



ELCIC

*In Mission  
for Others*

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

# Study of Human Sexuality

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Session 6: **ORIENTATION**

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# Sexuality and Orientation

## Gathering prayer

Draw your church together, O God, into one great company of disciples, together following our teacher Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving in Christ's mission to the world, and together witnessing to your love wherever you will send us; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

## Hearing the word

Read Romans 1:16–18

## Considering the word

Silence

Reflection and Discernment

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

## DISCUSS

Describe a time when you sensed the power of the gospel.

## Changed context

Our context has changed. In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in the general acceptance of diverse sexual orientation by Canadian society, including the legal recognition of same-sex marriages. These changes are not universally accepted, and many voices express opposition. The overall result is that people with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual have increased opportunity to be open regarding identity, orientation and family situation. At the same time, those of other than heterosexual orientation live as a minority in a heterosexual-dominant culture. Along with times of overt, even hostile discrimination, members of this minority may report an ongoing disconnect between their personal orientation and the assumptions, language and metaphors of the dominant culture.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mission of the Church, EvLW, Page 75.

A variety of factors contribute to this changing context. Until the nineteenth century, homosexuality was talked about (usually in the negative) mainly in terms of sexual genital acts. Beginning in the nineteenth century, psychologists in particular begin to write about “sexual orientation.” That is, for some people, the orientation of their affection and sexual interests was towards those of the same gender. At first, “orientation” was studied as a form of mental illness, but beginning in the 1950s some research began to suggest that homosexuality did not, in and of itself, indicate mental illness. In 1973, The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its diagnostic list of disorders.<sup>2</sup> However, a minority of professional psychologists and psychiatrists continue to advocate for the right of a homosexual person to “diminish their homosexuality and develop their heterosexual potential.”<sup>3</sup>

Research and conversation led to an increasing awareness that sexual orientation is complex. Martinson offers one perspective on this complexity:

While one’s “sexual orientation” is primarily determined by the object(s) of one’s sexual fantasies and desires, by the focus of one’s inner sexual fantasies and affection, Eli Coleman understands sexual orientation to be even more complex. Coleman asserts one must consider nine dimensions of human sexuality when discerning sexual orientation: current relationship status, self-identification identity, ideal self-identification identity, global acceptance of one’s current sexual orientation identity, physical sexual identity, gender identity, sex-role identity and sexual orientation identity as measured by behavior, fantasies, and emotional attachments, and lastly the individual’s past and present perception of their sexual identity compared to their idealized future. Even though on this basis men and women are said to be hetero-, bi-, or homosexual, Coleman asserts this to be an oversimplification. It is possible to be an anatomical male, have male gender identification, live in societally expected modes of masculine being and behaviour, and be exclusively focused on another male as the object of one’s sexual desire and fantasies.

The unfolding discoveries and conceptualizations of the last 150 years in western societies “establish” sexual identification to at least include the complex dimensions of sex, gender identity, sex roles, and sexual orientation.

This broad operating consensus is by no means everywhere accepted, commonly understood, or static. New research, alternative proposals, and intense political machinations regularly reshape it. While great efforts are being extended in redefining gender and sex roles, those studies, debates, and political movements concerning sexual orientation are the most divergent and contentious.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Martinson, *Sexual Orientation: The History and Significance of an Idea*, Word & World, Volume XIV, Number 3, Summer 1994, Pages 239–245.

<sup>3</sup> For example, National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, [www.narth.com](http://www.narth.com)

<sup>4</sup> Martinson *Sexual Orientation: The History and Significance of an Idea*, Page 241. Includes the citation: <sup>#4</sup> Eli Coleman, *Assessment of Sexual Orientation, in Psychotherapy with Homosexual Men and Women*, ed. Eli Coleman (New York: Haworth, 1988).

One community ministry dedicated to support and education regarding sexual diversity seeks to be inclusive of various identities using the shorthand LGBTTIQQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-spirited, Intersexed, Queer Identified or Questioning. Diversity itself is diverse, and individuals are even more diverse.

## DISCUSS

- What examples of diversity have you encountered in your context?

## Response of the church

The church is ever affected by its context, and is never obliged to accept prevailing philosophies. A Lutheran response to changing contexts means acting from a theology of grace, a theology of the cross, and a solid biblical foundation. The church does need to understand its context in order to effectively engage in witness and service.

At the request of the ELCIC, Rev. Dr. Irwin Buck wrote *Studies on Homosexuality and the Church*.<sup>5</sup> The studies review biblical texts that directly mention homosexuality, and a number of texts which may be related. The historical and theological context of each passage is articulated. Discussion questions invite readers to share insight as they look afresh at these readings. These are available for study by groups and individuals, on the ELCIC website. More recently, the ELCA developed a study paper called *Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality*.<sup>6</sup> It is available for download at on the ELCA website.

Even after significant biblical and theological study, the church commonly finds itself divided on matters of sexual orientation. Due to changing context, diverse opinion and the desire to offer faithful witness the church continues to be in conversation. While recent debate in the ELCIC has focused on the blessing of same-sex unions,<sup>7</sup> the questions before the church are more comprehensive. We know that the church today is composed of people of varied sexual orientations. As members of the body of Christ, we are together seeking: to know Christ in Word and Sacrament, to deepen faith in the midst of Christian community, to express faith through witness and service, to experience support, care and encouragement in the midst of life's joys and sorrows, and to be *In Mission for Others*.

This ongoing conversation is prone to misunderstanding and accusation. There may be value in accepting that God seems to be calling us into this difficult conversation at this time in our life together. If the church uses this moment to have respectful, open and prayerful conversation, then we might discover skills for communication, discernment, and growth that serve the body of Christ well in various expressions of mission. Imagine letting go of a small bit of yourself and

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<sup>5</sup> Erwin Buck, *Studies on Homosexuality and the Church*, copyright 2001 Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. They are available for viewing and download on the ELCIC website: [www.elcic.ca/Study-On-Sexuality-And-The-Church/default.cfm](http://www.elcic.ca/Study-On-Sexuality-And-The-Church/default.cfm)

<sup>6</sup> *Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality* Copyright © 2003 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney)

<sup>7</sup> For example, "local option to bless same-sex couples" motions at the 2005 and 2007 conventions, and the conversations which surrounded these moments in the life of the church.

your current perceptions, so that we all might better turn our collective attention toward God. Imagine the possibility that God wants us to have this discussion.

## Considering some possible responses

For the purposes of discussion, let us consider three possible responses to same-sex couples who seek to have their union recognized and blessed by the church. These positions are not intended to be proscriptive or rigid. They are intended to be a general summary of some ways that faithful, thoughtful, caring Christians have tried to make sense of the world today. They are intended to represent some perspectives that are heard in discussion and debate regarding sexual orientation. And they are intended to help explore why others may have a different opinion than your own.

Two key texts will be lifted up in each section: Romans 1:26–27 and Genesis 1:27–31:

Romans 1:26–27

*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.*

Genesis 1:27–31

*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

The three potential responses are:

- Welcoming but not affirming;
- Concessionally affirming; or
- Fully affirming.

The words rejecting and accepting refer to practicing other than heterosexual orientation in the context of a committed relationship. Again, these positions are not intended to be proscriptive or rigid; they are intended to explore the why of various opinions.

### 1. Welcoming but not affirming

In our present context, some Christians maintain that the Bible unequivocally condemns all homosexual behaviour as sinful. While the Bible mentions homosexuality only occasionally, whenever it is mentioned it is always forcefully denounced. This is a clear indication that God always considers other than heterosexual behaviour to be sinful. A key biblical text in the Old Testament is Leviticus 18:22 which proscribes all male homosexual behaviour, calling it “an abomination.” The key New Testament text is Romans 1:26–27, where St. Paul names homosexual behaviour not only as one sin among many, but as the culmination of a pattern of sin among Gentile peoples. It is also here that St Paul names both male and female homosexual behaviour as sinful and unnatural. So, while the early Christian community left behind some Old Testament regulations, like those around circumcision and dietary purity, proscriptions against homosexual behaviour remain in force. In the face of such a clear biblical witness, then, engaging in homosexual practice, is an indication of a rejection of God and of God’s intentions for humankind.

Texts like Genesis 1 set out the norm for sexual activity as being between a male and a female. Commonly, two reasons are given for this norm. First, sexual complementarity between male and female is seen to be an integral part of God’s intended structure for creation. Thus, the sexual union between a man and a woman in the marriage union is representative and symbolic of God’s greater design for human existence. Second, this complementarity and union of the two sexes is good because it is open to the possibility of the creation of life. Only when the two opposing and complementary sexes come together sexually is there the possibility of procreation, which is a great gift that God is pleased to give for the union of marriage. Thus, because same-sex unions always lack these primary, God-given purposes for sexual behaviour, same-sex sexual activity is always outside of God’s will.

Furthermore, because the Bible is of one voice on homosexual acts, and speaks so forcefully against it, to deviate from scripture is not only to flout God’s intentions for creation, but also to disrespect God’s revelation in scripture. One simply cannot be faithful to the Christian tradition and affirm same-sex sexual behaviour.

In condemning same-sex sexual activity, this position always seeks to *speak the truth in love*.<sup>8</sup> While condemning sinful behaviour it seeks to affirm the person. Love the sinner, hate the sin, so to speak. The faithful Christian community walks a fine line between welcoming all people, regardless of sexual orientation (or any other discernible human characteristic), and prophetically renouncing sinful behaviour in all its manifestations. The principle of affirming the sinner but not the sin is key to a faithful response. In the end, this leads a church to encourage all people, whether homosexual or heterosexual, to live a sexually celibate lifestyle or to live in the context of heterosexual marriage.

## 2. Concessionally affirming

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<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:15

In our present context, some Christians maintain a similar interpretation of the Bible as that articulated above, but they also believe that life's complexity in the realm of human sexuality calls for ethical ambiguity when it comes to same-sex sexual behaviour. Furthermore, the Bible's infrequent mentioning of homosexuality is an indication that this is not an absolutely crucial issue for the church. For example, Romans chapter 1 mentions homosexual behaviour among a long list of sins, and the whole point of Romans 1 is that we are all sinners, and that God's grace is needed by all. It is not intended to single out any single activity or group of people as especially sinful. The world that we experience today is not perfect and is broken in many ways, including in the realm of sexuality. Both homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships and activity manifest this brokenness in a diversity of ways.

Genesis 1 does indeed set out God's intended norm and ideal for sexual activity as rightfully between a male and a female. But we do not live in a world of ideals; we live in a world of realities. And one of the realities of our world is that people with other-than-heterosexual orientations exist. Biblical writers were probably unaware of this fact, or at least did not have the understanding that we do today about the complexity of human sexuality. Thus, we need to make room for a different appraisal of same-sex sexual activity in the church today. We ought to accept that ethical deliberation in the realm of sexuality can be ambiguous.

Indeed, our call to love and accept each other as sinners forgiven by God, combined with our sense of mission to extend God's love towards all people, compels us to take steps towards affirming and supporting people in same-sex relationships. Just as the early church moved to accept uncircumcised Gentiles into the church, just as they moved to accept that no food was inherently unclean, so the church today is being called to move towards a re-evaluation of same-sex sexual activity. Where celibacy and heterosexual marriage are not possible, people in same-sex relationships, like people in heterosexual relationships, should be encouraged to live lives of fidelity and commitment towards each other in a supportive community. Churches should bless same-sex unions and extend pastoral care to those in same-sex relationships with a view to supporting them to be as faithful and loving as possible. Although same-sex unions are not equal to marriage, they nevertheless can be a positive, life-giving way for other-than-heterosexually oriented people to live and flourish.

### 3. Fully affirming

In our present context, some Christians maintain that the Bible simply does not address the issue of committed, monogamous, same-sex relationships. Biblical injunctions and proscriptions against same-sex sexual activity are directed towards abusive or non-committed or non-consensual relationships. And because the biblical authors did not know what we know today about human sexuality, the biblical injunctions and the biblical norm simply do not apply to our situation today. For example, when Paul wrote Romans 1, he was writing first of all without our understanding of sexual orientation, and second of all with a cultural assumption that homosexuality was "unnatural;" our cultural assumptions have now changed. Sexual orientation is now known to be something fixed very early on in life, and is clearly linked biologically to our

bodies, the chemistry of our brains, and our genes. A homosexual orientation is just as “natural” as a heterosexual one.

In fact, when the Bible is read with its clear call towards justice, peace, and equity for all people, the right action for the church today to take is to fully affirm and accept people of other-than-heterosexual orientations. The only way that this can be done without reservation is to bless same-sex unions as equivalent to heterosexual marriage.

The church continues to take seriously that sin is alive and well in our world. But in our context today, neither same-sex sexual orientation, nor same-sex sexual activity are indicators of sin. Sexual orientation is God-given; sexual activity that aligns with that orientation is merely a living out of that good, God-given sexual identity. Indeed, what is sinful today in our churches is our attitude towards and discrimination against a minority group comprised of other-than-heterosexually oriented people. Preventing the church from supporting same-sex marriages is blessing the sin of discrimination.

Read in this light, the day by day accounts in Genesis 1 reveal God creating the world in remarkable diversity. The creation of people with varied sexual orientations is part of God’s diversity. We are all called to live and grow as disciples of integrity. Rejecting same-sex relationships dishonours God’s creation and disrespects God’s people.

In accepting same-sex relationships, this position is seeking to be the church and the society God calls us to be. Encouraging people of all sexual orientations to live their committed relationships well creates the best space for individuals and communities to be formed as the disciples God wants them to be. *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,*<sup>9</sup> is a text that reminds the church to grow beyond categories created by mere culture or church debate.

## DISCUSS

- Where do you see yourself in these positions?
- Do you see yourself in more than one position?
- Where have your opinions about homosexuality and heterosexuality come from?
- What role has the Bible played?
- What role has culture played?
- What relationships have influenced you?
- What experiences have influenced you?

## Honour people who disagree with us

In session 1, this study lifted up the concept of “Honour people who disagree with us but

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<sup>9</sup> Galatians 3:27–28

continue to talk.”<sup>10</sup> The idea is that faithful Christians can sincerely come to different conclusions on an issue. While at least one party has likely come to a “wrong” conclusion, asking someone to act against their conscience generates another damaging wrong.

Honouring people who disagree with us is not simply about opinion. It is a product of prayerful consideration that includes careful consideration of the Scriptures. It is more than agreeing to disagree; it is about a commitment to continue to journey together as the body of Christ and to seek to understand the how and why of the conviction of another. And it is an honest admission that one’s own opinion may be the perspective that needs calling to repentance.

One challenge of working with people of diverse opinion is that it is all too easy to assume things about the motivation of those with a differing opinion. For example, those who are rejecting of committed same-sex relationships may feel accused of discrimination in general. Those who are accepting of same-sex committed relationships may feel accused of lacking boundaries. Particularly hurtful are accusations regarding the faith and earnest reflections of another. Honouring people in the midst of disagree includes a call to sincerely learn the story of another, and to trust the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the life of another.

Lutherans fail to honour our tradition of proclaiming justification by grace when discrimination tries to exclude some people from access to the gospel. In writing to the church at Galatia about the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul points out that life in the church cuts across the major social divisions of his time. Martin Luther recognized this in his commentary on Galatians. Regarding Galatians 3:28, Luther wrote:

Here many other titles could be added of offices that have been divinely ordained. For example, “There is neither magistrate nor subject, neither professor nor listener, neither teacher nor listener, neither lady nor servant.” For in Christ Jesus all social stations, even those that were divinely ordained, are nothing. Male, female, slave, free, Jew, Gentile, king, subject—these are, of course, good creatures of God. But in Christ, that is, in the matter of salvation, they amount to nothing, for all their wisdom, righteousness, devotion, and authority.<sup>11</sup>

If Paul were writing to the ELCIC today he might say there is no longer easterner or westerner, there is no longer conservative or liberal, there is no rich or poor, there is no longer gay or straight, there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. According to Paul and his understanding of the gospel, no human categories can ever preclude one from saving grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Such words inspire us to work hard so that all peoples in our society do indeed have an opportunity to encounter the message of the gospel. While few churches openly discriminate against minority groups, unspoken but deep-seated negative attitudes towards certain groups of

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<sup>10</sup>See Session 1, page 10. Also see Session 3, pages 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> *Luther’s Works*, Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Vol 26, Pages 353–354.

people can have a profound impact on our ability to proclaim the gospel to those who may need to hear it the most.

## DISCUSS

- What challenges do you see in seeking to work with people of diverse opinion?
- What successes have you had in working with people of diverse opinion?

## One congregation's story

An urban congregation in the United States learned that the annual gay pride parade was scheduled to go down the street on which the church was located. Soon after, they were contacted by neighbouring congregations who were organizing to protest the presence of the parade.

While holding various opinions, generally the leaders in the congregation were not particularly comfortable with the idea of gay rights. At the same time, they knew that the hostile reaction of some of their church neighbours did not feel right either. Someone asked the question, “suppose one person from the parade came to our church on a Sunday morning. What would we do? Would we hold a placard in their face or would we welcome them?”

“We would welcome them. In fact, we would probably offer them a cookie and some coffee or juice. It is going to be a summer day and it will probably be hot. The participants might appreciate something to drink.”

So it was decided. On the day of the parade, the church would share drinks and baking, saying welcome to the neighbourhood. They would offer a tour of the church as well, if anyone wanted. Many people did stop for refreshment, and some took a tour. Many said how thankful they were to be welcomed.

This congregation found a different way than arguing or ignoring the presence of diverse neighbours. By sticking to a principle they understood, hospitality, they were able to be in relationship and offer a small witness to the faith of the church and the love of Christ. This choice did not endorse any lifestyles, and it said nothing about church policy or their level of comfort/discomfort regarding sexual orientation. Rather, they discerned a response based on their core values. In the process, they had an experience to remember and continued to seek to be the church in mission today.

The proceeding story reminds us that the Spirit continues to present opportunities for the church to faithfully live out God's mission. Claimed by Christ, rooted in the gospel and guided by the Spirit, particular opportunities and responses may emerge in unexpected ways. Discerning ways to witness with integrity is an ongoing process; one that requires study, prayer, conversation, loving action and humility.

## DISCUSS

- What values guide your congregation as you seek to engage in God’s mission?
- One challenge for a social statement is to articulate “theological foundations” that will help the church wrestle with future issues that have not yet been named or imagined. What thoughts do you have regarding this challenge?
- What have you learned by participating in this session?
- What other questions might be asked?

## 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 stories, told and heard  
                                 The wonderful complexity of life  
                                 Challenges placed before us that help us grow  
                                 God’s call to offer witness with integrity

Pray for:                God’s support for family, friends and hope  
                                 Those whom the church has hurt  
                                 New insight into the church’s mission  
                                 Unity for the church, rooted in Christ

Offer your own prayers: