



# CONSCIENCE AND CONVERSATION:

*A STUDY DURING THE RECONSIDERATION OF THE SOCIAL  
STATEMENT HUMAN SEXUALITY: GIFT AND TRUST*



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

***I, THEREFORE, THE PRISONER IN THE LORD, BEG YOU TO WALK IN A MANNER WORTHY OF THE CALLING TO WHICH YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED, WITH ALL HUMILITY AND GENTLENESS, WITH PATIENCE, BEARING WITH ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE, MAKING EVERY EFFORT TO MAINTAIN THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE: THERE IS ONE BODY AND ONE SPIRIT, JUST AS YOU WERE CALLED TO THE ONE HOPE OF YOUR CALLING, ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM, ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL, WHO IS ABOVE ALL AND THROUGH ALL AND IN ALL.***

***—EPHESIANS 4:1-6***



In an increasingly polarized world, the unity and peace called for in Ephesians can seem unattainable. Yet we remain interconnected with all of creation through God, the “maker ... of all that is, seen and unseen,” and with one another in baptism.

Since 2022, the ELCA has been in the process of discerning two reconsiderations of the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, originally adopted in 2009. This process, handled in two stages, has been led by a diverse task force with members drawn from across the ELCA. The first reconsideration concluded in 2025, when the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted edits to the social statement that updated language in light of more recent ELCA social teachings and legal changes within the United States.

The second and current reconsideration looks at the subsection of the social statement that describes the range of four stances of conscience ELCA members may hold regarding same-gender sexual relationships. This is commonly described as “bound conscience.” This work is underway, and any proposed revisions will be brought to the 2028 Churchwide Assembly after an extended period of public comment and discernment.

We know that many in the church are anticipating with hope the result of this process. We also know that many in the church carry fear and worry into this process. As the ELCA begins communal discernment, this study is intended to help groups have open and constructive conversations about sexuality and conscience and to provide feedback to the task force as it drafts a revised social statement. Our hope is to help ELCA members navigate discussion faithfully, “bearing with one another in love.”

At the end of the study guide is a survey and instructions for you to submit comments to the task force. We pray that you will contribute to the discernment of the whole church through your responses.

In Christ,  
The ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality Reconsiderations



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FOR LEADERS</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>SESSION ONE: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO THE REFORMATION</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>ACTIVITY #1: WHAT UNITES LUTHERANS?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>OPTIONAL ACTIVITY</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>ACTIVITY #2: THREE STORIES</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>ACTIVITY #3: LESSONS FROM THE STORIES.</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>SESSION TWO: SEXUALITY AND THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>ACTIVITY #4: POINTS OF AGREEMENT WITHIN ELCA SOCIAL TEACHING</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>ACTIVITY #5: RECONCILIATION AND TRANSFORMATION.</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b>SURVEY INFORMATION AND FEEDBACK</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>40</b>

## FOR LEADERS

Discussions about sexuality require an atmosphere of safety, mutuality, and respect. As you prepare for the conversation, take time to set expectations with the group. Open each session with prayer and a hymn or song, and be open to pausing for prayer or quiet reflection throughout the session. Each session of this study includes suggestions for prayers, Bible readings and hymns.

While this study is structured as two sessions, we encourage you to set aside time for four sessions, if possible. This will allow ample time for conversation.

A group covenant can help the group set expectations for each member. Suggestions for setting group expectations can be found in Appendix 4.

Please invite each participant to fill out the online feedback form linked at the end of this study and to share their perspectives with the task force. This will help shape the task force's work on the social statement. You can also email your thoughts, concerns and questions to [Reconsiderations@elca.org](mailto:Reconsiderations@elca.org).



# SESSION ONE: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO THE REFORMATION

## GETTING STARTED

### *Introduction to Session One*

In a time of deep social and political division, it can be easy for us to believe that we can't agree on anything. We tend to focus our time and energy on the beliefs, political affiliations and behaviors with which we disagree. Lutherans have never shied away from the reality that human beings, including Lutheran Christians, can and do disagree about many things. There are times when disagreement and even conflict can be healthy and important for the pursuit of a more just world.

*You can divide Session One into two sessions by ending the first half with the Optional Activity and beginning the second half with Activity #2.*

### *Flow of Session One*

- Welcome and Introductions
- Opening Hymn Suggestion
- Opening Bible Reading
- Opening Prayer
- Introduction to Reconsiderations Process and Purpose of Study
- Group Expectations
- Activity #1
- Optional Activity: A Joint Statement
- Activity #2
- Activity #3
- Closing Prayer

### **Welcome and Introductions**

*Welcome the group to the study. Invite each participant to share their name and their hopes for the sessions.*

### **Opening Hymn Suggestion**

“The Church’s One Foundation” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 654)

### **Opening Bible Reading**

Ephesians 4:1-6

### **Opening Prayer**

Most high and holy God, pour out upon us your one and unifying Spirit, and awaken in every confession of the whole church a holy hunger and thirst for unity in you; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (From *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 73.)

## *Introduction to Reconsiderations Process and Purpose of Study*

The ELCA addresses social issues in many ways, including through the development of social teaching documents. A social statement is one type of social teaching document. Social statements address complex issues or big institutions, such as human sexuality, the economy or health care. Requests for new social statements come from congregations through synods and must be authorized by an ELCA churchwide assembly.

A task force leads the process for developing a social statement. Throughout the process, the task force listens to as many ELCA members as possible, gathering feedback, questions and comments that help to shape a proposed statement. The task force also develops study materials and a draft for ELCA members to comment on and share their perspectives.

Once adopted by an ELCA churchwide assembly, a social statement becomes official teaching of the ELCA. That doesn't mean that every individual Lutheran must agree with everything in a social statement. It does mean that the church's collective witness and policy will be based on the social teaching. When we speak as church together, social statements guide our witness. Church policies are also grounded in social teaching.

A churchwide assembly can also authorize reconsideration of a section of a social statement. A reconsideration allows the church to revisit an older social statement and discern together whether changes might be needed. Of course, the church can also determine that no changes are needed.

The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized two reconsiderations of a subsection of the 2009 social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. A diverse task force of ELCA members from different backgrounds, perspectives, identities and geographies was seated to lead both reconsiderations. (See Appendix 1 for the full text of the two reconsiderations.)

The first reconsideration, an editorial reconsideration, allowed the ELCA to make editorial changes to update language in the text to ensure consistency with more recent social teachings and with changes to civil law regarding marriage. These edits were adopted by the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

The second reconsideration is a substantive reconsideration of a subsection of the social statement. That section describes a range of four different convictions that Lutherans may faithfully hold about same-gender relationships (the shorthand for this concept is "bound conscience"). This process is underway, and the task force is directed to bring a proposed text to the churchwide assembly in 2028.

This process requires the faithful and prayerful discernment of people from across the ELCA. The end of the process is not predetermined. The study you are using now is intended to aid the church in discernment and to gather your input to shape the process.



## Timeline of *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*

- 2009** — *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* is adopted by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly.
- 2022** — The ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorizes two reconsiderations of the social statement.
- 2024** — The task force is seated by the ELCA Church Council.
- 2025** — The first reconsideration, a series of edits to a section of the social statement, is adopted by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly.
- 2026** — The task force publishes study materials for congregations.
- 2027** — A draft of revisions to the social statement will be released for public comment. The task force will consider these comments in revising the draft.
- 2028** — The ELCA Churchwide Assembly will take action on any proposed revisions.

### Group Expectations

The discussions in these sessions can be sensitive. Following the opening hymn, Bible reading and prayer, share with the group your own hopes for this session. (Example: “This will be a time of learning and dialogue; the conversations will be life-giving and thought-provoking; each participant will be open to the perspective of others.”) On a physical or digital whiteboard or on a sheet of paper, invite the participants to suggest expectations for one another. Including these expectations in a group covenant that all participants agree to follow can be helpful. Some examples of expectations are included in Appendix 4.

## ACTIVITY #1 - WHAT UNITES LUTHERANS?

*If you are leading this activity in person, copy the list of Faith Statements below, cut along the dotted lines and scatter the statements on a table. (For larger groups, you may want multiple copies.) If you are leading the activity online, share your screen and then follow the remaining instructions.*

Disagreement is normal in any human community, including in the church. Some disagreements arise from our different backgrounds or experiences. Some disagreements may seem trivial whereas others can seem insurmountable. Some disagreements come from miscommunication whereas other disagreements stem from deeply held beliefs.

Invite someone to read Ephesians 4:1-6 (see below).

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians pleads for Christians in Ephesus to treat each other in “a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”



“I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

—Ephesians 4:1-6



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are some of the values or behaviors mentioned in the verses?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Does the writer of Ephesians ever ask the people in the church to agree with one another about every issue? Why is that important?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

When we center our attention only on disagreement, we can miss the many things on which we agree. The writer of Ephesians stresses the church's attention to God as the source of the church's unity. The writer also highlights the shared vocation to which each person in the church is called. This focus can open our hearts to the many things we hold in common and to the behaviors and values that will support trusting and life-centered relationships. As Lutherans, grounded in the basic teachings of our shared faith, we agree on many things.

The points of agreement in the table below are drawn from multiple sources, including the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. In the social statement, the ELCA has affirmed that "faithful people can and sometimes will come to different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action" when it comes to human sexuality (p. 10). However, ELCA social teachings also note the many areas in which the ELCA has come to agreement.

## FAITH STATEMENTS

We can agree that “Christians believe that God is the creator of all that is and that this ongoing handiwork is good, good, and very good!” (*Human Sexuality*, p. 4) and that all human beings are created in the image of God as part of God’s good creation (Genesis 1:31).

.....

We can agree that, as baptized followers of Jesus, “the foundation of Christian identity is what God has done for us through Christ” (*Human Sexuality*, p. 3).

.....

We can agree that “in the name of the God who creates every human being out of love ... human dignity is God’s gift to every person” (ELCA social message “Human Rights” [2017], p. 2).

.....

We can agree, and Lutherans confess, that we are trapped in sin, violating God’s trust and alienating ourselves from life-centered relationships with God and neighbor in our self-centeredness or self-denial (Genesis 3, *Human Sexuality*, p. 5).

.....

We can agree that “God does not abandon that which God loves” (*Human Sexuality*, p. 5). God saves, forever healing and transforming our relationships through the power of the crucified and risen Christ.

.....

We can agree that “we are saved by grace alone ... [which] means that there is nothing a person can do through his or her action that will create a right relationship with God. Only God’s grace can do that” (*Human Sexuality*, p. 2).

.....

We can agree that, in the unity of the Spirit, joined and knit together in the one body of Christ, we are called to love all our neighbors, being responsive to their needs through the love that God has first given us (Ephesians 4:1-6).

.....

We can agree that “because we are radically freed in Christ, we are called in that freedom to love and serve our neighbor as Christ loved and served us” (*Human Sexuality*, p. 4).





*Invite the participants to complete the steps below.*

Step 1: Take two or three minutes on your own to read and reflect quietly on this list of things upon which Lutheran Christians can agree in faith, especially as they relate to the questions of sexuality this church is considering. Which statements of agreement do you think are most important for you and the church to hold on to as we engage in this reconsideration process? Which are the most difficult for you to agree with and live out in the world right now? What in your life experience has made them difficult?

Step 2: Choose one of the statements from the scattered slips of paper. Turn to a partner and share the statements of faithful agreement that you think are most important for you and this church to hold on to as we engage in this reconsideration process. Discuss these questions with your partner: What effect do you think it would have on our conversations about sexuality if we made these core beliefs the glue that holds us together even amid disagreement? What are some practices that could remind the church of these central agreements of faith?

After the participants have completed steps 1 and 2, invite them to share highlights of their conversation with the larger group. Write down practices from step 2 and other key ideas on a large sticky note or whiteboard.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does the church's activity in the world reflect the statement you have chosen?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What might be at stake if the church could not agree on the statement you have chosen?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: A JOINT STATEMENT

*Provide printed or electronic copies of the quotations below to the participants.*

Though many beliefs unite Lutherans with each other and with other Christians, there are also beliefs or perspectives on which Christians from different communions disagree. Indeed the division of the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church stemmed from the sharp disagreements of the Reformation in the 1500s. Many of these disagreements are yet to be resolved.

In this activity, we will look at an example of dialogue across these disagreements. As you consider this example, think of the following question: How can a focus on what unites us as Christians help guide dialogue, even when disagreements remain unresolved?

This activity uses quotations from the 2016 “[Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation.](#)”<sup>1</sup>

### ***Background for Leaders***

Despite sharing affirmation of many beliefs, conflicts and disagreements between Christians continue, even to the present day. Yet, this unity in shared beliefs laid the foundation for more recent dialogues between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church and provides hope for increased collaboration and strengthened relationships in the future. This joint statement is an example of how a focus on what unites us, coupled with honesty about what divides us, can foster dialogue and renewed relationships among Christians.

*Read the following description of the joint statement:*

**Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, President of the Lutheran World Federation signed a Joint Statement on October 31, 2016, in which Catholics and Lutherans pledged to pursue their dialogue in order to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder them from reaching full unity. They also stressed their commitment to common witness on behalf of the poor, the needy and the victims of injustice. The Declaration was signed during the ecumenical prayer service held in Lund’s Lutheran Cathedral on the first day of the Pope’s visit to Sweden.<sup>2</sup>**

1. Pope Francis and Bishop Mounib Younan, “Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation,” Catholic Culture, October 31, 2016, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=11429>.

2. “Joint Statement.”

*Invite participants to read some or all of the following quotations from the joint statement:*

“With this Joint Statement, we express joyful gratitude to God for this moment of common prayer in the Cathedral of Lund, as we begin the year commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Fifty years of sustained and fruitful ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans have helped us to overcome many differences, and have deepened our mutual understanding and trust. At the same time, we have drawn closer to one another through joint service to our neighbours — often in circumstances of suffering and persecution. Through dialogue and shared witness we are no longer strangers. Rather, we have learned that what unites us is greater than what divides us.”



“...[W]e also confess and lament before Christ that Lutherans and Catholics have wounded the visible unity of the Church. Theological differences were accompanied by prejudice and conflicts, and religion was instrumentalized for political ends. Our common faith in Jesus Christ and our baptism demand of us a daily conversion, by which we cast off the historical disagreements and conflicts that impede the ministry of reconciliation. While the past cannot be changed, what is remembered and how it is remembered can be transformed.”



“We emphatically reject all hatred and violence, past and present, especially that expressed in the name of religion. Today, we hear God’s command to set aside all conflict. We recognize that we are freed by grace to move towards the communion to which God continually calls us.”



“We pray to God that Catholics and Lutherans will be able to witness together to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, inviting humanity to hear and receive the good news of God’s redeeming action. We pray to God for inspiration, encouragement and strength so that we may stand together in service, upholding human dignity and rights, especially for the poor, working for justice, and rejecting all forms of violence. God summons us to be close to all those who yearn for dignity, justice, peace and reconciliation.”



“As we recommit ourselves to move from conflict to communion, we do so as part of the one Body of Christ, into which we are incorporated through Baptism.”



“Rather than conflicts of the past, God’s gift of unity among us shall guide cooperation and deepen our solidarity. By drawing close in faith to Christ, by praying together, by listening to one another, by living Christ’s love in our relationships, we, Catholics and Lutherans, open ourselves to the power of the Triune God.”



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What “yearnings” does the joint statement name?

---

---

---

What do both Lutherans and Catholics say about their own roles in the disunity of the whole church?

---

---

---

What key principles or teachings should guide how Christians navigate deep disagreements, according to the joint statement?

---

---

---

Where or how do we experience disagreement as Christians, either with another person or as a church with other churches?

---

---

---

Why is it important to be honest about both our agreements and our disagreements with each other?

---

---

---

The joint statement reflects yearning for unity, but neither the Lutheran church nor the Catholic church lets go of its deepest beliefs. Dialogue across disagreement does not mean that either side must come to a quick or easy compromise. That would be a false form of unity. Instead the joint statement recognizes that these deep disagreements still exist and notes that the two churches commit to remaining in relationship, learning from each other and finding creative ways to “witness to the gospel.”

The next activity features three stories of people disagreeing in conscience within the church. What values or practices might the church today learn from the church in history about how to handle disagreement?

**Note to leader: If you are dividing Session One into two sessions, this is a good stopping point. Use the closing prayer for Session One or another prayer of your choice, then start with Activity #2 at your next session.**

## ACTIVITY #2: THREE STORIES <sup>3</sup>

### *Introduction to Activity #2*

The three stories in this activity illustrate important lessons about how to handle disagreement within the body of Christ. Though historical debates can often seem inconsequential or quaint, each story represents a significant issue. Questions about eating meat (Story #1) or drinking wine during Holy Communion (Story #3) were utterly divisive issues at the time that reflected people's deep concern about their relationship to God. At the same time, the stories reflect questions about moral action rather than salvation. In those cases, Christians are free to give priority to the well-being of the neighbor. There are multiple discussion questions after each story. You may select from these as time allows.

### MORAL ACTION AND FREEDOM

Lutherans believe that salvation is not dependent on human effort. We are saved by God's gift of grace. There are some beliefs Lutherans hold about God and salvation that are central to our faith as Lutherans and Christians. If salvation is not at stake in a particular question, such as questions about human sexuality and church practice, Christians are free to give priority to the neighbor's well-being, as the stories here describe.

3. Portions of this activity are drawn from the following sources: ELCA, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2025); Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer I*, and vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Fortress Press, 1999); and Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric in Its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Hendrickson, 2004).



### **Story #1: Eating Meat in Rome**

*Invite someone to read Romans 14:1-10. (You may want to provide printed or electronic copies to participants to read along as they listen.)*

*Allow for a moment of reflection, then invite someone to read the following story:*

The Christians in Rome in the first century faced a dilemma. As followers of Jesus, they had been expelled from the Jewish community in Rome, but many still felt connected to the beliefs and practices of the Roman Jewish community, including Jewish dietary practices. These dietary practices included careful preparation of meat to ensure it was ritually clean. A majority of Roman Christians, which included both Jews and Gentiles, weren't concerned with the ritual purity of food. A small group of Roman Christians, though, were religiously opposed to eating meat that might not have been prepared according to Jewish laws. They felt that eating meat would cause them to sin and threaten their relationship with God, so they avoided meat.

This conflict made fellowship a crisis of conscience. If meat was served, the consciences of the people whom St. Paul called "weak" (Romans 14:1) would be troubled. If meat wasn't served, the people who believed it was fine to eat meat would feel that their freedom in faith was violated.

In his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul agreed that there was no problem with eating the meat. But he told them not to violate the consciences of the "weak" by eating meat. They should avoid meat in community meals out of love for the people who would eat only vegetables.

On the other hand, Paul also told those who didn't eat meat that they shouldn't judge those who did. Both groups, he insisted, were doing what they did because of faith and "for the Lord." If they did not respect each other's consciences, they risked harming each other's faith — a far greater sin than eating meat or vegetables.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul goes even further, counseling Christians to abstain from eating food that had been sacrificed to idols if eating the food might harm another Christian's conscience: "Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge the weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed. But when you thus sin against brothers and sisters and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never again eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall" (1 Corinthians 8:9-13).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What stands out to you from the story?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Paul insists that both the people who eat meat and the people who avoid meat are acting out of faith and in gratitude to God. Yet Paul refers to one group as “weak” and implies that the other group is “strong.” What do you think he meant? How are the “weak” to be treated by the community?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What responsibilities do Christians have when exercising their “liberty” in Christ, according to Paul?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## Story #2: Martin Luther Is Questioned

In 1517, Martin Luther, a German monk, publicly posted his “95 Theses,” a series of statements accusing the pope and the Catholic Church of teachings that contradicted the gospel. A year later, Pope Leo X, furious at Luther and spurred on by Emperor Maximilian, sent his representative, Cardinal Cajetan (KAJH-eh-tin), to Augsburg, Germany.

Cajetan’s order was straightforward: get Luther to recant or have him arrested.

Cajetan promised Luther a fair hearing, even telling Luther that he would act as a “father,” with understanding and care. But Luther learned quickly that this wasn’t to be. In a 1518 letter, Luther assured Cajetan of his obedience to the pope and humbly acknowledged his willingness to recant if the cardinal could give him sound evidence from Scripture. However, Luther also shared the Bible passages that had bound his conscience to his teachings. “Convince me that I am reading Scripture wrong, and I will recant,” Luther seemed to say.

Luther’s letter did not attack Cajetan, nor did Luther obstinately refuse to listen to Cajetan or the pope. Instead Luther appealed to Cajetan as a penitent would to a priest, begging Cajetan to treat his conscience with gentleness: “I humbly beg your most reverend highness,” Luther wrote, “to deal leniently with me, to have compassion with my conscience, to show me how I may understand this doctrine differently, and not to compel me to revoke those things which I must believe according to my conscience.”<sup>4</sup>

Luther also appealed to Cajetan as his pastor to show compassion for his soul: “May it please your highness to intercede with our most holy lord, [Pope] Leo X, in my behalf so that he will not proceed against me with such stern rigor that he cast my soul into darkness, for I seek nothing but the light of truth and I am prepared to give up, change, or revoke everything if I am informed that these passages are to be understood in another sense. ... However, I do not want to be compelled to affirm something contrary to my conscience.”<sup>5</sup>

Luther’s pleas went unheeded, and he was excommunicated from the Catholic Church in 1521.

4. Martin Luther, “Proceedings at Augsburg” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. (Fortress Press, 1999), p. 274.

5. *Ibid.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What stands out about Luther's tone and approach in his letters? Was it surprising to read his appeals to Cardinal Cajetan?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What does Luther mean when he says his views are "bound" to his conscience? What seems to be the difference between being "bound" and being merely argumentative or unyielding?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Has there been a time when you felt torn between obedience and conscience? How did you respond?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What responsibilities do leaders have when confronting someone whose conscience is at stake? How might the ending of the story have changed if Cardinal Cajetan's response had been different?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### **Story #3: To Drink or Not to Drink**

As the Reformation church grew, it encountered numerous challenges in which beliefs about God and about the church and its practices overlapped. How were these new “protestant” churches to be organized? What practices from the Catholic Church should be kept, and what practices should be set aside?

One of the key controversies involved Holy Communion. Luther and the Reformers believed that Christians were commanded by Jesus to consume both the bread and the wine during Holy Communion. But that was a hard sell for deeply religious people who grew up learning that only a priest should drink the wine. Drinking the wine felt inappropriate, and their consciences were burdened by this new “freedom.”

In 1528, a group of nuns wrote to Philip Melanchthon, German Lutheran and leading theologian of the Reformation, and asked for permission to consume only the bread during Communion. Melanchthon, Luther and other reformers believed this was contrary to the clear command from Jesus to consume both bread and wine.

But Melanchthon, consulting with Luther, didn’t tell parish pastors to force people to drink the wine and violate their consciences. “No one,” he wrote, “is to be forced to believe, or driven by command or force from his unbelief, since God likes no forced service.” When people “out of weakness and terror of conscience rather than obstinacy cannot receive both kinds, one may allow these to take communion in one kind for the time being.”<sup>6</sup>

The teaching about communion, as important as it was, Melanchthon wrote, should be “temporarily postponed through Christian patience and love” lest the people afflicted by their conscience “feel they are made to sin.”<sup>7</sup>

Questions about Holy Communion, a sacrament in both Lutheran and Catholic churches, can be weighty and complex. Still today, many people seek pastoral guidance on questions about who is welcome at the table, how Holy Communion is offered and the meaning of the sacrament.

6. Philip Melanchthon, “Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony,” in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. (Fortress Press, 1999), p. 290-291.

7. Ibid.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What stands out to you from the story? What was surprising to you?

---

---

---

---

---

Melanchthon and the other reformers believed that Jesus had clearly commanded us to consume both the bread and the wine (Matthew 26:26-27). Why did Melanchthon insist on an exception for the nuns?

---

---

---

---

---

---

What do you think Melanchthon meant by “weakness and terror of conscience”? How was this different from a mere unwillingness to change?

---

---

---

---

---

---

Recall the story of Luther and Cajetan. How does Melanchthon’s approach reflect what Luther had hoped for from Cajetan?

---

---

---

---

---

---

What is the difference between “forced service” and obedience to God? In a crisis of conscience, why is it important to respect our own conscience and the consciences of others?

---

---

---

---

---

---



## ACTIVITY #3: LESSONS FROM THE STORIES

### *What Do the Stories Tell Us About Conscience?*

#### *Conscience Is ...*

**Carefully considered.** Conscience is not a “knee-jerk” reaction to a moral problem. The people who did not eat meat in Rome, Luther at Augsburg, and the nuns had carefully and prayerfully arrived at their beliefs, and they were bound by their consciences.

**Religious.** In each of the stories, conscience is about more than a single act. It concerns a person’s whole relationship to God and their deepest sense of who they are before God.

**Faithful and individual.** In the stories, conscience arises from an individual’s faith in God as revealed in the law, the Bible or church teaching. The plea in each story is for individuals to be treated with care and love. Luther’s plea to Cajetan is not on behalf of the whole Reformation. His plea is for loving treatment from one Christian to another.

**Humble.** Paul taught the Roman Christians to refrain from judging each other. Luther was open to being proven wrong. The nuns didn’t refuse the wine out of pride but out of faith and humility. Conscience doesn’t grant a person superior holiness or power. Being bound by our conscience also means recognizing that we might be wrong even if we cannot, in good conscience, act otherwise. As the stories point out, being “bound” does not mean being unyielding or unwilling to have a change of heart.

**Utterly serious.** Forcing someone to violate their conscience can have serious consequences for their faith, their sense of their relationship with God and their sense of personal identity. In each story, an appeal is made to treat another person’s conscience with love and compassion rather than derision or control.

## *The “Bound Conscience” in the Social Statement*

Invite participants to read aloud or silently the following section from the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*:

• The Apostle Paul testifies to conscience as the unconditional moral responsibility of the individual before God (Romans 2:15-16). In the face of different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action, the concept of “the conscience” becomes pivotal.

• When the clear word of God’s saving action by grace through faith is at stake, Christian conscience becomes as adamant as Paul, who opposed those who insisted upon circumcision (Galatians 1:8). In the same way, Luther announced at his trial for heresy, “Unless I am persuaded by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason ... I am conquered by the Scripture passages I have adduced and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.<sup>8</sup> I neither can nor desire to recant anything, when to do so against conscience would be neither safe nor wholesome” (WA 7:838; Luther’s Works 32:112).

• However, when the question is about morality or church practice, the Pauline and Lutheran witness is less adamant and believes we may be called to respect the bound conscience of the neighbor. That is, if salvation is not at stake in a particular question, Christians are free to give priority to the neighbor’s well-being and will protect the conscience of the neighbor, who may well view the same question in such a way as to affect faith itself.

• For example, Paul was confident that Christian freedom meant the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not at stake in questions of meat sacrificed to idols or the rituals of holy days (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8:10-14 and 10:23-30). Yet he insisted that, if a brother or sister did not understand this freedom and saw eating this meat as idolatry to a pagan god, the Christian was obligated to “walk in love” by eating just vegetables for the neighbor’s sake (Romans 14:17-20)!

• This social statement draws upon this rich understanding of the role of conscience and calls upon this church, when in disagreement concerning matters around which salvation is not at stake, including human sexuality, to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), honor the conscience, and seek the well-being of the neighbor.<sup>8</sup>

8. The social statement as adopted in 2009 and in 2025 mislabels this quoted phrase as “words of God.” This error will be corrected by the task force during the reconsideration process. *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, 42, endnote 31.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does conscience differ from just “following the rules”?
- What responsibilities do people who are “bound” by their consciences have to other people? What responsibilities do we have to people who are “bound” by their consciences?
- How do the stories illustrate the difference between a sense of conscience and a sense of moral superiority?
- Both Paul and Melanchthon use the term “weak” to describe people whose conscience is bound. Do you think they mean this in a negative way? What are they trying to say about power and the responsibilities of the “strong”? (See the callout box below.)
- What would it look like to practice Christian patience and love in disagreements in the church today? What makes that difficult? What are some ways patience and love are already present in disagreements you’ve experienced?

### STRONG VERSUS WEAK

Paul described Christians who refused to eat meat as “weak” in faith, the same term Melanchthon used for Christians who refused wine in Communion (Story #3). But Paul most likely was repeating words already being used by the meat-eating Christians. He and Melanchthon use “weak” not to disparage Christians who are bound by conscience but to highlight the responsibility of other Christians (the “strong”) to help bear their burden of conscience.

Paul also may have been describing the power dynamics in Rome. As the majority, the meat-eaters had more power in the community than those who abstained from meat. He likely was exhorting them not to use their power to violate the consciences of the “weak” minority.

### *Closing Prayer*

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of reconciliation that we have through your Son, Jesus Christ. Teach us to recognize your image in one another, to receive one another’s gifts and to remain faithful companions on the road. Amen.

# SESSION TWO: SEXUALITY AND THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

## GETTING STARTED

### *Introduction to Session Two*

As we consider the deeply held beliefs, behaviors and identities of all members of the community of Christ (the church) in which we live together as the ELCA, we return to the recognition that, even in disagreement, there is still much upon which this church agrees regarding how we relate to one another. This session will introduce points of agreement from the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* and provide the opportunity to name sources of disagreement about human sexuality.

### *Flow of Session Two*

- Welcome
- Opening Hymn Suggestion
- Opening Bible Reading
- Opening Prayer
- Activity #4
- Activity #5
- Closing Prayer
- Survey

### **Welcome**

*Welcome the group to the study. Invite new participants to introduce themselves. Recap for the group key lessons, questions or observations from Session One, including the purpose of this study guide. Review the group expectations from Session One.*

### **Opening Hymn Suggestion:**

“We All Are One in Mission” (ELW 576)

### **Opening Bible Reading:**

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

### **Opening Prayer**

Most high and holy God, pour out upon us your one and unifying Spirit, and awaken in every confession of the whole church a holy hunger and thirst for unity in you; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 73)



## ACTIVITY #4: POINTS OF AGREEMENT WITHIN ELCA SOCIAL TEACHING

### *Background for Leaders*

*Note: If you are dividing Session Two into two shorter sessions, end the first part after Activity #4.*

Discussions about sexual behavior and identity involve our deepest sense of who we are and, as such, can be fraught with complex emotions. For some, the church has been a source of healing and affirmation of their sexuality and their relationships. For many others, the church has been a source of pain, rejection and denial of their dignity and value as sexual beings.

In reading and interpreting the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (2009), some in the church emphasized the concept of “bound conscience” as a means of healing division and fostering unity amid difference. Others in the church have emphasized the social statement’s references to conscience-bound convictions without attending to other teachings in the social statement. In some situations, this has led to mistreatment of people based on their sex, gender, sexuality or conviction.

Focusing on the points of agreement can help correct this misinterpretation of the social statement and point to paths toward both unity-amid-disagreement and shared commitments within the church.

### *Activity Instructions*

*Read the following:*

It is important to note that the statements below reflect official ELCA teaching found in *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* that was formed through communal moral deliberation across the church. This does not mean that every individual will agree with every statement. It does mean that, as a church, we have agreed to lift up these principles and values as the ELCA’s shared witness on human sexuality. These principles and values guide the ELCA when this church develops policies or speaks publicly on issues related to sexuality.

*If meeting in person, print the table of statements below. If meeting online, share your screen. Invite a participant to read each statement aloud.*

### **ELCA Teachings on Human Sexuality**

The ELCA teaches that “sexual love — the complex interplay of longing, erotic attraction, self-giving, and receiving defined by trust — is a wondrous gift” (p. 11).

.....

The ELCA teaches that we are created as “relational and sexual beings” and that our sexuality can be a profound part of our identity (pp. 11, 28).

.....

The ELCA teaches that “sin enters all relationships, both within and outside the institution of marriage. All marriages fall short of intentions, and difficulties are inevitable, both because of the different needs and desires of the two individuals and because of sin, which places the anxious concern for self before the needs of the other” (p. 17).

.....

The ELCA teaches that congregations, pastors and other rostered leaders are called “to reach out in welcome to all ... and to assist members to understand what it means to be hospitable to all in the name of Christ regardless of sexual orientation” (p. 45).

.....

The ELCA teaches that “God’s gracious embrace through Christ is at the heart” of the call of Christians “to respect the integrity and dignity of all persons, whatever their age, gender, sexual orientation, or marital status” (ELCA, “Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” social message, p. 2). “This dignity of the human being reflects God’s deep love and stands against all forms of violence, discrimination, and injustice” (p. 5).

.....

The ELCA teaches that this church opposes “all forms of verbal and physical harassment and assault based on actual or perceived sex, gender, or sexuality” and will “[support] legislation and policies to protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services” (p. 19).

.....

The ELCA teaches that all congregations and members are called “to welcome, care for, and support all couples and their families and to advocate for their legal protection” (p. 19).

.....

The ELCA teaches that this church “has a responsibility to care for all children of God. This includes a responsibility to minister to those with diverse sex, gender, or sexual identities and to those who are seeking counsel about their gender or sexual self-understanding” (p. 19).





## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Which teachings stand out to you or were surprising to you?

### *Sources of Different Perspectives*

The social statement recognizes that ELCA Lutherans do not all agree about same-gender marriage. These differences come from several places.

*As you share the following paragraphs with participants, write on a whiteboard or large poster the phrases underlined below. (If meeting online, type the phrases on an online whiteboard or in the chat.)*

One area of disagreement is how we understand sexuality as part of being human. Some people place greater emphasis on sexual identity whereas others focus more on sexual behavior.

Another difference is how we understand sin in relation to sexuality and the Scriptures. Some believe that sinful behavior should be defined mainly by a literalist reading of the Bible. Others offer interpretations that raise important questions about the meaning of words, phrases and verses in the Bible, including how to interpret references to sexuality in their historical context. Some believe that the form of a relationship — the sex or gender of the couple — is most important in deciding the morality of the relationship. Others believe that the quality of a relationship — such as love, commitment and care for one another — is most important when considering the morality of a relationship.

We also differ in where we turn for wisdom. When we ask what is right, wrong, good or bad, we turn to different sources to help us answer the question “How do we know?” Using different sources can lead to different conclusions. In conversations about sexuality and marriage, this church has not always agreed on:

- How to interpret Scripture and which biblical passages should carry the most weight.
- How Christian tradition, including the Lutheran Confessions, should guide us.
- What science and human knowledge teach us about sex, gender, and sexuality.
- How personal experience shapes our understanding, including whose experiences we listen to and value.



These sources are connected to one another. Our understanding of the Bible is influenced by our experiences. Likewise, our understanding of the Bible influences how we understand our experiences.

People also differ in how they make moral decisions. When thinking about marriage between individuals of the same gender, some focus mainly on:

- Rules or guiding principles from an authority such as Scripture or lived experience.
- The impacts of decisions on people, the church and society.
- Assumptions about the character of those involved.

There is also disagreement about how certain or humble the church should be in this conversation. Some feel confident in their conclusions and want the church also to take a clear position as the body of Christ. Others believe that we are still called to listen carefully, learn from one another and continue reflecting together as the body of Christ.

Finally, people have different understandings of who has the authority to make decisions in the ELCA and how those decisions are carried out. For example:

- Congregations decide whom they will call as pastors.
- Synods decide who may be ordained.
- Bishops offer pastoral guidance.
- Pastors and their congregations can choose whether to perform marriage ceremonies.
- Only a churchwide assembly can adopt an ELCA social statement.

As we look more closely at the things with which we agree as well as some of the sources of our disagreements, we can begin to recognize how thorny our conversations about sexuality can become. Unfortunately, when we do talk about this and other moral topics, we can easily dismiss other people's lives, beliefs and experiences through a failure of empathy. Too often in our attempt to stand up for what we hold dear in our own "bound consciences," we cause our neighbors physical, emotional, spiritual and moral injury.

This is why the social statement calls upon us to live out the moral principle of "mutual respect" amid our disagreements.

*Invite someone to read the following section from Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust (2025):*

The Christian tradition has historically defined marriage as reflected in the language of Genesis 1:27; 2:23-24.29. However, this church acknowledges that consensus does not exist concerning how to regard marriage for couples of diverse sexual orientations, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful study and conversation.

In response, this church draws on the foundational Lutheran understanding that the baptized are called to discern God's love in service to the neighbor. In our Christian freedom, we therefore seek responsible actions that serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the conscience-bound beliefs of others. ...

Although at this time this church lacks consensus on this matter, it 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. This church calls for mutual respect in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community. Regarding our life together as we live with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect.<sup>9</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it look and feel like to be respected? What are some characteristics of “mutual respect”?
- What do you need from others to feel respected in a disagreement?
- Describe a time when you felt or experienced respect from someone with whom you disagreed. How did you treat that person afterward?
- Describe a time when you respected someone with whom you disagreed. What did you do or say (or not do or say) that helped them feel respected? How did they relate to you afterward?
- How should disagreements about sexuality be handled within the church, according to the social statement?
- The reading from the social statement acknowledges disagreement within the church about marriage. What points of agreement does the statement lift up despite these differences?
- What, if anything, would you change in the reading from the social statement? What might be gained or lost in the change?

**Note to leader: If you are dividing Session Two into two sessions, the end of Activity #4 is a good stopping point. Use the closing prayer for Session Two or another prayer of your choice, then start with Activity #5 at your next, concluding session.**

9. Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust, 19-20, 21.



## ACTIVITY #5: RECONCILIATION AND TRANSFORMATION

*Invite the participants to think of a time when they witnessed a sharp disagreement between people, perhaps on social media, in the news or in person. Ask them to keep this in mind as you read Ephesians 2:13-22:*

⋮ Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought  
⋮ near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has  
⋮ made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the  
⋮ hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and  
⋮ ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place  
⋮ of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one  
⋮ body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.  
⋮ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace  
⋮ to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one  
⋮ Spirit to the Father. **So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens,**  
⋮ **but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the**  
⋮ **household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and**  
⋮ **prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone;** in him the  
⋮ whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the  
⋮ Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling  
⋮ place for God.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does the message in Ephesians differ from the ways we experience disagreement today? In what ways is the church called to be a model of love, even in disagreement?
- Read Ephesians 2:19-20 (highlighted in bold above) again. What does it mean for all Christians to be “fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God”?

*Read or invite someone to read 2 Corinthians 5:16-19:*

⋮ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;  
⋮ even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no  
⋮ longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new  
⋮ creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come  
⋮ into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through  
⋮ Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ  
⋮ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses  
⋮ against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

For Lutherans, caring for our neighbor flows from faith, which empowers us to love and serve the neighbor boldly and freely. As Martin Luther wrote, “I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor [taking] no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss.”<sup>10</sup>

Part of “the ministry of reconciliation” is recognizing the image of God and the “new creation” in other people. This includes listening to others, caring for others, being willing to be cared for by others and loving others as God loves us. The social statement does not try to solve disagreements but to guide the church in living together amid disagreement.

Discussions about disagreements can be scary for some of us. We may fear that we won’t be respected. We may fear that the disagreement will threaten our relationship with another person. We also may fear that we will be changed by the experience or that our moral certainty will be threatened.

These conversations often require vulnerability and always require trust and courage. Doing this well means transforming some of the ways we relate to one another.

*Invite participants to each read aloud one of the following transformations.*

**From:** Dismissing or minimizing another person’s fears or questions

**To:** Actively listening to understand their fears or questions

**From:** Believing that we alone have the right answer

**To:** Trusting that the Holy Spirit guides our community in discernment

**From:** Trying to control or lead the conversation

**To:** Accompanying one another in love

**From:** Ignoring the perspectives and experiences of another person or group

**To:** Actively seeking perspectives and experiences that differ from our own

**From:** Inflexibly sticking to our current beliefs

**To:** Being open to the “new thing” God is revealing to us through others

**From:** Believing we are the teachers

**To:** Seeking to learn from others

**From:** Judging one another

**To:** Welcoming one another

10. Martin Luther, “Treatise on Christian Liberty” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Fortress Press, 1999), 367.



## DISCUSSION QUESTION

Which transformation do you think is the hardest in our culture and in our church today?

In the next activity, participants will practice this transformation by listening to one another with open hearts for understanding.

*Invite participants to reflect individually and privately on the following question. (Do not share responses with the larger group. The participants can write down their answers for themselves or just reflect during a moment of silence.)*

When conversations about sex, gender or sexuality arise in the church, what emotions do I notice first? (Examples include hope, grief, frustration, fear, confusion, protectiveness and longing.)

---

---

---

---

*Divide the group into pairs. Invite them to focus on listening to their partner as each person responds to the following question. Partners should listen without trying to correct theology, defend a position or offer a solution. After a few minutes, have each pair switch so that the person who was listening can answer the question.*

What matters most to you when the topic of sexuality or same-gender marriage comes up in the church — not what you believe but what you hope for or fear?

---

---

---

---

*As you gather again in a large group, ask, “What can we learn from listening carefully to others’ priorities in conversations about sex, gender and sexuality?”*

Watch the task force video (2:39), available at [ELCA.org/reconsiderations](https://www.elca.org/reconsiderations).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What do the task force members see as the goals of their work? (*Some examples might include: To lead the church in discernment, to produce a reconsidered social statement for the churchwide assembly or to be a model of faithful dialogue.*)

What was surprising or unexpected?

*Invite the participants to recall the video, readings and reflections you have discussed in this or previous sessions. What hopes or fears were shared in these resources? Some examples might include:*

- *Hope that the church remains united.*
- *Hope that people can find a place in the ELCA.*
- *Hope that the church will be a trustworthy steward of God’s “message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19).*
- *Fear of not being accepted or of being mistreated within the church.*
- *Fear that hostility may re-erect a “dividing wall” between people (Ephesians 2:14).*

How is the church called to support the hopes and address the fears of people in congregations or communities?

How might ELCA members journey together faithfully while carrying “the message of reconciliation” that has been entrusted to the church?

### ***Closing Prayer***

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of reconciliation that we have through your Son, Jesus Christ. Teach us to recognize your image in one another, to receive one another’s gifts and to remain faithful companions on the road. Amen.



## SURVEY INFORMATION AND FEEDBACK

*Thank you for taking the time to lead your group in these activities and conversations. As you finish the last activity, please invite the participants to respond to a survey available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VDLV59S>.*

The feedback, comments, questions and suggestions gathered through this survey will be shared with the ELCA's Human Sexuality Reconsiderations Task Force.

To follow this process of communal moral deliberation across the ELCA, visit [ELCA.org/Reconsiderations](https://www.elca.org/Reconsiderations).

The survey link will close September 30, 2026. However, additional comments and questions can be sent to the task force at [Reconsiderations@ELCA.org](mailto:Reconsiderations@ELCA.org).



# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1

### *Actions of the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly*

#### *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](http://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.

## APPENDIX 2

### *Frequently Asked Questions About the Reconsideration Process*

#### **Why do we have social statements? What do they actually do?**

Social statements are expressions of our church’s discernment on complex moral issues, such as sexuality, or big social institutions, such as the economy. The church is called to be a community of moral discernment, engaging in open, passionate, and respectful deliberation on challenging issues that impact the world. Social statements are teaching and policy documents. They are used in a variety of settings to teach about faith and ethics. They also guide the ELCA’s public statements and action on social issues of concern to the church.

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

The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized two reconsiderations (Memorial C3 and Motion K) of the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* ([www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements)), both by two-thirds majorities. The assembly did not authorize a reconsideration of the whole statement or dictate a particular outcome. Both possible reconsiderations arise from legal and social changes since the adoption of *Human Sexuality* in 2009.

#### **What is “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.

#### **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 there is a specific, extended public comment period based on a draft for each process.

#### **Why should I fill out the survey? Will my responses matter?**

Yes, your response is very important! The task force will carefully review the results of the survey. Your responses will impact the task force’s conversations as they develop a draft social statement for public comment by the church in 2027.

#### **I am concerned the task force is not representative of all points of view. How do I know my position is heard?**

The task force includes people who hold a diversity of views on human sexuality. They have engaged in prayer, conversation, and learning together. The task force will spend a lot of time reflecting together on the feedback from all quarters of our church received during the process.



### **Isn't the outcome of this process already decided? Hasn't the church already determined what the result will be?**

All ELCA social teaching or reconsideration is developed in a process of communal moral deliberation. This involves hearing from people across the ELCA as a social teaching is developed or reconsidered. The authorization of the Churchwide Assembly to reconsider a section of *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* is the start of this process. The church trusts that the Holy Spirit will guide the church in this process, but we do not know what the end will be.

### **Why is this current study focused so much on conscience?**

Conscience is an important topic within Lutheran ethics and within *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. The social statement as adopted in 2009 describes a range of four conscience-bound perspectives Lutherans may faithfully hold about same-gender relationships. However, the concept of a “bound conscience” is often misunderstood. The conversations generated by this study are intended to help congregations and other groups deepen their understanding of conscience and unpack some of the underlying beliefs that inform their perspectives on sexuality.

### **Can the social statement define who can be ordained as a rostered minister or who can be married in the church?**

The social statement provides important foundational teaching, but it is not ministry policy. Ministry policy governs questions such as ordination, the calling of rostered ministers, and church practices. Ministry policy is governed by social teaching, but these are not the same. The reconsideration process the ELCA is engaged in now concerns a section of the social statement, not ministry policy. The task force has studied current and past ministry policy in the ELCA and the impacts of ministry policy on people in the ELCA in an effort to learn. However, the task force will not deliberate ministry policy nor propose changes to ministry policy.

### **How was this task force formed? What does the task force do when it meets?**

Members of the task force are ELCA members chosen through an extensive application and interview process. They were seated by the executive committee of the ELCA Church Council, and the membership reflects the ELCA's representational principles for diversity. At meetings, the task force members pray together, hear from experts and stakeholders, share stories of their own experiences, and deliberate about the social statement. At times, we share each other's joys. At times, we share each other's sorrow. And we sing — in praise, in lament, in hope, and in joy.

## APPENDIX 3

### *How to Use This Study*

This study is intended for two group sessions of approximately one hour each. It can also be divided into four shorter sessions. As the group begins, it is important to talk together about commitments and expectations for behavior. These conversations involve topics that are sensitive and personal for many people. Your group's commitments to listening, prayer and respect are key in getting the most out of the study.

As you begin, inform the group that the study will involve completing a survey at the end. The survey can be completed by the group as a whole or by individuals.

#### **Gather the following supplies for each session:**

- Handouts of the readings  
(it may be helpful to have an electronic or print copy of the whole study for each person).
- Bibles.
- Writing utensils.
- Paper.
- Whiteboard or large sticky notes.
- Video screen and computer (Activity #5).

There is a certain flow to the activities in the sessions. However, as a leader, feel free to shift the timing of the activities to best suit your group's needs. The only activity that should come at the very beginning is the conversation about group expectations.

Leaders should read the entire study before beginning the first session. If questions arise during an activity, this will allow the leader to point to a later activity or to note the question for group discussion at an appropriate time.

In every group, some participants will be more vocal than others. As a leader, encourage the broadest participation possible while respecting participants who may wish to remain silent.

Some of the material in the sessions instructs the leader to read or to invite someone else to read the text directly. For other material, leaders should try to accurately restate the text to keep participants engaged.



## APPENDIX 4

### *Sample Group Expectations*

Participants in this study will experience the activities and discussions in a variety of ways. Trust needs to be built and maintained during the sessions so that each participant can feel safe in sharing their perspectives and experiences. Listening respectfully to each other is a first step. Below are some other suggested behaviors and expectations that can be shared with the group to help foster healthy, faithful conversation.

- Listen actively to one another, seeking to understand before responding.
- Be sensitive to the different ways each person may experience these conversations.
- When speaking, use “I” statements and avoid speaking for a group.  
Do not presume or attempt to speak for others.
- Remember that each person present is a child of God and is created in the image of God. Their perspectives and experiences matter and are worth hearing and respecting.
- Take time for prayer during the conversations.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to talk if they want to.
- Allow space for silence as people process their thoughts and feelings.
- Ask for clarification if something is unclear or uncertain.

The *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* Reconsiderations Task Force has adopted a group covenant to guide its discussions and work. This covenant can be found at [ELCA.org/Reconsiderations](https://www.elca.org/Reconsiderations). This covenant is a living document. At each meeting, the task force discusses whether the covenant still meets their needs and makes adjustments as necessary.

## APPENDIX 5

### *Additional Resources*

*Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* social statement (2019). Available at [ELCA.org/publications/2019-sexism-theological-discernment-social-statements](https://www.elca.org/publications/2019-sexism-theological-discernment-social-statements).

*Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* social statement (2025). Available at [resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/sexuality-2/](https://resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/sexuality-2/).

“A Guide for Talking Together About Shared Ministry with Same-sex Couples and Their Families” (2017). Available at [resources.elca.org/faith-practices/a-guide-for-talking-together-about-shared-ministry-with-same-sex-couples-and-their-families-leaders-guide/](https://resources.elca.org/faith-practices/a-guide-for-talking-together-about-shared-ministry-with-same-sex-couples-and-their-families-leaders-guide/).

“Journey Together Faithfully: ELCA Studies on Sexuality,” a two-part study available at [resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/journey-together-faithfully-part-1/](https://resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/journey-together-faithfully-part-1/) and [resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/journey-together-faithfully-part-2/](https://resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/journey-together-faithfully-part-2/).

“Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” social message (1996). Available at [resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/sexuality/](https://resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/sexuality/).

“Talking Together as Christians About Tough Social Issues” (1999). Available at [resources.elca.org/ministries-of-diverse-cultures-and-communities/talking-together-as-christians-tough-social-issues/](https://resources.elca.org/ministries-of-diverse-cultures-and-communities/talking-together-as-christians-tough-social-issues/).









Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

## **CONSCIENCE AND CONVERSATION:**

*A STUDY DURING THE RECONSIDERATION OF THE SOCIAL  
STATEMENT HUMAN SEXUALITY: GIFT AND TRUST*