



ELCIC

*In Mission  
for Others*

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

# Study of Human Sexuality

---

Session 1: **DISCIPLES**

---

# Called to Be Disciples

## Gathering prayer

Behold Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

## Hearing the word

Read Romans 12:9–21

## Considering the word

*Silence*

*Reflection and Discernment*

- What did you hear?
- Is there a word of God for us?

### DISCUSS

- Who are some people who have modelled genuine love for you?
- What were they like?
- How did they model genuine love?

## Called to be disciples

“God calls us, through Word and Sacrament, to be disciples and to make disciples. Our discipleship is defined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>2</sup> So begins the *Evangelical Declaration* (1997) of the ELCIC. These words are a declaration of faith that God claims us in baptism, and sends us out into life as disciples. These words are an honest admission that in our life as a church, there is room for growth and changes in our discipleship.

---

<sup>1</sup> A prayer of Martin Luther, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (EvLW)*, page 87.

<sup>2</sup> *In Mission for Others: A Theology of Mission*, a mission statement for the ELCIC affirmed by convention in 2007 was originally developed as the *Evangelical Declaration* and affirmed by convention in 1997. [www.elcic.ca](http://www.elcic.ca) go to “What we believe.”

A disciple is one who follows a teacher. Christians call themselves disciples because they are followers of Jesus Christ. It is a call to lifelong learning about how faith applies to life. It is a call to live in the way that Jesus lived. It is a commitment to follow Christ to the particular places where ministry can happen. Christ leads us into a tremendous variety of contexts; we encounter diverse people who hunger for God, and we seek to offer a witness to our Lord and Saviour. When Christians speak of making disciples, it is a mission to proclaim the gospel in various contexts, and to nurture faith among disciples worshipping and living in community. It takes a lifetime, and a variety of significant moments, to be formed as disciples.

Being disciples is a challenge. We can feel confused about what to do, fearful of where God wants us to go, and troubled by conflicting advice that sometimes comes from family, friends and faith community. At the same time, facing difficulty frequently becomes the seed that germinates into a formative experience. Praying and living our way through difficult choices can leave us more ready to rely on God, and more prepared to act with faithfulness in future circumstances. God's call to be disciples presents challenge and opportunity. In Romans 12:9–21 Paul offers words to encourage disciples:

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;...  
Do not lag in zeal,...  
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer....  
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep....  
Live in harmony with one another;....  
...overcome evil with good.*

## DISCUSS

- What implications for being a disciple do you hear in Paul's words?

## Sexuality and faith

Being faithful to God in matters of sexuality is one aspect of being a disciple. James Nelson defines sexuality in the following way:

[Sexuality is a] comprehensive term associated with...diffuse and symbolic meanings, psychological and cultural orientations. While it includes sex and relates to biological organ systems, sexuality goes beyond this. To be sure, sexuality is not the whole of our personhood, but it is a very basic dimension of our personhood....Sexuality is our self-understanding and way of being in the world as male and female.<sup>3</sup>

Nelson goes on to point out that sexuality includes attitudes, orientation, body image and a whole lot more. This definition is an invitation to recognize that sexuality is a dimension of many aspects and issues in life. As disciples, we are called and commanded to have faith inform all matters in life, including sexuality.

---

<sup>3</sup> James Nelson, *Embodiment*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1978) page 17–18.

The realm of sexuality is complex and mysterious. It is a personal matter, relating deeply to our sense of identity, personhood and our very ability to love and to be loved. Our sense of sexuality may be affected by powerful memories, both positive and negative. In the midst of all this complexity, we may not fully understand our own sense of sexuality. There may be times when it is difficult to admit, even to ourselves, the influence that some aspects to our sexuality have on us. For all these reasons, and many more, discussing sexuality and faith can be difficult. For all these reasons, and many more, discussing sexuality and faith is important.

We live in a rapidly changing world. Changes in technology mean that most people have more access to more information, and more images, from more sources. In Canada, many consumers of information are more in control of which sources they access; they can change the channel if they don't like the answer they get. Changes in family life are varied. Some examples of things one might hear during informal conversation are: families are busier, the divorce rate has increased, couples live common-law more frequently, men are more involved in parenting, and same-sex couples are more accepted. A particular trend may be accurate in a wider circle of society, while at the same time being unreflective of a particular family or context.

The difficulty of discussion, the changing context and the value of conversation make this an opportune time to talk about human sexuality in this church.

## DISCUSS

- Do you find this to be a helpful definition of sexuality? Why or Why not?
- What makes it difficult to talk about sexuality?
- What makes it difficult to talk about faith?

## Theological foundations

A primary goal of a social statement on human sexuality is to develop a theological and ethical foundation that helps disciples grow in their understanding and witness. The ELCIC has guidelines for how a social statement is developed.<sup>4</sup> One thing that these guidelines do is ensure that there is wide consultation across the church as part of the process of developing a statement. The process of consultation is a key element in discovering common values and in crafting a statement.<sup>5</sup>

Developing a common theological and ethical foundation is not an easy task. As members of the church, we hold much in common, and at the same time we are made up of people of diverse experiences and opinions. People use a variety of tools as they seek to understand. For example, the Bible, experience, culture and history are all relevant to how we make sense of faith and

---

<sup>4</sup> *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](http://www.elcic.ca)

<sup>5</sup> The final step in the process is adoption of a social statement at convention. Without consultation, a convention motion is not fruitful or meaningful. At the same time, convention delegates are the final faithful reviewers of a proposed statement.

world.<sup>6</sup> One approach to learning and insight is to use multiple lenses with which to consider matters of sexuality.

In the section below, a list of “lenses” is named as potentially important in developing a social statement on human sexuality. The lenses are not all of equal importance. Some of the lenses might better be called “principles,” “values,” or “beliefs;” in fact, some of the lenses are absolutely essential to any Lutheran theological endeavour. In the current phase of study and consultation, the church is moving toward identifying and articulating some common principles. Most of the lenses will offer some insight, though some people may regard some of the lenses to be of almost no help. The over-riding questions are:

- Which lenses are the most helpful in understanding faith and sexuality?
- Which are the least helpful?
- Are there other lenses that might be considered?

Recognizing that different people will find different lenses to be the most helpful, using a variety of lenses and an ongoing commitment to listening will maximize one’s opportunity to find insight.

The lenses are in three categories:

- Theological lenses:** Theological and ethical principles that help the church gain insight into faith and sexuality.
- Context Lenses:** Principles that help the church do social analysis and to deepen understanding of our current context.
- Process Lenses:** Principles that need to be kept in mind as the church develops a social statement and as local groups engage in conversation.

## Theological lenses

### The Bible

“This church confesses the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks, and as the only source of the church’s doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the church.”<sup>7</sup> As the source and norm for faith, the Bible plays a central role in the life of disciples and the life of the church. Biblical texts are lenses that help us to understand reality, and are spiritual food that offer wisdom, encouragement and correction as we make our journey on life’s path. The reading of scripture is one way for Christ to be present among Christians, and a fundamental way for Christ to lead us. The practice of encountering the Bible in worship, prayer, study and teaching keeps us rooted in the source of

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Robert Kysar, *Opening the Bible: What It Is, Where It Came From, What It Means for You*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1999. Kysar suggests that in the quest for religious truth, people use the ways of: experience, culture, reason, tradition, and the Bible.

<sup>7</sup> *ELCIC Constitution*; [www.elcic.ca/Documents](http://www.elcic.ca/Documents), Article II Confession of Faith, Section 3 The same confession statement is recommended in the “Model Constitution for Congregations” [www.elcic.ca/Documents](http://www.elcic.ca/Documents)

our faith, and creates opportunity for God to speak afresh to our current yearnings, temptations and crises.

Using the Bible as an authority does not produce quick or easy unity. History and experience record that different people interpret the Bible in different ways. Interpretation is an important and complex matter. One aspect of life in a church is seeking some common interpretation that empowers disciples for a common public witness. Some of the lenses discussed below help Lutherans to focus and invigorate a common process of interpretation. Many of the lenses discussed below affect how the Bible is read, heard and interpreted.

## **Experience**

In one sense, any gathered group is a collection of individuals; and each individual is a unique creation of God. To any conversation, each person brings a unique set of experiences. Factors such as gender, culture, education, personality, history and economic status all affect our perceptions of faith and life. And they affect how we read and interpret the Bible. God's Word is living and active as it touches people's lives.

Some may suggest that the lens of experience would more accurately belong to the category of "contextual" or "process." As the church has conversation about complex matters, listening to each other's stories and perspectives is essential to growing in understanding and to finding common principles. Our experiences include moments of blessing, of brokenness, of learning and of profound awareness of God's presence in our lives. Christians sharing stories will include hearing how God's Word is made manifest in the experiences of others.

## **Tradition**

The word "tradition" is being used here in a broad sense to mean the history, practices and teachings of the church. While individuals bring their personal experiences to conversations about faith and sexuality, each disciple is accompanied both by the present faith community and by the witness and teaching of church history. The Lutheran tradition includes *The Lutheran Confessions* as a faithful witness to the Scriptures. It includes the practice of experiencing Christ's grace through Word, Sacrament and prayer. It includes placing a high value on teaching theology. From the tradition, Lutherans seek to connect with what is "apostolic;" that is, what is "faithful to the good news of God's love shown in Jesus Christ as witnessed to and passed on by the first apostles as recorded in Holy Scriptures."<sup>8</sup> Much more could be said about the significant value that Lutherans place on many tools in tradition.

## **Justification by grace through faith**

A central teaching of the Lutheran church is that God's forgiveness and salvation comes to us as a free gift. We are justified by grace, through faith, apart from works of the law.<sup>9</sup> God is the source of all salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. Ever present is the temptation to rely on self,

---

<sup>8</sup> *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk About Human Sexuality*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Studies on Sexuality, part 3, page 141. (It is a quote from the glossary.)

<sup>9</sup> Romans 3:28

or on rules, or on good deeds. Christ comes to shatter all self-justification projects, and to return our focus to his gifts of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Right relationship with God leads to good works, but good works do not save. Behaviour matters, but behaviour does not save. In language and practice, Lutheran theology seeks to have the free gift of Christ shine. One important implication of grace is that all are sinners, and that all need God's grace. Martin Luther described this as *simul justus et peccator*, which is Latin for "simultaneously justified and sinner." Luther insisted that in the life of the Christian, sin never goes away; and the saving work of Christ does not go away either.

## **Law and gospel**

The Lutheran tradition consistently speaks of biblical interpretation in terms of law and gospel:

All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises. In some places it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ; this it does either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for his sake, or when, in the New Testament, the Christ who came promises forgiveness of sins, justification and eternal life. By "law" in this discussion we mean the commandments of the Decalogue [Ten Commandments], wherever they appear in the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup>

Law and gospel work together to help us connect with God. The law reveals to us God's expectations, and our failure to meet God's expectations. The gospel reveals to us Christ and his gift of forgiveness, life and salvation. Reading the Bible with a law and gospel lens helps focus attention on God's will for the world, God's gift of salvation and God's mission of proclamation.

## **Theology of the cross<sup>11</sup>**

"Theology of the cross" is an important Lutheran teaching that is worthy of much more study and reflection in congregations. Theology of the cross is defined in contrast to the "theology of glory." Theology of glory highlights human accomplishment. Theology of the cross repeatedly calls us back to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the central reality of salvation, discipleship and life. In a sense, God hid in the wonderful gift of salvation in the tragedy and violence of crucifixion. Through this action, God demonstrated a profound and passionate love for the world. Whenever we recognize that we cannot save ourselves, whether during moments of joy, sorrow, success or failure, we are living a theology of the cross.

## **God's compassion for a broken world**

God has profound concern for the brokenness of this world. In becoming *the word made flesh*,<sup>12</sup> Jesus entered into the whole realm of human existence. God's mission includes the whole person: soul and body, individual and community. God's compassion for the world extends not only to guilty souls, but also to those harmed by the effects of sin.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article IV, Justification (Tappert, page 108).

<sup>11</sup> For a brief summary of Theology of the Cross, see Rev. Dr. Gordon Jensen, *Death or Glory?* (Canada Lutheran, April/May 2009, page 8).

<sup>12</sup> John 1:14

“We believe that the reality of Christ is that God promises to be with us unconditionally in the midst of the changes in our world. The church is called to name those things that cause us to be less than human. The church is called to proclaim the truth of the gospel to others and to live according to it as a community. The church is called to stand in solidarity with, and to welcome into its midst, all those who are marginalized because of sin and who experience injustice. The cross of Christ stands opposed to any ideology that treats people as commodities or proclaims that people can earn salvation by hard work or positive thinking.”<sup>13</sup>

### ***In Mission for Others***

In recent years the ELCIC has articulated its goal as to be a church *In Mission for Others*. We are called to be disciples AND to make disciples. Each of us has a role to play in this mission, for we are a priesthood of all believers. “We believe, teach and confess that the Holy Spirit calls and gathers the whole church into the mission of God, which takes seriously both the reality of the world, and the reality of Christ, with equal care.”<sup>14</sup> In seeking a deeper understanding of faith and sexuality, the ELCIC is also seeking to empower and encourage its witness. What the church teaches about sexuality and how it says it needs to support its mission to serve others and to share the story of Jesus.

### **DISCUSS**

Which theological lenses are the most helpful in understanding faith and sexuality?  
Which are the least helpful?  
Are there other lenses that should be considered?

## **Contextual lenses**

### **Culture<sup>15</sup>**

The term “culture” may be defined as the beliefs, values, customs, practices and social behaviour of a particular group. That is, culture is a basic set of assumptions that is taught as the accepted way to perceive, perform, think, feel and interact. In this way, a culture shapes its members’ understanding of what is real. We all are members of many cultures, large and small. A family unit constitutes a small culture. Our workplaces have their own unique cultures. The same holds true for each local congregation. These cultures all overlap with one another, and all operate within what we call the “dominant culture.” Congregations are made up of individuals who bring their own cultural experiences and perspectives into congregational life, and are affected by the cultures around them.

Each of us belongs to a variety of communities and cultures. These cultures contribute to our personal identity, and they are the context in which we live our discipleship. Jesus became

---

<sup>13</sup> *In Mission for Others: A Theology of Mission*, www.elcic.ca

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> An expanded consideration of culture can be found in Session 3 of the ELCA study, pages 27–34.

incarnate in a particular time and place. People of faith cannot escape the many cultures of our world and the forces of change, nor do we seek to do so. But we can view our social world and the social practices of our time and place through the message of the gospel. And this view will in some respect change our perspective and influence our actions. At their best, congregations can be places of profound formation, helping members to grow in faith, to know their values and to live out their values.

## **Equity**

In Canadian culture today, there is a general sense that equity between people is important. Equity means that differences between people are respected, and that all people have a fair opportunity to participate in society. This is articulated in things such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and multiculturalism. Certainly, equity is not perfect, and people are frequently less than fully aware of biases and prejudices being expressed. In families, neighbours, societies and churches, there is room for growth in living with more respect for the similarities and differences between people. In some ways, the language of rights and dignity is fairly modern; nevertheless, some Christians hear a call to equity from biblical sources. In celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, The Lutheran World Federation focused on the parallels between Luther's *Small Catechism* explanation of "Give us today our daily bread" and the articles of the UN Declaration.<sup>16</sup> The lens of equity may help us understand our context, and may help us to recognize injustices that need to be addressed. How does the faith community find ways to honour the gifts that diverse cultures, experiences and characteristics of disciples bring for ministry?

## **Science**

Through the ages, human beings are on a quest for knowledge. Research, studies and technology can alter how people experience reality. Studies in fields such as sociology, psychology, biology and history can be used as lenses to help the church understand context. Every study and researcher carries with them a set of assumptions that focuses work. Church teaching may or may not agree with a particular set of assumptions. However, social analysis is part of the social statement process. Through training, vocation and experience, members of our church bring many gifts for social analysis. Using the lens of science in conjunction with theological lenses may deepen our understanding.

## **Freedom, responsibility, accountability**

From both a global and a historical perspective, people in Canada enjoy a relatively large amount of freedom. Generally, people feel free to make their own choices and to hold their own opinions. This sense of individualism has positives and negatives. Freedoms and rights can be an important tool for detecting unfairness and encouraging justice. Individuals choosing to take responsibility can enter into service and witness with creativity and energy. Human nature being what it is, people are frequently more interested claiming individual freedoms than in taking

---

<sup>16</sup> Lutheran World Information, *Give Us This Day Our Human Rights*, LWI No. 10/2008. [www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/OCS/LWI-2008-PDF/LWI-200810-EN-low.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/OCS/LWI-2008-PDF/LWI-200810-EN-low.pdf)

individual responsibilities or in being accountable to anyone other than themselves. In our current context, there is often reluctance to trust authority or to accept accountability. As disciples live out their sexuality in the light of faith, there are interesting challenges to the interplay between freedom, responsibility and accountability.

## **DISCUSS**

- Which contextual lenses are the most helpful in understanding faith and sexuality?
- Which are the least helpful?
- Are there other lenses that should be considered?

## **Process lenses:**

### **Prophetic and pastoral**

The ELCIC guidelines for preparing a social statement identify the following evaluation standard:

In engaging in a public witness, the ELCIC measures the effectiveness of this ministry by the twin criteria of prophetic credibility and pastoral responsibility.

Prophetic credibility is recognizing that our statements must address the concrete social reality faced by members of the global family. Therefore they require that the ELCIC ensure through the contribution of those with special competence, that these statements address the real questions faced by society. The test becomes, does the public statement help increase an understanding of the issues and directions for future actions?

Pastoral responsibility recognizes that the teaching of the church has an influence on individuals and communities faced with the serious ambiguities of living in a complex world. The ELCIC does not make statements simply for the sake of making statements, but for helping those faced with serious ethical and moral choices. The test of a statement's pastoral responsibility is, does a public statement help those facing such decisions?<sup>17</sup>

### **Proximate answers**

ELCIC guidelines for a social statement offer the following perspective on the effect of a social statement:

The ELCIC's public statements are always proximate answers to the ever changing reality of God's world. While hoping to encourage responsible Christian discipleship, such public statements do not obligate all members of the ELCIC to agree. Honest disagreement should not be seen as a sign of disunity, but as a means of forcing the

---

<sup>17</sup> *The Public Witness of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada: A Policy on How the Church Addresses Social Issues.*  
www.elcic.ca

ELCIC to new understandings and insights. After such debate and discussion, those delegates to a convention and members of boards, who in conscience cannot subscribe to an adopted policy statement, should always be allowed to register their disagreement in the official record of the proceedings. However, once adopted the Social Statements, Position Resolutions and Policy Resolutions are normative for the elected officers, staff and elected or appointed representatives of the church in representing the ELCIC.<sup>18</sup>

### **Honour people who disagree with us but continue to talk**

There is little doubt that in considering matters of faith and sexuality, we will discover that people disagree. There are times in life when it is a good strategy to agree to disagree. When communities have disagreements, much energy is spent on persuading others to join the correct side; at some points in the process, consideration might be given to investing some of this energy in seeking to better understand how and why the other side formed its perspectives. When dealing with moral issues, it seems that there are times when two Christians come to different conclusions about the same set of circumstances. While we might regard an individual's conviction as wrong, compelling someone to act against his or her convictions holds potential to be spiritually harmful. At such times, Christians are called to humility in recognizing that one's own convictions might be wrong. Everyone is challenged to consider deeply their own opinions in the light of scripture and prayer; and everyone is called to deep respect for the core faith found in others. Understanding why a sister or brother in Christ so deeply holds a different conviction is a profound call to community, listening and intimacy. Some might consider this to be a theological lens. For example, during the process of working toward a social statement on human sexuality for the ELCA, Timothy Wengert lifted up for the church the concept of *Bound Conscience*.<sup>19</sup>

### **DISCUSS**

- Which process lenses are the most helpful in understanding faith and sexuality?
- Which are the least helpful?
- Are there other lenses that should be considered?

## **Consultation**

The importance of consultation and conversation in the process of developing a social statement cannot be stressed enough. It is hoped that local discussions will produce insight into local ministry and context. Insight and wisdom shared with the task force will help the church in its quest for effective wording. All feedback will be considered. We need to hear many voices in the development of a foundation that is truly held in common. A deeper understanding of sexuality will help disciples become the people God calls us to be.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> The Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality prepared two documents: 1. *Reflections on the Bound Conscience* by Timothy Wengert; and 2. *FAQ on Bound Conscience*. [www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues.aspx](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues.aspx)

# Listening to the whisperings of the spirit

## Personal reflections:

- What happened for you during this session?
- My insights into my life are. . .
- My insights into life and mission of my congregation are. . .
- My insights into the life and mission of the wider church are. . .
- In light of this session, questions that need to be explored are. . .
- Insights I would like to share with the ELCIC Human Sexuality Task Force are. . .

## Feedback for the ELCIC Task Force

(form provided in appendix #1.)

Having considered this session, what observations might help the ELCIC as it develops a social statement on human sexuality?

## Closing prayer

Give thanks for:       The gift of sexuality  
                              Great teachers of faith  
                              People in your life who have loved you  
                              The gift of faith

Pray for:               Those who rejoice and those who weep  
                              Your enemies  
                              The ability and opportunity to listen  
                              Disciples to become who God calls them to be

Offer your own prayers: