

*A Message on...*

## **Sexuality: Some Common Convictions**

*as adopted by the Church Council of the  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on November 9, 1996.*

*Messages of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, adopted by the Church Council, are intended to focus attention and action on timely, pressing matters of concern to this church and society. They do not establish new policy for this church, but build upon previously adopted policy positions, especially from social statements.<sup>1</sup>*

*The wider context for this message is the continuing ferment in our society regarding sexuality and sexual behavior. The more specific context is the considerable amount of discussion and debate that has occurred throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America during the past few years in response to three study documents on sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Differences and disagreements were at times sharp, especially regarding homosexuality. Plans to present a social statement on sexuality to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly were postponed. However, these discussions also indicated that on many aspects of sexuality there are widely-shared convictions. In 1995, a report to the Churchwide Assembly and an action of the Church Council called for the development of a message on sexuality addressing “those areas for which there appears to be consensus within this church.”*

*This message builds upon predecessor church statements,<sup>3</sup> as well as actions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It presents some convictions regarding sexuality on which there generally seems to be theologically-based agreement within this church. It is not a social statement, nor should it be seen as moving toward new policy positions. Its purpose is to provide guidance for members of our church, and as a public witness in the wider society.*

### **GOD'S CREATION AND NEW CREATION**

Scripture is the source and norm of our proclamation, faith, and life as a church. In Scripture we read that God created humankind male and female and “...behold it was very good” (Gen. 1:27, 31). Sexuality is a mysterious, life-long aspect of human relationships. Through sexuality, human beings can experience profound joy, purpose, and unity, as well as deep pain, frustration, and division.

Human sexuality was created good for the purposes of expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure. Yet it has been marred by sin, which alienates us from God and others. This results in expressions of sexuality that harm persons and communities.

Because human sexuality is a powerful, primal force in personal and communal life, both church and society seek to order sexual expectations and expression. God’s Law serves this purpose by providing guidance and exposing sinfulness. For example, the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17) have implications for sexuality:

- ◆ sexuality is placed in perspective (First Commandment);
- ◆ family relationships are to be honored and nurtured (Fourth Commandment);
- ◆ destructive abuses of power that harm others are prohibited (Fifth Commandment);
- ◆ marriage is upheld and supported as a sacred union and social institution (Sixth Commandment);
- ◆ truth-telling is essential in all relationships (Eighth Commandment);
- ◆ sexual desire that lures one away from spouse or family is condemned (Tenth Commandment).

Christ’s death and resurrection inaugurated God’s new creation. Christians enter into this new creation and “die” to sin through baptism. As Christ was raised, so we walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:1-4). As sexual beings, we are called to a life of responsible freedom in God’s new creation, while still struggling with how our sexuality is captive to sin. We live in the tension between the old age of sin, bondage, and death, and the new age of the Gospel’s grace, promise, and freedom.

For Christians, the human body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Living in the power of the Spirit, we are called to avoid behaviors that harm or devalue ourselves and others, such as immoral sexual behavior (1 Cor. 5:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21). Through words and actions, Christians seek to build up one another and the whole Christian community. The law of love—“you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14)—binds Christians together in anticipation of the fullness of God’s reign.

Through baptism, we have been received into the body of Christ and welcomed into the Lord’s family.<sup>4</sup> God’s gracious embrace through Christ is at the heart of the Church’s welcome to all to participate together in its life.

Mindful of the sin to which all succumb, Christians are called to:

- ◆ *respect* the integrity and dignity of all persons, whatever their age, gender, sexual orientation, or marital status;
- ◆ *discern* and provide guidance for what it means to live responsibly as sexual beings;
- ◆ *support* through prayer and counsel those facing questions about their sexuality;
- ◆ *heal* those who have been abused or violated, or whose relationships are broken.

We live in various relationships, all of which are affected by the physiological, psychological, and social aspects of our sexual identity. People of all ages need information and experience to understand and responsibly live out their sexual identity in the varied relationships of their lives—as child or parent, sister or brother, spouse, friend, co-worker, neighbor, or stranger. This church affirms the importance of ordering society and educating youth and adults so that all might live in these relationships with mutual respect and responsibility.

## Single adults

Single adults vary widely in age and life circumstances. Some persons intentionally choose to remain single, which St. Paul commended as a Christian vocation (1 Cor. 7:8, 32-35). Others yearn to be married. For many adults, singleness is a temporary period prior to marriage. Still others become single again after having been married.

The church is to be a loving, supportive community for single persons. Language and practices that demean or exclude them are to be avoided. This church seeks to be a place where, as sexual beings, single adults can find guidance for their particular spiritual, ethical, psychological, and social issues. Knowing that they are loved by God can help single persons to be accepting of themselves and others. As a community of encouragement and healing, the church's acceptance and support of single persons is important as they experience growth, change, and disappointments in their relationships.

## Marriage

Marriage is a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman. In marriage, two persons become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:4-6; Mk. 10:6-9; Eph. 5:31), a personal and sexual union that embodies God's loving purpose to create and enrich life. By the gift of marriage God “founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come.”<sup>5</sup>

Marriage provides a structure of security and stability within which spouses may fully enjoy and risk sexual expression. The binding legal contract of marriage reinforces its “staying power” when it is threatened by sin. Within marriage, spouses can learn to exercise mutual, faithful love.

Christians yearn for marriages that are loving and life-giving. In the intimacy of marriage, spouses can learn to share feelings and fears, to listen deeply, and to respect the differences of the other. Being loved and accepted by God helps them to love and accept one another. Rather than one dominating the other, each spouse seeks to empower and encourage the other.

All marriages fall short of intentions. Some marriages are not safe spaces, but places where spouses or children are abused. Intimacy and sexual pleasure often are absent. A marriage grows and changes over time through experiences of humor and playfulness, brokenness and healing, failure and accomplishment, forgiveness and renewal.

In the growth, changes, and disappointments of a marriage, the counsel and support of the Church is important. Premarital instruction can help a couple to prepare for the covenant they are entering. During the first few years of a marriage, the guidance and support of the Christian community can help a couple to adjust and set healthy patterns for their relationship. Those more recently married can learn much from those whose marriages have grown and been tested through the years. Throughout a marriage, the ministry of the Church should assist the couple to discern and address their shortcomings, and to seek forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life.

The purpose of marriage goes beyond the intimacy and companionship it provides the couple. The wider community is symbolically present when a couple publicly exchanges vows. Witnesses pledge to support the marriage, and those exchanging vows are reminded that their marriage will affect the wider community. They are to extend themselves for the sake of others.

## Responsible procreation and parenting

Conceiving, bearing, adopting, and rearing children can be wondrous and challenging ways through which a couple participates in God's creation and new creation. Sexual intercourse between a woman and a man can bring into being the mystery of a new human life. New reproductive technologies have opened further possibilities for conceiving and bearing children. Yet, such technologies also pose complex ethical questions.<sup>6</sup> This church seeks to be a community that provides spiritual support and assists persons in their deliberations on these matters.

When a woman and man join their bodies sexually, both should be prepared to provide for a child, should conception occur. When that is not their intention, the responsible use of safe, effective contraceptives is expected of the male and the female.<sup>7</sup> Respect and sensitivity should also be shown toward couples who do not feel called to conceive and/or rear children, or who are unable to do so.

As children and youth grow in their baptismal identity, it is important that they learn to love and respect one another and the power of their sexuality. Youth need the support and guidance of the church to resist cultural and peer pressures that encourage sexual intercourse prior to marriage. Open and honest discussion of sexual questions is to be encouraged, in ways that communicate

God's guidance, forgiveness, and ongoing care. As a church, we affirm the importance of education about sexuality that emphasizes respect, mutuality, responsibility, and abstinence outside of marriage. Such education should begin in the home, and continue in congregations, schools, and other community settings.

Rearing children requires a stable, secure environment of emotional, social, spiritual, and material support and nurture. Good child rearing can occur in different parenting arrangements; it is most likely to occur in the context of an enduring, loving marriage with the support of extended family, congregation, and community. If a marriage ends, both parents carry continuing responsibility for the well-being of their children.

### The ending of a marriage

Regrettably, some marriages end in divorce. Divorce is tragic, a consequence of human sinfulness. It is a serious breach in the community God intends for marriage (Mk. 10:9). In some situations, however, divorce may be the better option. Continuing some marriages may be destructive and abusive to those involved. In such cases, those involved should examine their responsibilities for the breakdown of the marriage. Confession and God's forgiveness bring healing and new life to persons who divorce.

The church is called to proclaim God's intention for the permanence of marriage *and* to minister compassionately to those who suffer as a result of divorce. The church should be a community of care and hope for those who divorce, rather than blaming, ostracizing, or being indifferent to their needs. The Gospel promises healing through the Holy Spirit's presence in the Church's ministry of Word and Sacraments.

Remarriage can be an opportunity to use wisdom gained from the past to create a new relationship of loving commitment and joy. Those considering remarriage should seek counsel from pastors and other professionals that enables them to assess their previous marriage and prepare for the unique challenges facing a new marriage and family.

### SOME MISUSES OF SEXUALITY

Sin violates what God intends for sexuality. It harms and demeans persons and relationships. This church opposes...

**Adultery:** In adultery, one abandons the sacred commitment made to a spouse and becomes sexually intimate with another person. Adultery is sinful because it breaks the trust between two people, disrupts their bond of marriage,

and violates the partner. When it is secretive, it also can involve deceitfulness, lying, and hypocrisy. Only repentance, honest work, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the power of the Holy Spirit can heal such wounds.

**Abuse:** Abuse can be physical, verbal, psychological, or emotional. Sexual abuse is the sinful use of power to dominate or control another person sexually. Victims of abuse are vulnerable because of their age, status, and emotional or physical condition. All forms of abuse are sinful—whether heterosexual or homosexual, whether by a spouse, family member, person in authority, date, acquaintance, or stranger.

- ◆ Rape and other forms of non-consensual sexual activity are sinful—whether this occurs in the home, on a date, at work, on the street, or in prison. Coercion, threats, intimidation, and manipulation are inappropriate responses to “no.”
- ◆ Trust and confidence are betrayed when a person of greater age or status manipulates one who is younger or more vulnerable to engage in sexual acts. Such acts are not mutual because of the power differences involved. This includes the sexual abuse of children and the sexual exploitation of clients by professionals or parishioners by clergy. Those who engage in such conduct sin against God and against the persons who are their victims.
- ◆ Sexual harassment is another way sexuality is used to hurt or control. Harassing words or behavior interfere with wholesome interaction and create an offensive, hostile, or intimidating environment in which to work, learn, live, or worship. All forms of verbal or physical harassment are sinful and must be confronted.

**Promiscuity:** Having casual sexual relations is sinful because this does not proceed from or contribute to respect, intimacy, and care of the other. Promiscuity is inconsistent with our identity as Christians (1 Cor. 6:12-20). Being sexually active in order to be popular or only to gratify sexual desire is morally wrong.

**Prostitution:** Prostitution is sinful because it involves the casual buying and selling of “sex,” often in demeaning and exploitative ways. Prostitutes and their patrons endanger their own health and that of others. Prostitution usually arises from and contributes to a cycle of personal, economic, and social difficulties. This church abhors the dramatic global rise in “sex traffic” of young girls and boys, who are exploited sexually for the sake of economic gain.

**Practices that spread sexually-transmitted diseases:** Irresponsible, unprotected sexual contact can expose sexual partners to incurable and fatal sexually-transmitted diseases. Sexual practices that result in physical harm to another are sinful and must be countered. Education about sexuality should emphasize monogamy, abstinence, and responsible sexual behavior, as well as

practices intended to prevent the transmission of disease during sexual intercourse. This church supports efforts to prevent, cure, and care for those afflicted with such diseases.<sup>8</sup>

**Pornography:** Pornography is sinful because it depicts sexuality in ways that are violent and/or demeaning. It asserts that sexual pleasure comes from humiliating, exploiting, or breaking down a person's resistance. Human beings are treated as objects of lust. Those who pose for such material, those who view it, and the general public become the victims of pornography.<sup>9</sup> Positive depictions of human sexuality, acceptance of one's own sexuality, and the cultivation of healthy sexual attitudes help to resist the lures of pornography.

**Sexuality in media and advertising:** Much of the media today contains explicit sexual references and behavior emphasizing sexual gratification apart from marriage. Damaging stereotypes of male and female sexuality also are perpetuated. Advertisers use the allure of sexuality to sell products. Sexuality becomes captive to the interests of money, power, and social status. Such manipulation of sexuality is sinful and opposed by this church. This church encourages the media to communicate expressions of sexuality that honor marriage and promote mutual respect, responsibility, and commitment to one another.

Although this church vigorously opposes the abuse of sexuality, not everything considered sinful should necessarily be made a civil offense.<sup>10</sup> This church supports policies and laws that foster justice, mercy, equality of opportunity, and the protection of basic human rights.<sup>11</sup>

## THE SUSTAINING POWER OF GOD'S GRACE

As Lutheran Christians, we seek God's will for sexual expression while also keeping the grace of God at the heart of our common life. This means undertaking all of our commitments to each other—including sexual relationships—with a sense of our life as a gift, with God's help to keep our promises, and with a deep sense of the sin that persists. The mercies of God continually sustain and undercut any simple division of the righteous from the unrighteous (Rom. 1:18 - 3:20).

On some matters of sexuality, there are strong and continuing differences among us. As we discuss areas where we differ, the power of the Holy Spirit can guide and unite us. Trust in the Gospel brings together people whose differences over sexuality ought not be a basis for division. We pray for the grace to avoid unfair judgment of those with whom we differ, the patience to listen to those with whom we disagree, and the love to reach out to those from whom we may be divided.

To a world obsessed with sexual self-fulfillment, divided by differences over sexuality, and weary of how sexuality is abused, the message of the grace of God lightens our burdens, lifts our spirits, renews our commitments, and reminds us of the deepest basis for mutual respect—the love of God we have in Jesus Christ.

## ENDNOTES

1. From "Messages on Social Issues," as adopted by the ELCA Church Council in 1989.
2. "Human Sexuality and the Christian Faith" [a study] (ELCA Division for Church in Society, 1991); "The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective" [first draft of a social statement] (ELCA Division for Church in Society, 1993); "Human Sexuality: Working Draft" [a possible social statement] (ELCA Division for Church in Society, 1994). See also, "A Collection of Responses from ELCA Academicians and Synodical Bishops to 'The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective'" (ELCA Division for Church in Society, 1994). None of the above documents has been adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
3. "Sex, Marriage, and Family" (Lutheran Church in America, 1970); "Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior" (The American Lutheran Church, 1980); "Teachings and Practice on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage" (The American Lutheran Church, 1982).
4. "Holy Baptism," Lutheran Book of Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, 1978), 125.
5. "Marriage," Lutheran Book of Worship, 203.
6. In separate pamphlets of the Procreation Ethics Series (1986), individual authors raise some considerations related to artificial insemination, prenatal diagnosis, in vitro fertilization, and surrogate motherhood. (Copies are available from the Department for Studies of the ELCA Division for Church in Society.)
7. "Abortion," a social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1991).
8. See the ELCA Message, "AIDS and the Church's Ministry of Caring" (1989).
9. "Pornography," a social statement of The American Lutheran Church (1985).
10. This distinction has been made in many Lutheran documents, such as, "Abortion" (1991).
11. "Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior," 7.

## ORDERING INFORMATION

Copies of this message are available in packets of 10 at a cost of \$1.00 per packet plus postage and handling from: Augsburg Fortress Distribution Service (800/328-4648), 426 S. Fifth St., Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440.

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