

# Proposed Sexuality Statement Released

Last week the latest in a series of statements about human sexuality prepared for the ELCA was released prior to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis. The statement will either be adopted or rejected at this meeting of our larger church organization.

## Background

The 2001 Churchwide Assembly (CWA) acted to “initiate a process within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to develop a social statement on human sexuality.” In accordance with social statement development procedures, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality was created at the direction of the ELCA Church Council to complete this task.

In years following 2001 various revisions and additions continued the process of making a sexuality statement. The most recent part of this process was the charge by the 2007 Churchwide Assembly for the task force creating the sexuality statement to make specific recommendations concerning ordination of sexual minorities.

Current ELCA policy states that sexual minorities may only be ordained if they refrain from engaging in same-gender relationships. While this is the official policy of the ELCA, many gay and lesbian Lutherans in relationships serve as pastors in our synod and throughout our nation.

## What are social statements?

Social statements are teaching and social policy documents, adopted by an ELCA Churchwide Assembly, which address significant social issues. They are the product of extensive and inclusive deliberation within the ELCA. Statements provide an

analysis and interpretation of an issue and set forth basic theological and ethical perspectives related to it. They are social policy and teaching documents, meant to aid members in moral deliberation and moral formation about social issues. In relation to social responsibility, they also set policy for the ELCA and guide its advocacy and other work as a public church.

## How are social statements used?

ELCA members are encouraged to use social statements for teaching and ethical guidance regarding social issues. On matters related to this church’s social responsibility, social statements govern church policy and state the official position of this church. Members of the ELCA may not agree with all parts of a social statement. This is consistent with the understanding of this church as a community of moral deliberation.

## So What Does this latest Statement Say?

You can read the document in its entirety at [www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx). There you will also find an executive summary and recommendations for action.

## Now here’s Pr. Katie’s executive summary:

The proposed sexuality statement is an improvement over the draft released last year. Substantially shorter, the proposed statement is still grounded in Lutheran tradition, concerned with all issues of sexuality (not just homosexuality), and reaffirms that good Lutherans can disagree about important issues. The statement affirms that human sexuality is a blessing from God that is lifelong, that families of a variety of make-ups can be life-giving bodies, and that the church has a duty to speak out on cultural and social issues of its time. The statement rejects all forms of abuse. It acknowledges that because of sin relationships, marriages, and families can be dangerous and unhealthy. The statement calls for appropriate and comprehensive sexual education for children, teens, and young adults. It asserts that trust and accountability are necessary hallmarks of stable relationships.

The statement no longer says, as it once did, that Lutherans do not desire to change the definition of marriage as “between a man and a woman.” It does note that traditionally this has been the definition of marriage in both secular and Lutheran contexts. It also indicates that people should refrain from any sexual activity outside of the bonds of marriage, including cohabitation.

In the end, the statement’s authors were unable to come to a consensus about whether or not sexual minorities should be eligible for ordination. A variety of positions are acknowledged in the statement, including ones supporting the ELCA’s current policies and one asking that it be overturned in favor of full inclusion

*(Continued on page 2)*

*(Continued from page 1)*

of sexual minorities. The statement suggests a four-part process by which the 2009 Churchwide Assembly might consider the issue. The authors suggest that before ordination may be considered, some form of church blessing for monogamous same gender relationships should be approved. (The current ELCA Bishop's Statement guiding ELCA policy on the matter does not recommend the creation of a service specifically blessing same gender relationships, but allows that local pastors must have discretion in how best to serve their own communities). The statements authors encourage, whatever decision the 2009 Churchwide Assembly comes to, that Lutheran congregations, bishops, and synods be allowed the freedom to follow their conscience in their actions on these matters.

#### **What does this mean for us?**

Whatever conclusions the Churchwide Assembly comes to this August, our congregation council has approved of Pr. Katie's blessing of same gender unions under the same guidelines by which she performs opposite gender marriages. Given the spirit of the 2007 Churchwide Assembly urging restraint in disciplining pastors, congregations, and bishops who do not adhere to current ELCA policy, it seems unlikely that we will face any ramifications for our stance.

#### **What next?**

If you have strong feelings about the Proposed Human Sexuality Statement, you can e-mail our bishop's office ([bpmark@spselca.org](mailto:bpmark@spselca.org)) or contact Jay Hines-Shah ([jay@eshah.com](mailto:jay@eshah.com)), our most local synod council representative. Keep the 2009 Churchwide Assembly in your prayers and watch your newsletter for further details on their decisions.

### **Statement from Bishop Mark Holmerud in anticipation of the Proposed Human Sexuality Statement**

It is my hope and prayer that as this proposed statement becomes public, we will take the opportunity to prayerfully and deliberately read and re-read the statement. I pray that we will take the time to gather with people who read the statement with different expectations and hopes than our own to learn more about its implications for our life together as congregations, conferences, synods, and as a church. I pray the Spirit of Christ will guide and lead our conversations as members of congregations and as pastoral leaders together seeking God's wisdom as it revealed through this statement, through Scripture, and through our understandings of sexuality.

Most of all, I pray that the communities where we have all been called to serve in ministry will be blessed by the quality and character of our conversations, and that our faith will be strengthened and encouraged by the witness we offer to each other - even and especially in the challenging conversations that are a part of our life together.

God's Blessings in our lives and ministries,

Bp. Mark