

Frequently Asked Questions on the Two Reconsiderations of Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

Background

What is Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust?

Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust is a social statement adopted by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly with a 2/3 vote of assembly members. ELCA **social statements** are official teaching and policy documents that provide broad frameworks for teaching and for discerning on social issues in the context of faith and life.

Why are elements of Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust being reconsidered?

The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized two reconsiderations (Memorial C3 and Motion K-see addendum below) of the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (www.elca.org/socialstatements), both by larger than two-thirds majorities. The assembly did not authorize a reconsideration of the whole statement or dictate a particular outcome. Both reconsiderations were requested because of legal and social changes since the adoption of *Human Sexuality* in 2009.

What is the first reconsideration?

The focus of Reconsideration #1 is editorial, which means the task force will look at small, clarifying word changes only. As the authorization indicates, civil law governing same-sex marriages, public acceptance of such marriages, and diversity of family configurations have changed dramatically since 2009. The most obvious example is the 2015 Supreme Court decision that makes the marriage of any two individuals the law of the land. Given the legal and social changes since adoption of *Human Sexuality*, the task force will examine editorial questions such as whether the statement should use 'marriage' for all couples.

What is the second reconsideration?

The focus of Reconsideration #2 is substantive rather than editorial, examining the coexistence in the 2009 statement of four different but valid convictions that Lutherans can faithfully hold about same-gender relationships (the shorthand for this concept is "bound conscience"). Again, the authorization sets in motion a reconsideration of these ideas but does not determine the outcome. The outcome must align with the main arguments of the 2009 statement and will follow the standard ELCA protocol for reconsideration.

Process and Protocol

What is a “reconsideration”?

Reconsideration is the technical term for the process by which the ELCA can think again about specific elements in a social statement. Reconsideration is not a wholesale rejection of a previous social statement. Instead, this process allows the church to thoughtfully, prayerfully, and communally re-examine particular parts of a social teaching document.

What is the protocol for the reconsiderations?

ELCA social teaching and its development are governed by “Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns,” available at download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies_and_Procedures.pdf. The process for reconsideration begins with the selection of a task force and will follow the designated procedure through two cycles. Each cycle will end with possible proposals for a churchwide assembly to consider. The work is directed by Theological Ethics staff in the Office of the Presiding Bishop. Because all social statements are adopted by two-thirds vote or more, any changes also require two-thirds vote by a churchwide assembly. The entire social statement is not being reconsidered, only those sections specified by the action of the 2022 assembly.

What are the steps in each reconsideration cycle?

There are five designated steps and a possible sixth. One task force will address each reconsideration, one after the other.

- 1) In 2024 the ELCA Church Council will appoint a single task force of 12-15 individuals chosen through a public application/nomination process. (Applications become available in late October 2023.) Task forces are composed of ELCA members intentionally chosen for the diversity of their viewpoints, gender, sex, race/ethnicity, geography, age and other factors.
- 2) The task force will receive presentations by specialists and engage in study and conversation to probe the questions at hand.
- 3) For each reconsideration, the task force will provide a draft for public comment on any proposed wording changes and include a survey to collect public feedback.
- 4) Task force members review all public input, such as emails or responses to the draft, and then send a proposal to the ELCA Church Council.
- 5) The Church Council takes action on any proposal and forwards their recommended action to the 2025 Churchwide Assembly (Reconsideration #1) and to the 2028 Churchwide Assembly (Reconsideration #2) for action (two-thirds vote required).

- 6) A reconsideration cycle may include hearings, longer periods of discernment, or development of study resources if the task force considers any of these wise.

Will the task force gather comments and perspectives from across the church?

Yes! Members of the task force will review all emails and letters received and, as noted in step 3 above, there is a specific, extended public comment period based on a draft for each process.

Why will the process take so long?

ELCA protocol for reconsideration requires a period of approximately two years that allows widespread discernment and makes room for feedback from anyone who chooses to participate. Since there are two reconsiderations, the extended time is necessary to provide for the thorough study and churchwide discussion described above. In addition, the work of the task force for reconsideration begins while an existing task force is developing a social statement on civic life and faith for consideration by Churchwide Assembly 2025.

The Task Force

Will the task force represent a diversity of views?

Yes, task force members will include members from a diversity of backgrounds, contexts, and perspectives. Applicants and nominees will be evaluated, in part, to ensure a rich diversity of people from across the church.

How can I be part of the task force?

To be part of the task force, you can submit an online application here:

<https://forms.office.com/r/bBCqtBdhzG>. This form can also be used to nominate other people you think would be good candidates for the task force.

What This Means...and What It Doesn't

Does the 2009 statement still govern the official stance and practice of the ELCA?

Yes, the 2009 social statement still represents the official stance and practice of the ELCA, unless changes are adopted at a churchwide assembly.

Will the task force be reconsidering the whole 2009 social statement?

The 2022 Churchwide Assembly did not authorize a reconsideration of the whole social statement or dictate a particular outcome. The outcome must align with the main arguments of the 2009 statement and the process of reconsideration will follow standard ELCA procedure for churchwide discernment.

Addendum: Assembly 2025 Actions

Wording of Reconsideration #1 -- editorial (Memorial C3)

To authorize a social statement reconsideration to revise *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009) so that its wording reflects current church understanding, church policy, civil law, and public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender non-conforming couples in accordance with “Policies and Procedures of the ELCA for Addressing Social Concerns” (2018). While references would be reviewed throughout the whole statement, the following sections are designated for reconsideration as described here: [reference may be found at www.elca.org/socialstatements]

- “Marriage: shelter and context for trust” p. 15. This would not reconsider the idea of marriage as shelter and context for trust but would consider the import that marriage legally is now a covenant between two individuals;
- “Lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships” p. 18f. Revision here would not change this church’s current understanding that recognizes four identified positions of bound conscience within its life. p. 19, but would review wording about “publicly accountable, lifelong monogamous same-sex relationships” in light of public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender-non-conforming couples;
- “Loving families: ground and source for social trust” p. 21f. Review here would consider references to diversity of family configurations; and

To authorize the Office of the Presiding Bishop and Church Council to approve the parameters and expense budget of this process and identify the revenue source(s) to provide for this revision to be considered as early as the 2025 Churchwide Assembly.

Wording of Reconsideration #2 – substantive (Motion K)

To authorize a possible revision of the social statement on *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* which reconsiders the church’s current concept of the four positions of bound conscience. This revision would focus on pages 19-21 (“lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships”) and any other references to the four positions of bound conscience.