believing that God intends us to see homosexuality as potentially one faithful expression of human sexuality, we should bless same-sex unions and ordain, commission, and consecrate people in such unions.

We know that homosexual orientation is a given for some people. Our more complex understanding of sexual orientation today differs from the view in the biblical world, which had no concept of "sexuality." There is no reason to think that when the biblical writers condemned same-sex activity that they had in mind people who are homosexually oriented who want to live in committed unions of Christian love and fidelity.

Blessing

We should regard homosexual orientation as one expression of human sexuality and affirm it with the sanctioning of same-sex unions. Some would like this sanctioning to use the language of marriage. Others prefer terminology such as "blessing" to describe this covenant. Both regard such a blessing as the equivalent in importance to marriage.

Ordination, Commissioning, and Consecration

People holding this view support the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex unions.

4. Variations

Even within the positions mentioned above there is diversity of understanding and opinion. For example, those who uphold the church's present position and oppose blessing same-sex unions as a matter of church policy may nevertheless find some form of blessing acceptable as a matter of pastoral discretion.

Similarly, people who favor the blessing of same-sex unions may differ on whether not it is the equivalent of marriage or is in a different category.

On the ordination question, some propose a complex solution, arguing that we should find a way to accommodate more than one practice on ordination, commissioning, and consecration while preserving the unity of the church and the vitality of its mission.

Some have wondered about creating the option of ordaining a person in a same-sex union when a particular congregation has indicated its willingness to call that person as their pastor. Another idea is that congregations favoring such ordinations could be organized into a non-geographic synod that would have different ordination standards from the rest of the church. Others think that each synod candidacy committee and bishop should be free to approve exceptions.

However, any change introduces additional theological and practical questions. For example, calling forth leadership in the church is a responsibility currently shared by congregations, synods and the churchwide office. A move away from a uniform ordination practice would be a change in custom and structure of the ELCA. Theologically, Lutherans do not consider themselves bound by any specific structures or customs. However, any form of church organization must serve the gospel.

Questions:

1. Given what you have learned in this study, what is your position on the blessing of committed same-sex unions? What is your position on the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex unions? Refer to your experience, the Bible, and our traditions to clarify your points.
 2. Do you think the ELCA should bless committed same-sex unions?
 3. Do you think the ELCA should ordain, consecrate, and commission people in committed same-sex unions?
 4. There are ELCA congregations that would welcome a rostered leader in a committed same-sex union. Would your congregation? Why or why not?
- 👉 Remember to record your responses.

THE NATURE OF THE DISAGREEMENT AMONG US

We not only disagree on what practices the church should follow for blessing and ordination, we also disagree on the nature of the question.

The Disagreement is About Moral Judgments

Position One

Disagreements about the morality of homosexual conduct and its implications for church practice and policy are not over the authority of the Bible, but over how we interpret and apply certain texts in today's world. In addition, our faith as confessed in the Creeds and the doctrine of justification by grace at the heart of the Lutheran Confessions is not at stake here. Therefore, whether to bless same-sex unions or ordain, commission, and consecrate people in such unions are not issues that can define or divide the church.

- The Lutheran church has always recognized that we will have differences over moral judgments. These we do not regard as reasons for division. Those who support same-sex unions, for example, also share the same ethical values as all other Christians, including the commitment to live in sexual and personal fidelity before the eyes of God. Those who support the ordination, commissioning, and consecration of those in committed same-sex unions point out how these people show deep devotion to the Church's ministry and mission. When it fails to affirm people in committed same-sex relationships, the ELCA is wasting the talents of those homosexual people who are eager to serve the Church's mission in its ministries.

- Allowing different practices regarding blessing and the role of homosexual people in the life of the church is a step toward demonstrating sensitivity, justice, and inclusivity. This will enhance our gospel mission.
- Differences in moral judgment should not prevent us from adopting policies that would allow for different practices in different places within the church.

Position Two

Even if we concede that this is a disagreement over biblical interpretation regarding moral judgments, the very visibility of blessings in the rites of the church and the people in its ministries makes allowing different practices an offense to many and a deterrent to mission.

- Throughout history churches have consistently rejected same-sex sexual conduct as incompatible with God's plan. With few exceptions the mainline churches still hold to that position. For the ELCA to allow the blessing of same-sex unions and the rostering of people in committed same-sex unions would place us outside the mainstream of Christianity. Such a move would weaken our ecumenical ties and mission outreach.
- Given the strong opposition to the affirmation of homosexuality among ethnic-specific communities in which the ELCA has been working, changes in policy could adversely affect that work. Were that to happen, it could detract from the church's efforts to build the diversity so important to its mission to all people.
- To go forward with the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordaining, consecrating, and commissioning of people in such unions could alienate the ELCA from many of its global partners in the Lutheran communion.

The Disagreement is About Core Doctrine

Position One

While matters of sexual morality have not been the subject of church dogma, some believe that the opposition to homosexual conduct in the Bible and Christian tradition is so clear and profound that revision of these teachings strikes at the foundation of biblical authority and church teaching on which the church's core doctrine rests. Such a revision would divide the church and undermine its mission.

Position Two

Revision of traditional prohibitions regarding the blessing of same-sex unions and the rostering of people in committed same-sex unions is required by the very nature of the Church. The Nicene Creed confesses the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." Our unity is not a product of our doctrine or practice. Instead it arises as a gift of Christ's righteousness for all. Including all people who share the common values of sexual fidelity in all facets of the Church's mission and ministry is a powerful statement about the redemptive power of the gospel in the mission of the Church.

These considerations conclude formal study. Thank you for responding to the call from fellow members of the ELCA to study the questions of whether the ELCA should establish and official blessing for same-sex unions and whether we should ordain, consecrate, and commission people in committed same-sex unions. Please remember to fill out the response form. It is included in this booklet and also available on-line at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney

Closing Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for this time of study and dialogue together. Remember the needs of all who have brought their concerns, fears, and hopes to this discussion. Bless this church as we consider the decisions that lie before us, keep us one, and guide us on the path of faithfulness for your name's sake. Amen.



ENDNOTES

1. Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and used by permission.
2. *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 70.
3. Samuel Balentine, *Leviticus* (Interpretation Series: Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), 159.
4. For a study, see Frederick Gaiser, "A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1-8 as Case Study," *Word and World*, XIV, 3 (Summer 1994), 280-293.
5. Anthony Kosnik, et. al., *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 37.
6. Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 83.
7. Anthony Kosnik, et.al., *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought*, 198.
8. *ELCA Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions*, 1996. www.elca.org/dcs/sexuality
9. See Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, "The Use, Misuse, and Abuse of Science in the Ecclesiastical Homosexuality Debates," *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 110-112; Merton P. Strommen, *The Church and Homosexuality: Searching for A Middle Ground* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2001), 41-48.
10. Isaiah Crawford and Brian Zamboni, "Informing the Debate on Homosexuality: The Behavioral Sciences and the Church," *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 227-239.
11. Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Sternja (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 105, 137-138. This is disputed by Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 362-373.
12. David Fredrickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros," Balch, David L. ed. *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 197-222. This view is disputed by Gagnon, *ibid*, 387ff.

APPENDIX I

2001 ELCA CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS

The Definition and Blessing of Committed Same-Gender Relationships

Assembly Action CA01.06.28

To respond to the memorials of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, the Southeast Michigan Synod, the Upstate New York Synod, the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod, and the Virginia Synod by directing the Division for Ministry and the Division for Church in Society, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, ELCA seminaries, colleges and universities, and other churchwide units, to implement jointly a churchwide study on homosexuality;

To provide that the process include creation of a study document on homosexuality for use in congregations, synods, and in sponsored hearings and focus groups across this church. This document shall include study of the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God and biblical, theological, scientific, and practical material on homosexuality. The document shall address issues related to blessing committed same-gender relationships, and rostering of approved candidates who are in committed same-gender relationships. This study shall provide for the sharing of information from and among members of this church;

To authorize the presiding bishop and Church Council to approve the parameters and expense budget of this process and identify the revenue source(s) to provide for this study;

To direct that reports on the study process shall be presented to each of the regular meetings of the Church Council, and to synod assemblies beginning in 2002 with response requested. A first edition report shall be brought to the 2003 Churchwide Assembly along with initial or interim recommendations. A final report, complete with action steps for full implementation, shall be presented to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly;

To respect charitably one another as we examine our understandings and practices, speaking the truth in love, practicing the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters” (Luther, Smalcald Articles, III.4); and

To request that the Division for Ministry, in consultation with the Division for Congregational Ministries and the Conference of Bishops, identify and make available materials to assist and support pastors as they provide pastoral care and counseling for persons concerned with these issues.

Ordination of Gay and Lesbian Persons

Assembly Action CA01.06.36

To respond to the memorials of the Saint Paul Area and Metropolitan Chicago synods by requesting that the Church Council, the Conference of Bishops, and the Division for Ministry create a specific plan and timeline leading to a decision concerning the rostering of homosexual persons who give expression to sexual intimacy only in a relationship that is mutual, chaste, and faithful, including but not limited to:

- 1) changes in “Vision and Expectations”;
- 2) changes in “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline”;
- 3) amendments to the ELCA constitution and bylaws; and
- 4) changes in all other related governing documents.

In the event any of the above mentioned changes require approval of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, such actions shall be placed before the 2005 Churchwide Assembly for adoption or ratification.

Social Statement on Human Sexuality

Assembly Action CA01.06.45

To initiate a process within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to develop a social statement on human sexuality.

APPENDIX II

From *Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior: A Social Statement of The American Lutheran Church, 1980.* www.elca.org/dcs/sex.alc

We note the current consensus in the scientific community that one's preferred sexual behavior exists on a continuum from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual and that homosexual behavior takes a variety of forms. We believe it appropriate to distinguish between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior. Persons who do not practice their homosexual erotic preference do not violate our understanding of Christian sexual behavior.

This church regards the practice of homosexual erotic behavior as contrary to God's intent for his children. It rejects the contention that homosexual behavior is simply another form of sexual behavior equally valid with the dominant male/female pattern.

We have reviewed the challenges to the traditional interpretations of those scripture passages that appear to proscribe homosexual behavior. We are not convinced by the evidence presented. Among passages cited as requiring interpretations different from the traditional interpretation are Genesis 18:16–19:29; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:24–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:10. While we see no scriptural rationale for revising the church's traditional teaching that homosexual erotic behavior violates God's intent, we nonetheless remain open to the possibility of new biblical and theological insights.

We agree that homosexually-behaving persons need God's grace as does every human being. We all need the care and concern of the congregation. We all need opportunity to hear the Word, to receive the sacraments, to accept the forgiveness God offers, to experience the understanding and the fellowship of the community of Christ. We all need the power of the Holy Spirit for ethical living sensitive to our own individual situations. So saying we nevertheless do not condone homosexual erotic behavior. Nor do we condone idolatry, pride, disrespect for parents, murder, adultery, theft, libel, gossip, or the other sins known in our circles. The sacrifice God finds acceptable from each of us is "a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart." Then he can answer our prayer for a "clean heart ... a new and right spirit within me." (See Psalm 51.)

Truth, mercy, and justice should impel members of congregations of The American Lutheran Church to review their attitudes, words, and actions regarding homosexuality. Christians need to be more understanding and more sensitive to life as experienced by those who are homosexual. They need to take leadership roles in changing public opinion, civil laws, and prevailing practices that deny justice and opportunity to any persons, homosexual or heterosexual. We all need recognition and acceptance as human beings known to and loved by God.

From *Sex, Marriage, and Family: A Social Statement of the Lutheran Church in America, 1970.* www.elca.org/dcs/sex.lca

Scientific research has not been able to provide conclusive evidence regarding the causes of homosexuality. Nevertheless, homosexuality is viewed biblically as a departure from the heterosexual structure of God's creation. Persons who engage in homosexual behavior are sinners only as are all other persons—alienated from God and neighbor. However, they are often the special and undeserving victims of prejudice and discrimination in law, law enforcement, cultural mores, and congregational life. In relation to this area of concern, the sexual behavior of freely consenting adults in private is not an appropriate subject for legislation or police action. It is essential to see such persons as entitled to understanding and justice in church and community.

APPENDIX III

HELPFUL RESOURCES

The following are available on-line at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources. Some resources are also available in print. Ordering information is included.

Journey Together Faithfully, ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Part One

This four session study will aid congregations, members, and others in discussing the ELCA's "Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions." For print copies call 800.328.4648 and request item 6-0001-6406-8. (\$1.50, plus shipping)

Journey Together Faithfully Bulletin Insert

An introduction to the process and timeline for use in congregational settings (2002)

Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality

A resource packet from the Division for Church in Society (1999)

Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues

A basic resource for discussing issues that Christians face in the context of their faith (1999)

For a printed copy, call 800.328.4648 and ask for item 6-0001-1197-5. (\$1.00, plus shipping)

A Conversation Among Sisters and Brothers in Christ on Homosexuality and the Church

- Synod Assemblies Model
- A Rostered Leaders' Event

These two resources from the Division for Church in Society were produced to assist synods in talking about homosexuality prior to the 2003 Churchwide Assembly.

Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality. Fortress Press. 2003.

While not an official product of the sexuality task force, this book should be a useful addition to a number of other background resources. For a printed copy, call 800.328.4648 and ask for item 0-8006-3580-9. (\$9, plus shipping)

Selected and Annotated Bibliography on Christianity and Homosexuality

A resource from the Division for Ministry (2001)

Congregational Hospitality to Gay and Lesbian People

A report from the ELCA Division for Outreach (1998). Call 800.638.3522 ext. 2647 for information on print availability.

"Report on Conversations about Homosexuality and the Church: Churchwide Report for 1999–2001."

A report to the ELCA Church Council by multiple churchwide units (2000)

Other resources:

ELCA News Releases: News articles that relate to the ELCA Studies on Sexuality process. Go to www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/news

Articles from *The Lutheran* magazine: A list of articles on both the ELCA Studies on Sexuality as well as articles of general interest on the topics of sexuality and homosexuality. Go to www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/thelutheran

From the Women of the ELCA's series *Listen, God is Calling*:

- *Called to Ethical Decision Making: No Easy Answers.* ISBN: 6-0001-6486-6
- *Called to Deal with Difficult Issues: A Challenging Ministry.* ISBN: 6-0001-6488-2

Both titles are available on-line at www.elca.org/wo/resource For availability in print, call 800.328.4648 and refer to the ISBN. (Pay only shipping.) Call 800.638.3522 ext. 2737 for more information.

Taking the War Out of Our Words: The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication, by Sharon Ellison. 2002.

Order on-line: www.pndc.com/booktape (\$15.95)

Consult the Web site (www.elca.org/faithfuljourney) for additional and updated resources.

APPENDIX IV

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

The study can be used in a variety of ways depending on local needs and preferences. The main purpose is to **study together** and **provide feedback** to the task force.

How to get organized

- Leaders can but need not be the pastor. Discussion facilitators from within the congregation can be recruited and prepared. People outside the congregation identified by the synod or by some other means may facilitate the study or train members to do so.
- People of all ages, from youth to older adults, should be encouraged to participate.
- Wherever possible, the participation of people with different points of view and experiences, including Lutheran Christians who are gay or lesbian, their relatives, and those who have sought therapy for issues relating to sexual orientation, will be helpful.
- Worshiping together keeps our feet on the ground that we stand on together as one in Christ. Worship suggestions are included at the beginning of each session. Congregations and groups will also have their own worship forms and ideas they may want to use.

For example: a congregation that has decided to make use of small group studies or house meetings may want to have a worship service at which there is an orientation to the study and a consecration of participants and group leaders.

How to study

- *In congregations:* as a series in a Sunday class; in small groups or house meetings; in special forums; as a part of the activities of different groups within the congregation.
- *In clusters of congregations:* Some congregations may wish to study with others nearby or hold joint forums.
- *Other possibilities:* Lutheran college and university groups, seminary groups, campus ministry groups, groups of rostered leaders, synod staffs, etc.

How to report the outcomes of your study experience

- If the group reaches consensus on some or all items, that consensus can be noted on the response form.
- If there is no consensus, each individual's views may be recorded and the response tallied in a composite report that may also include individual written commentary.
- Thoughts and ideas not specifically requested on the response form may also be included.

How to lead discussion

- Please pay special attention to the section in the study booklet entitled, “Productive Discussion in a Spirit of Mutual Respect,” page five. Be sure everyone has read through these points. It may be helpful to review them briefly before beginning.
- Participants will need their Bibles.
- The study sessions build on one another, leading up to the final session when people will have a chance to reflect on the experience they’ve had with the study, what they have learned, and what conclusions they are prepared to draw. It is important to the learning and discerning process that your group follows this session-by-session approach before sharing final thoughts.
- Discussion leaders should read the entire booklet ahead of time. That way, for example, the discussion will not get unnecessarily sidetracked on a subject that will be coming up for explanation and discussion later.
- In preparation for the sessions, leaders should read the background papers and encourage participants to read them as well. Copies of these papers are available on-line at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney
- It is most helpful if participants read the material for each session in advance. Nonetheless, it is still helpful to review the material in each session point by point before getting to the discussion questions to make sure that everyone understands what is being presented.
- If there are questions raised about the meaning of items in the study booklet that are not satisfactorily answered, record them and seek help before the next session. Another reason, then, for leaders to read the entire booklet in advance is that they might spot something that could raise questions of understanding and be prepared to respond.
- It is important that the leader not skew the discussion toward a one-sided perspective by allowing his or her views to intrude into the interpretation of the material or to influence the response to the discussion questions.
- In every group some are more vocal than others. Encourage as broad a participation as possible. Attention to the principles for dialogue outlined in “Productive Discussion in a Spirit of Mutual Respect” (page five) should help guard against individuals feeling intimidated because they think they are in the minority, or because others in the group are more forceful in expressing themselves.

APPENDIX V

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Before beginning *Journey Together Faithfully: Part Two*, “The Church and Homosexuality,” groups might find it helpful to walk through these questions and answers together. The questions and answers attempt to address in a helpful way some of the fears and perceptions that concern people in this church as they consider participation in the study.

Isn't the outcome of the study on homosexuality a forgone conclusion? Haven't we already decided to change and the study is only a pretense to justify that change?

The ELCA Church Council and everyone involved in the conduct of these studies on sexuality are committed to an open and fair process in which there are no foregone conclusions. Every effort will be made to ensure as broad a participation of people throughout this church as possible. All views will be heard and respected. The task force and the director are committed to serving the Church rather than any specific point of view.

Why are we spending so much money on this study when this money is needed for things like world hunger and other important activities of the Church's mission?

The simple answer is that the ELCA 2001 Churchwide Assembly passed resolutions mandating that we do this study. (The full text of these resolutions is in Appendix I.) However, we can say more than that in answer to this question. This is an important issue for many people throughout the Church. Sincere Christian people within our church hold different points of view on these matters and many are struggling with uncertainty. We in the church owe it to one another to participate as much as possible in this study and in dialogue with one another as part of our ministry of caring for each other. Beyond that there are other matters at stake such as exploring how we interpret the Bible's teaching on vital issues and how we are guided by our Lutheran theology and tradition as we engage in serious moral deliberation.

Why are we engaged in a study of homosexuality when the Bible is clear about this matter?

Serious students of the Bible disagree on what the implications of the Bible's teachings regarding homosexuality are. Lutherans have always sought to understand the meaning of Scripture passages in terms of the total teaching of the Bible and we have sought faithfully to interpret the meaning of the Bible's teaching for the particular circumstances of our own day. It is important to do this work of biblical study in connection with these studies on sexuality in order that we can move forward in the Church with even greater confidence in the guidance of God's Word.

Will my opinion be heard and respected?

The task force and the director for the studies on sexuality are committed to providing as many opportunities as humanly possible for people to participate in this discussion. Appendix IV contains a number of suggestions as to how congregations and other groups can participate. We encourage congregations to take part in this study. *Journey Together Faithfully: Part Two* is designed to promote true dialogue with respect for one another's opinions and a sincere effort on everyone's part to understand the opinions of those who hold different viewpoints.

Haven't we been talking about homosexuality long enough? Aren't we ready to decide? Isn't it clear that the gospel calls us to be an inclusive church?

We have certainly been discussing the matter of homosexuality in the Church for a good many years. However, now the Churchwide Assembly has mandated this study and required that certain proposals be brought forward and a social statement ultimately developed. This moves the conversation into a new phase and it also recognizes the fact that we cannot yet agree about how to resolve this debate. The study, therefore, provides us with the avenue for exploring our differences and seeking direction for this church. Once again, there are no foregone conclusions. There is much hard work to be done.

While the gospel calls us to be a welcoming church to all people, there is still much study to be devoted to our views on sexuality and the implications of these views for church policies such as ordination of gay or lesbian people in committed relationships.

The Church has changed its view many times on issues like slavery, women's ordination, and the acceptance of divorced clergy. Doesn't a new understanding of gay and lesbian sexuality suggest that another change is due?

Certainly there are some in this church who make that argument. Others do not regard it as convincing, however. This is one of the questions we deal with in the study booklet.

If as a result of this study we change our present policy regarding the ordination of gay and lesbian people in committed relationships, will our congregation be forced to accept a gay or lesbian pastor in such a relationship?

Congregations are not forced to accept any pastor. A congregation should strive, after prayer and deliberation, to call a pastor whose gifts for ministry seem well suited to the needs of that particular community of faith, in keeping with the established standards of this church for ordained ministry.

Some say that the task force is biased in favor of blessing same-sex unions and admitting people in committed same-sex unions into the rostered ministries of the church. Is this true?

The task force members have demonstrated their diversity of viewpoints and their readiness to listen to and respect all voices. They represent a spectrum of opinion but they are united in their commitment to serve this church. Outside observers at the task force meetings have been impressed with their sincere and gracious manner of dialogue and their fairness.

Though representing a variety of opinions themselves, task force members have often voiced their concern that this discussion in the church avoids hurtful labels and false assumptions. Here are some examples:

- "People of homosexual orientation are likely to be pedophiles." The truth is that pedophilia (sexual attraction to children) is not a problem peculiar to homosexual people. The background paper on research into sexual orientation can provide some helpful information. (Available on the Web at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney or by calling 800.638.3522 ext. 2815)
- "People who oppose same-sex activity are usually homophobic." (homophobic: feeling fear and hatred toward homosexual people) This is an unfair label. People with concerns about church policies on ordaining, commissioning, or consecrating people in committed same-sex unions or blessing those unions do not necessarily act out of homophobia at all.
- "People who wish to affirm homosexual people, bless their unions and welcome them into the church's ministries are willfully flaunting the Bible and the will of God." Certainly the church has historically interpreted the Scripture as judging same-sex activity to be wrong in God's sight. However, those who offer a different view also seek to follow the Word as they understand it. Their conscience should also be respected.
- "People who condemn same-sex relations and oppose blessing or admittance to ministry of people in committed same-sex unions are legalistic and don't understand the gospel and Christian love." A judgment of this sort is certainly unfair to many Christians who live lives of faith in the gospel active in Christian love. They welcome gay and lesbian people as sisters and brothers in Christ even though they have reservations about blessing same-sex unions and welcoming people in same sex-unions into our ministries.

How can we avoid division in our congregations and in the ELCA over questions about homosexuality in the church?

The first thing to remember is that our unity in the baptismal fellowship of Christ's body, the Church, is a gift given by God. If we start with that awareness and deal respectfully and lovingly with one another as we seek better to understand one another, even if we cannot agree, we can do much to avoid division. In each of the sessions of the study booklet we remind ourselves of central themes of our life together in Christ: Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the communion of saints, justification by grace through faith, our call to moral deliberation, and the mission of the gospel. These themes remind us of *who we are and whose we are* as we talk together about the issues.

At the beginning of each session are brief suggestions for worship. One of the most important things in the work of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality has been the practice of surrounding our discussions together with worship and prayer.

How should we go about doing this study so that as many as possible participate?

The study booklet suggests that congregations and groups can study together in a number of different formats such as small groups, house meetings, educational forums, etc. The idea is that there are a variety ways to involve people in a format that they feel comfortable with.

How will the study process and feedback be used?

The task force is studying along with the church and will be receiving and listening to the voices of the whole church. Where the guidance of the Spirit through the Word and the emerging mind of this church converge will be the point at which the task force will have to report with accuracy what this church is saying and what they believe are the Spirit-led recommendations. *Participating in the study and sending in the response form is the best way to have your voice heard!*

RESPONSE FORM

ELCA STUDIES ON SEXUALITY

JOURNEY TOGETHER FAITHFULLY, PART TWO

Select the circle that indicates your response by filling it in completely (●).

Please do NOT place a “√” or an “X” on top of the circles.

1. Did you complete the study process on your own or with others in a group?

- on my own (Skip to question 6.)
- in a group, but the answers in this survey represent my opinions, not the group's (Go on to question 2.)
- in a group—this survey represents the opinions of the group (Go on to question 2.)

2. How many participants were in the group?

- 2 to 5
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 15
- 16 or more

3. Describe the discussion group: Was it...

- a Sunday school class or forum?
- another congregational group meeting at church or elsewhere?
- a group composed of members from several congregations at a conference or synod assembly, for example?
- other? (Please describe.)

4. Who was the leader of the group?

- a pastor
- a lay person
- I'm not sure if the leader was a pastor or lay person.

5. How many people of the following characteristics were in the group? Make your best estimate or ask people to raise their hands if possible and necessary.

- | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|--|
| _____ 24 or younger | _____ male | _____ Asian or Pacific Islander |
| _____ 25 to 44 | _____ female | _____ Black or African American |
| _____ 45 to 64 | | _____ Latino/Latina |
| _____ 65 or older | | _____ American Indian or Alaska Native |
| | | _____ White or Caucasian |

6. As you think about what you (or the group) believe about human sexuality, how well were those beliefs represented in the study documents?

- I (we) didn't see my (our) beliefs in the study documents. It didn't come close.
- The documents did a fair job of representing my (our) beliefs.
- The documents did a good job of representing my (our) beliefs.

7. Did the study experience help you better understand the views of other people within the ELCA?

- Yes, I (we) think the experience helped me (us) better understand the views of other people. I (we) learned some things.
- No, I (we) already understood the views presented or I (we) didn't learn anything new.
- Other (Please explain.)

8. Given what you have learned from this study about the various views among members of the ELCA, what course do you think our church should follow?

9. Please describe yourself. Are you...?

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> 24 or younger | <input type="radio"/> male | <input type="radio"/> Asian or Pacific Islander |
| <input type="radio"/> 25 to 44 | <input type="radio"/> female | <input type="radio"/> Black or African American |
| <input type="radio"/> 45 to 64 | | <input type="radio"/> Latino/Latina |
| <input type="radio"/> 65 or older | | <input type="radio"/> American Indian or Alaska Native |
| | | <input type="radio"/> White or Caucasian |

10. In what region do you live?

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Great Plains | <input type="radio"/> Northwest |
| <input type="radio"/> Mid-Atlantic | <input type="radio"/> South and Southeast |
| <input type="radio"/> Midwest | <input type="radio"/> Southwest |
| <input type="radio"/> New England | <input type="radio"/> West |
| <input type="radio"/> Northeast | <input type="radio"/> Caribbean |

Please write any additional comments here or on a separate sheet of paper.

Thank you for participating in the study. **Return this response form by November 1, 2004.**

Mail to: ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631

This response form may be photocopied. Copy carefully on 8½ by 11 in. white paper so that the bubbles are clearly visible and the margins even.

The response form can be filled out and submitted on-line at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney

GLOSSARY

abstinence: refraining from sexual relations

apostolic: faithful to the gospel

Augsburg Confession (1530): the Lutheran confession of faith, written by Philip Melancthon and approved by Martin Luther

Augustine (354-430): an influential theologian whose work focuses on our sin and God's grace; Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk

Baptism: one of the two sacraments in this church; it initiates the baptized into the Body of Christ; in Baptism, we die to sin and are reborn in Christ

Book of Concord (1580): contains the Lutheran Confessions, which are statements of faith and *core doctrine* of the Lutheran tradition

celibacy: voluntary chastity sometimes bound by vows

commissioning: the ceremony in which one becomes an associate in ministry

communion of saints: community of all faithful Christians, in the present, past, and future

consecration: the ceremony in which one becomes a diaconal minister or a deaconess

core doctrine: central articles of faith

discernment: the process of trying to understand God's will for us or what a biblical passage means; interpreting God's Word

Eucharist: one of the two sacraments in this church; it nourishes faith in the baptized; also called *Holy Communion* or the *Lord's Supper*

faith active in love: an important Lutheran expression to emphasize that faith comes first and leads us to love one another and to act accordingly

Formula of Concord (1577): one of the writings included in the *Book of Concord*

gospel: the good news that God accepts us as we are, on account of Christ

Holy Communion: one of the two sacraments in this church; it nourishes faith in the baptized; also called the *Lord's Supper* or the *Eucharist*

idolatry: excessive love of something other than God; loving or worshiping things of this world instead of God

justification: God's act whereby we are placed in a right relationship with God through Christ's perfect faithfulness to God's will

justification by grace through faith: the central doctrine of Lutherans; trust in God, not one's works, makes us right with God and is itself God's work in our hearts

law: God's goodness experienced as demand upon us, showing us our need for grace; rules that guide our living together harmoniously

ordination: the ceremony in which one becomes a minister of Word and Sacrament, a pastor; the office of pastor

ordination to place: ordination to serve only in a particular context

priesthood of all believers: teaching that all the baptized have the authority and responsibility to share the gospel with their neighbors

rostered: describes all ordained, consecrated, and commissioned ministers in this church; includes pastors, associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers

Sources include:

James S. Kerr and Charles Lutz, *A Christian's Dictionary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

ELCA Web site, www.elca.org



Available on the Web at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney.
Order print copies (\$1.50 each, plus shipping) by calling 800.328.4648