

From pages 9-12 of “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”: A Social Statement of the ELCA

=====

IV. Sexuality and social structures that enhance social trust

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

Marriage: shelter and context for trust

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

Marriage is a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by God. The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting Mark 10: 6–9: “But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” (Jesus here recalls Genesis 1:27; 2:23–24.)

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

Marriage requires constant care and cultivation. It is intended to protect the creation and nurturing of mutual trust and love as one foundation of human community. It is a binding relationship that provides conditions for personal well-being, the flourishing of the partner, and the possibility of procreation and the nurturing of children. It is also intended to be a blessing to the community and the world. Because of promises of fidelity and public accountability, marriage provides a context of love, trust, honesty, and

commitment within which a couple can express the profound joy of relationship as well as address the troubles they encounter throughout life.

Christians believe that marriage is not solely to legitimate physical sexual intimacy, but to support long-term and durable communion for the good of others.²³ It is a communion within which the play and delight of physical love are crucial expressions of the depth of trust, and in which lovemaking can be a tender and generous act of self-giving that tends to the joy and pleasure of the other.

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

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

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

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

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

their new responsibilities in joy and hope. This church will tend pastorally to the special concerns of blended families, to children of divorced parents, and to the particular tensions that may accompany family breakdown and transition.

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

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

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

Recognizing that this conclusion differs from the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions, some people, though not all, in this church and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong monogamous relationships. They believe that such accountable relationships also provide the necessary foundation that supports trust and familial and community thriving. Other contractual agreements, such as civil unions, also seek to provide some of these protections and to hold those involved in such relationships accountable to one another and to society.

Lifelong monogamous same-gender relationships

Within the last decades, this church has begun to understand and experience in new ways the need of same-gender-oriented individuals to seek relationships of lifelong companionship and commitment as well as public accountability and legal support for those commitments. At the same time, public debates and deliberations have continued regarding evolving understandings of human sexuality in medicine, social science, and corresponding public policy about same-gender relationships.

We in the ELCA recognize that many of our sisters and brothers in same-gender

relationships sincerely desire the support of other Christians for living faithfully in all aspects of their lives, including their sexual fidelity. In response, we have drawn deeply on our Lutheran theological heritage and Scripture. This has led, however, to differing and conscience-bound understandings about the place of such relationships within the Christian community. We have come to various conclusions concerning how to regard lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships, including whether and how to publicly recognize their lifelong commitments.

While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, this church is united on many critical issues.²⁴ It opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation. It supports legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services. It has called upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection.

The ELCA recognizes that it has a pastoral responsibility to all children of God. This includes a pastoral responsibility to those who are same-gender in their orientation and to those who are seeking counsel about their sexual self-understanding. All are encouraged to avail themselves of the means of grace and pastoral care.

This church also acknowledges that consensus does not exist concerning how to regard same-gender committed relationships, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful study and conversation. We do not have agreement on whether this church should honor these relationships, uplift, shelter, and protect them or on precisely how it is appropriate to do so.

In response, this church draws on the foundational Lutheran understanding that the baptized are called to discern God's love in service to the neighbor. In our Christian freedom, we therefore seek responsible actions that serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the conscience-bound beliefs of others. We understand that, in this discernment about ethics and church practice, faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of Scripture²⁵ and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of "the bound conscience,"²⁶ will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.

This church recognizes that, with conviction and integrity:

- On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law. They believe same-gender sexual behavior carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin. They therefore conclude that the neighbor and the community are best served by calling people in same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle. Such decisions are intended to be accompanied by pastoral response and community

support.

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

Although at this time this church lacks consensus on this matter, it encourages all people to live out their faith in the local and global community of the baptized with profound respect for the conscience-bound belief of the neighbor. This church calls for mutual respect in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community. Regarding our life together as we live with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect.

----- **Footnotes** -----

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

²⁴ See ELCA Church Council minutes for 1993 and ELCA Churchwide Assembly minutes for 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1999 respectively: CC93.03.37; CA91.07.51; CA93.03.4; CA95.6.50; CA99.06.27. These actions may be found at www.elca.org.

²⁵ “The difference between interpreters should not be understood as a conflict between those who seek to be ‘true to Scripture’ and those who seek to twist the Bible’ to their own liking. The disagreements are genuine.” This is the conclusion of Dr. Arland J. Hultgren and Dr. Walter F. Taylor Jr. Both are members of the ELCA and both are highly regarded scholars and teachers. The citation is from Arland Hultgren and Walter Taylor, *Background Essay on Biblical Texts for Journey Together Faithfully*, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality. (Chicago: ELCA, September, 2003), 18. This essay was written at the request of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality.

²⁶ The Apostle Paul testifies to conscience as the unconditional moral responsibility of the individual before God (Romans 2:15–16). In the face of different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action, the concept of “the conscience” becomes pivotal. When the clear word of God’s saving action by grace through faith is at stake, Christian conscience becomes as adamant as Paul, who opposed those who insisted upon circumcision. (Galatians 1:8). In the same way Luther announced at his trial for heresy, “Unless I am persuaded by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason . . . I am conquered by the Scripture passages I have adduced and my conscience is captive to the words of God. I neither can nor desire to recant anything, when to do so against conscience would be neither safe nor wholesome” (WA 7: 838; Luther’s Works 32:112). However, when the question is about morality or church practice, the Pauline and Lutheran witness is less adamant and believes we may be called to respect the bound conscience of the neighbor. That is, if salvation is not at stake in a particular question, Christians are free to give priority to the neighbor’s well-being and will protect the conscience of the neighbor who may well view the same question in such a way as to affect faith itself. For example, Paul was confident that Christian freedom meant the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not at stake in questions of meat sacrificed to idols or the rituals of holy days (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8:10–14; and 10:23–30). Yet he insisted that, if a brother or sister did not understand this freedom and saw eating this meat as idolatry to a pagan god, the Christian was obligated to “walk in love” by eating just vegetables for the neighbor’s sake (Romans 14:17–20)! This social statement draws upon this rich understanding of the role of conscience and calls upon this church, when in disagreement concerning matters around which salvation is not at stake, including human sexuality, to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), honor the conscience and seek the well-being of the neighbor.