

What Does This Mean...for the Congregations and People of the IN-KY Synod?

A summary of actions taken by the ELCA 2009 Churchwide Assembly
regarding the rostering of gay and lesbian people and implications for the Indiana-Kentucky Synod
Prepared and distributed by the Office of Bishop James R. Stuck, August 2009

Social Statement – “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”

This tenth social statement adopted by the ELCA, like all such social statements, articulates a distinctly Lutheran response to current social realities and concerns. Social statements of the ELCA are not binding on the individual consciences of ELCA members, but rather serve as guide for policies and practices of the church and foundation for addressing the stated issues in the public square.

A wide range of topics are covered in this statement. Among them are marriage, family, protecting children and youth, sexuality and the self, friendship, commitment and sexuality, adult cohabitation, and sexuality and social responsibility. However, most attention has been given to one portion of this document, “Lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” Here are some snippets from that section of the document:

This church...

- opposes all forms of verbal or physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation;
- supports legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services;
- calls upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection;
- acknowledges that consensus does not exist concerning how to regard same-gender committed relationships;
- does 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;
- seeks responsible actions that serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the conscience-bound beliefs of others;
- on the basis of “the bound conscience,” will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world;
- 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;
- calls for mutual respect in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community; and
- commits itself to continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect.

Note: This social statement does not address specific implications for blessing (or not) lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships or the rostering (or not) of persons in such relationships. Building on a foundation of Lutheran Christian theology and biblical interpretation, the statement highlights differences of perspective in the church on these matters and emphasizes pastoral concern and the honoring of one another’s bound consciences.

Recommendation on Ministry Policies

Four recommendations were adopted regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships and the rostering of people in such relationships. These recommendations call for action on the part of the various expressions of the ELCA. In some ways, they attempt to provide ways for the church to express commitments and perspectives articulated in the social statement in its own policies and practices. The recommendations were adopted in the order listed here, after what was number 3 was moved to number 1. A majority (not 2/3) of those voting was required for adoption.

- 1. In the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commits itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.** (Yes – 771; No – 230)

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Wengert's reflections on "bound conscience" are included at the end of this material. This focus on bearing each other's burdens, loving our neighbor, and respecting one another's conscience (when consciences are bound to differing conclusions by scripture, tradition, and reason) takes seriously St. Paul's assertions that the body of Christ may be wounded by deep differences and that in the grace of God underneath these differences we are nevertheless one in Christ. As scripture and the great liturgies of the church remind us, even – and especially? – through these very wounds the goodness and glory of God can be made known. Bearing one another's burdens, loving one another, and respecting others' bound, yet differing, conscience may be means of this grace among individuals, within congregations, and among the various expressions of this church.
- 2. The ELCA commits itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.** (Yes – 619; No – 402)

The social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" calls on all members and congregations of the ELCA to care for and support same-gender couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection. This resolution, however, does not require any congregation to do anything to recognize, support, or hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships liturgically or in other aspects of its life as a congregation. This resolution does, however, provide permission for congregations who sense a call to formally recognize, support and hold accountable such relationships to find ways to do so. Decisions should include a wide array of congregational leadership and include intentional prayer, study, and conversation among members of the congregation. Again, honoring one another's individual and corporate bound consciences are important as each local community of faith responds as faithfully as it can in discerning the call of God's Spirit in their context.
- 3. The ELCA commits itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.** (Yes – 559; No – 451)

This resolution opens the door; resolution #4 begins to map the way through the door. A well-established and effective churchwide process of discernment regarding rostered ministry has been in place and has served the church well for many years. Very little about these foundational processes of candidacy and rostering is likely to change. Rather, following the processes outlined in Resolution #4 the church across its various expressions will provide publicly accountable ways in which people in the relationships described may enter into these processes and, if approved, be considering for call and rostering. Please

note that it is not the practice of this church to compel or force congregations to call rostered leaders that they discern are not appropriate leaders for them. Synod offices, including bishops, will continue to honor the bound consciences of congregations – and invite congregations to honor the bound consciences of others – while engaging in genuine discernment with one another.

4. The fourth recommendation has 8 “resolved” sections that were adopted (Yes – 667; No – 307). This rehearsal of the recommendations has been edited for simplicity and focus. The full document, as well as other related materials, can be found at <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly.aspx>
 - a. **The ELCA calls upon its members to commit themselves to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree regarding decisions on the call and rostering of individuals in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, in this church and with churches ecumenically and globally;**
 - b. **The ELCA declares its intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making regarding the approving or disapproving in candidacy and the extending or not extending of a call to rostered service of a person who is otherwise qualified and who is living or contemplates living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship;**
 - c. **The ELCA will make provision in its policies to eliminate the prohibition of rostered service by members who are in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships;**
 - d. **The ELCA will make provision in its policies to recognize the conviction of members who believe that this church should not call or roster people in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship;**
 - e. **The ELCA churchwide units will develop appropriate guidelines for a process by which congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization could hold people publicly accountable in their relationships who are in or contemplate being in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships and who seek to be on rosters of this church;**
 - f. **The ELCA will develop appropriate amendments to “Definition and Guidelines for Discipline” and appropriate amendments to the “Vision and Expectations” document and the Candidacy Manual to accomplish the intent of this resolution;**
 - g. **Additional policies will be developed, as necessary, so that those whom this church holds responsible for making decisions about fitness for rostered ministry in general and for call to a particular specific ELCA ministry may discern, and have guidance in discerning, the fitness for ministry of a member living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship;**
 - h. **The ELCA will continue to trust its established processes and those to whom it has given the responsibility to discern who should and should not be rostered or called to public ministry in this church.**

Implementation of these adopted recommendations will take some time. There will be almost no immediate changes in practices related to candidacy, rostering and call. A significant amount of work lies ahead in implementing these now adopted recommendations. For example:

- Leaders and staff of various units of the ELCA churchwide structure, the Conference of Bishops, and the Church Council of the ELCA, along with synod leadership and others will pray, study, consult and converse to address concerns raised in Resolution #4, including, but not limited to the following:
 - Candidacy, call and rostering processes and policies need to be reviewed, discussed and amended.
 - Guidelines and processes for “public accountability” (including a variety of documents, for example) need to be discussed, agreed upon and approved.
- Each synod, in partnership with churchwide staff and among its own broad base of leadership and membership, needs to explore the implications of concepts like “structured flexibility” and establish structures, policies and practices most appropriate in the synod within the context of churchwide structures, policies and practices.
- Each congregation that desires to do so will engage in prayer, study and conversation to discern their role in recognizing, supporting, and holding publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships, as well as their openness to calling rostered leaders who are in such relationships.
- In this synod, we will cultivate conversation with synod leadership, rostered leadership and congregations as, together, we live into bearing one another’s burdens, loving our neighbors, honoring each other’s bound consciences, and stewarding significant changes in the life of this church.

Along the way, we will continue, by God’s grace in Christ, to follow established policies and practices and work with and accompany one another in humility and compassion, adhering to our shared mission, vision and core values.

We empower, equip, and encourage the people of God to make Christ known in the hope that every person will be a missionary, every pastor a mission director and every congregation a mission center. Along the way we are Christ-centered and collaborative, we trust and take risks. We value communication and remain interconnected with compassion, commitment and faithfulness.

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Remarks Concerning “Bound Conscience”

presented to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly by the Rev. Dr. Timothy J. Wengert

One of the greatest legacies that the early Lutheran reformers bestowed upon the entire Christian church is what we are calling “respect for the bound conscience of the neighbor.” This notion came up in several different contexts in Martin Luther’s own lifetime. Thus, when standing before the Emperor, confessing his faith in 1521, Luther begged his accusers to show him from Scripture and clear reason that he was wrong, but if they could not, his conscience was bound to the Scripture passages about God’s mercy in Christ. But Luther had already made the same plea in October 1518, when he stood in Augsburg before the pope’s representative, Cardinal Cajetan. It is there that we discover that this appeal to the Cardinal to deal with him mercifully was actually an appeal to Luther’s pastoral and spiritual superior not to violate his conscience by merely dismissing his arguments and what he held to be central to the Christian faith.

There is a second way in which “the bound conscience” came up in the Reformation and it dealt with very specific practical, ethical dilemmas, similar in some ways to those dealt with by St. Paul in Romans and 1 Corinthians. The reformers knew that they could not simply act like the pope and decree that people obey them. Indeed, while Luther was in protective custody at the Wartburg Castle, the Wittenbergers attempted a coercive approach to Reform, making people do things that violated their conscience, including forcing lay people to receive both bread and wine at communion. Luther came back and, not by force but by persuasive preaching, got the Wittenberg church to respect those who were not at the same place as they were. As a result, communion in one kind remained an option for the churches in Saxony for fifteen years after the time Luther returned home. Later in his ministry, Luther addressed other issues, including war and peace, or marriage and divorce, using the same appeal to balance, fairness, and pastoral care.

Now, we could view Paul’s comments about meat sacrificed to idols or Luther’s problem with the laity receiving bread and wine as minor things. In the first instance, the question was whether such behavior broke the first commandment, not to worship other gods—hardly a small matter—and in the second instance it had to do with Luther being willing to set aside a command of Christ (“Drink of this ALL of you!”) for the sake of conscience. These are small things now precisely because these pastors of the church treated all consciences with respect.

We find echoes of this principle in the Augsburg Confession, in the discussion of fasting. The reformers outline their reasons for overturning the prevalent rules about fasting for several different reasons: the rules obscured Christ’s grace, they confused human practices for God’s commands to care for the neighbor, and, “In the third place, such traditions turned out to be a heavy burden to consciences. For it was not possible to keep all the traditions, and yet people thought that keeping them was required for true service to God. Gerson writes that many fell into despair doing this. Some even committed suicide because they had heard nothing about the comfort of Christ’s grace.” As important as the first two reasons were, the confessors insisted that *consciencies* also needed care and respect from the entire church.

It is precisely this concern that lies at the heart of our proposal. Respect for the bound conscience does not mean that one can simply declare one’s conscience to be bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture, and then make everybody else deal with it. Respecting bound conscience is not a form of selfishness or an excuse to sin. Instead, it means that the very people who hold different, opposing viewpoints on a particular moral issue based upon their understanding of Scripture, tradition and reason must recognize the bound conscience of the other, of their neighbor who disagrees with them, and then work in such ways as not to cause that other person to reject the faith and fellowship in Word and Sacrament.

2009 Churchwide Assembly: Remarks on “Bound Conscience”