



ELCIC

*In Mission
for Others*

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Study of Human Sexuality

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Introduction

In March 2006, the ELCIC's National Church Council (NCC) directed the National Bishop to "appoint a task force to prepare a proposal for the development of a social statement on human sexuality."¹ The Task Force on Developing a Social Statement on Human Sexuality was appointed to develop and lead the process of developing a social statement. While the task force has significant responsibility in preparing study documents and draft statements, an integral part of that task is to ensure wide consultation across the ELCIC so that various expressions of this church engage the questions and have opportunity to offer voice. The task force acts as servants of the whole body of Christ and as stewards of an effective, fair and faithful process.

The task force humbly presents this study as our best effort, given the limitation of time and resources. Among eight people around the task force table, there is remarkable diversity in theological approach, life experience and personal perspective. We are aware that there are many things in this study document that might have been said in different ways. Many paragraphs are all too brief considerations of important and complex matters. Among study groups and individuals across the ELCIC, there will no doubt be much diversity. This study is not a statement. It is not a summary of what the task force agrees on, or the best compromise that could be developed. It is a conversation starter. We look forward to hearing your articulation of faith regarding the topics of the study, in all its diversity. And we eagerly anticipate the opportunity to mine your wisdom as we continue the process of developing a social statement that proclaims and encourages faithfulness to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

What is a social statement?

In the ELCIC, several specific steps must be taken for a document to become a social statement of this church.² A social statement is defined as a theological and ethical document that provides a foundation for understanding God's living word in the light of the changing realities of the modern world. A social statement seeks to provide the social analysis and theological basis for the collective ELCIC understanding of a continuing crucial issue that arises out of the mission of the ELCIC. A social statement normally focuses on a broad social theme rather than a specific issue. Specific issues may emerge within this broader discussion (e.g. A "Statement on Peace" might well include reference to disarmament).

The process for developing of a social statement involves:

- Wide consultation with the members and ministries of the ELCIC, and with ecumenical partners;

¹ Motion CC-06-17. NCC minutes can be viewed on line, including March 2006. www.elcic.ca/National-Church-Council/documents/2006marNCCmin.pdf

² The ELCIC's policy on addressing social issues is called: *The Public Witness of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: A Policy on How the Church Addresses Social Issues*. It was adopted by National Church Council in April, 1991. www.elcic.ca

- A first draft of the proposed social statement is created;
- Distribution of the draft statement to members of the ELCIC for review and feedback. Generally, this step includes forums or workshops in various contexts;
- The task force develops a second draft. Based on feedback from the consultation process, the goal here is for understanding to be communicated clearly, for analysis to have integrity, and for the proposed statement to be uniting and empowering for the church's mission; and
- NCC reviews the final draft and presents it to convention for approval.³

The process intentionally involves much consultation. A document does not become a social statement of this church until it is approved in convention. Along with consultation, it is understood that delegates will have sufficient time to review the final draft before convention.

This study document is part of the consultation process that precedes the preparing of a first draft of a social statement. Feedback received will inform the second draft of the social statement. The process of developing a social statement is as important as the social statement itself. It is hoped that participating in the study will be a time of respectful conversation that offers insight into local contexts. Issues of sexuality are personal, complex and sometimes controversial. The purpose of this study is to listen to the church and to move toward articulating theological foundations for engaging matters of sexuality. It is intended to inform, but not to make, policy declarations.

The context

Over the last several decades, society has experienced shifting “norms” with regards to sexuality, marriage and family. One aspect of these changes is increased individualism. In respecting the right of individuals to make choices in matters of sexuality, there has been increased diversity in what is considered acceptable “norms,” and decreased capacity of church, state or family to impose “norms” on individuals. Another aspect is rapid changes in technology, which have led to increased access to, and generation of volumes of information, images and opinion. A parallel shift is that the church, once at the centre of community life and ethical debate, increasingly finds itself on the margins of society. The voice of the church has more difficulty being heard, as it may be ignored, regarded as one opinion among many, or judged to be no longer relevant. All of this makes “a foundation for understanding God's living word in the light of the changing realities of the modern world”⁴ relevant to this moment as the life of the church. Regarding matters of sexuality, there is a fresh need to offer faithful, wise, integrated and evangelical witness.

Historically, issues with a sexual dimension of life have, at times, generated heated debate in the church. Divorce/remarriage, ordination of women, abortion and (most recently) the blessing of same-sex couples are all examples of emerging issues that have generated divisive debate and difficult decision making. It is to be acknowledged that NCC's call to move toward a social statement at this time came in the midst of on-going and often difficult discussion regarding the blessing of same-sex couples, including motions debated at the ELCIC National Conventions in 2005 and 2007. NCC's call for a social statement is an invitation for members to deepen faith

³ Ibid., paraphrase.

⁴ Ibid.

and to grow in witness. Connecting theological and ethical foundations in this regard is intended to encourage various expressions of mission. To open the Scriptures, to pray together, to conduct respectful conversation, to engage the issues of the day with integrity, and to follow Christ into the many contexts of our hurting world, are all practices that help the ELCIC to be a church *In Mission for Others*.

The ELCIC is not alone in facing these issues as all churches struggle to respond to changing norms. Specifically, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has recently completed a year long process of developing a Social Statement on Human Sexuality. The ELCA social statement was adopted by the church wide assembly in August, 2009, along with policy motions related to rostered leaders in same-sex relationships. It is important to keep in mind the ELCA actions are not actions of the ELCIC and they do not change existing ELCIC policies. The process of preparing the ELCA statement included the development of three studies and the circulation of their draft social statement.

The 2007 General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) asked the Primate's Theological Commission to consider two topics related to human sexuality:⁵

1. The theological question of whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a faithful, Spirit-led development of Christian doctrine; and
2. Scripture's witness to the integrity of every human person and the question of the sanctity of human relationships.

The commission was also asked to consult with members of ACC as they prepared their response. *The Galilee Report*⁶ is the commission's response to the above questions. Canadian Anglicans were invited to respond to the report.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) included a chapter on "Justice and Healing in Families"⁷ in the study book for its Tenth Assembly in 2003, and in 2007, the LWF adopted "Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue" on the topics of marriage, family and human sexuality.⁸

ELCIC study of human sexuality

After reviewing the ELCA study documents, the ELCIC task force decided that the ELCIC would benefit from developing its own study of human sexuality, which is meant to complement the work of our ecumenical partners. The ELCA study document *Journey Together Faithfully: Part Three: Lutherans Talk about Sexuality*. (2006.)⁹ has been a significant source document for this study. A conscious decision was made to make this study briefer than the ELCA document,

⁵Information about the Primate's Theological Commission is available at: www.anglican.ca/primate/ptc/index.htm

⁶www.anglican.ca/primate/ptc/galilee/1-report.htm

⁷ LWF Tenth Assembly Study Book, *For the Healing of the World*, Part III G. "Justice and Healing in Families." www.lwf-assembly.org/study.html

⁸ *The Lutheran World Federation: Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue*, LWF Council, March, 2007.

www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/2007_Council/Task_Force_Report-EN.pdf

⁹ www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Resources/Historical-Documents.aspx In particular, see *Journey Together Faithfully: Part Three: Lutherans Talk about Sexuality*. (2006.)

in the hopes that it might be used by a wider audience. For those who desire additional and/or more in-depth study the ELCA study is available.¹⁰

The ELCIC task force decided that the extensive use of facilitators was not feasible for the ELCIC at this time. Rather it was felt this brief, printed study resource has sufficient potential to support conversation in the wide and various expressions of the ELCIC. This approach expresses confidence in local congregations and groups to engage in meaningful theological conversation and prayerful discernment together. It is to be noted that Session 4, “Justice and Healing in Families,” is a summary of an LWF study from its Tenth Assembly. The use of resources from ecumenical partners is part of the mandate of the task force. Congregations, groups and individuals with an ongoing interest in particular topics are encouraged to consider the ELCA, the LWF and Anglican resources,¹¹ and to take advantage of opportunities for conversation in ecumenical settings. The ELCIC acknowledges and appreciates the generosity of our ecumenical partners in sharing these resources.

An opportunity

The primary purpose of these studies is to generate conversation. Through fresh encounters with scripture, prayer, and respectful discussion, the task force hopes that this study will lead to new insight and empower disciples for faithful living and mission. It is hoped that what you learn will be of value to your personal discipleship, to your congregation’s ministry, and to the faithful mission of *[making] disciples of all nations*¹² as expressed by the wider church.

Every congregation is invited to participate in this study. The studies are designed to be used by a wide audience. Congregations are encouraged to consider what groups and individuals might be enriched by using these studies. Are there existing Bible study, the Evangelical Lutheran Women (ELW), and/or youth groups who might be interested in engaging these questions? Are there voices, such as youth or seniors, your congregation will not hear without making a special invitation? Would a multi-generational group enrich your conversation? Would an all-male or all-female group be desirable in some situations? Are there households in your congregation who would like to use the study as a family?

It is understood that there are a variety of ways to engage this study. While some groups will choose to do all the study sessions, others may find that their ministry context dictates there is only time to use select sessions. All feedback will be taken seriously. While a group process offers the benefits of discussion, individuals are free to use the study on their own. Again, feedback from individuals will also be gladly received by the task force as part of the process.

About the sessions

The sessions begin with a gathering prayer and scripture reading. This is meant to honour and express the central role that the Bible plays in the life of the church. It is suggested that time for silence and reflection be offered at this moment in the session.

¹⁰ ELCA essays and studies, www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Resources.aspx

¹¹ This is in no way a comprehensive list of resources. Rather, it reflects primary church partnerships with ELCIC.

¹² Matthew 28:19

The body of each session offers reflections and discussion questions on matters of faith and sexuality. The reflections highlight various scriptures as the study searches for wisdom and insight. The study seeks to respect diverse perspectives present in the ELCIC. The words presented here are intended to generate conversation and feedback. They are not the words of the social statement.

It is recommended that each session end with a time of reflection and prayer. A section called Listening to the Whisperings of the Spirit offers a set of reflective questions, some prayer suggestions, and the opportunity for the group to pray together. In listening to each other, the church is ever mindful that we are listening for the voice of God.

Feedback for the task force

All who use a session for study and conversation are invited to share their feedback with the task force. The same question is asked at the end of each session: “Having considered this session, what observations might help the ELCIC as it develops a social statement on human sexuality?” A feedback form is found in appendix #1.

The Task Force welcomes responses that summarize the reflections of a study group, and responses that are submitted by individuals. Feedback to the task force will be kept confidential and need not be signed, as it is being collected for the purpose of developing a draft social statement. All are welcome to submit information anonymously.

All who use the study are encouraged to recognize that Session #1 is an introductory chapter. It names theological principles and defines sexuality. Some awareness of the first session is assumed in the other sessions.

Participating in this study supports the process of wide consultation across our church. Sharing feedback with the task force means you are participating in a wider church conversation. The task force will review all responses, and this feedback will inform the work of developing a first draft of a social statement. Again, a feedback sheet is provided in appendix #1, and it may be used by groups or individuals.

Feedback and responses to this study should be submitted to:

Online: www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=mQ7_2fGxVretEQummw_2bGZ_2fMw_3d_3d
(You may also access this link at www.elcic.ca click on “Resources” and scroll down to “Human Sexuality.”)

Email: humansexuality@elcic.ca

Mail: ELCIC Task Force on Human Sexuality
302-393 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg MB R3B 3H6

All feedback from this study should be forwarded by February 28, 2010.
The first draft of the proposed social statement will also be widely distributed for feedback.

This is a consultation; the crafting of a draft social statement has not yet begun, and the outcomes of this process are not predetermined. The task force is committed to being servants of the ELCIC by leading a good process, and to working under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

With thanksgiving

Thank you for taking the time to consider this study. In the words of St. Paul, *[We] give thanks to [our] God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*¹³ Our prayer for your group, and for the ELCIC, is that Jesus Christ will be revealed among us as we make this journey together.

¹³ I Corinthians 1:4-7