

# St. Luke's Lutheran Church

## Telling people of Jesus Christ

November 3, 2009

Dear Members of St. Luke's,

In August, the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA adopted the social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" and accompanying Ministry Recommendations. These documents instruct the ELCA to develop policies to allow congregations to recognize certain homosexual relationships and to allow people in certain homosexual relationships to serve as church leaders and clergy.

On the surface, this issue seems to not directly pertain to St. Luke's. In our past and at the present, we worship and serve together with homosexual members. We have chosen and employed homosexual leaders. In some manner, our congregation has already held a policy of welcome and acceptance – not necessarily as Christ would, but as we have been able. However, these specific changes in teaching and the manner in which the ELCA has brought them to our congregation have greatly concerned some of our membership.

The ELCA has been studying this issue for at least ten years. When we have been previously asked, St. Luke's held discussions and responded to the ELCA. When it was known that these issues would be brought to a vote this year, it was easy to believe that "Oh, that would never pass." Well, it did. And the leadership of St. Luke's is not pretending that the issue will go away. We are able to ignore or follow social statements as we desire, but we cannot ignore the Ministry Recommendations, and must make a choice.

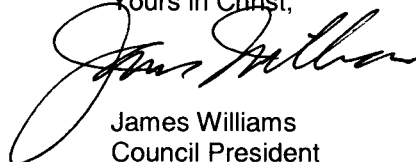
We have had two council meetings with serious discussion on the ELCA actions and one special meeting to discuss the impact this is having on our congregation. Pastor Olson has already held a special five-week Sunday School class to learn about and discuss the issue. As the discussions continue, the following things have become apparent to me:

- This isn't easy to talk about. Aside from the taboo of sex, we all have experiences that shape our life and our faith. We may arrive at the same conclusion for completely different reasons. And when we have discussions on this topic, it takes awhile to get past our predispositions to understand the issues and to hear what the Bible says.
- Church is different from other things in our lives. It is easy to see change happen in our country, at our jobs or with our families. It is difficult to see change happen in our church. We want to be faithful. We want to know what is faithful. We struggle to be faithful. We cling to our traditions because they connect us to God, especially in times of need. When church changes, we feel uncomfortable and less connected. We sometimes respond in shock and anger through passionate defense of our traditions and traditional teachings.
- We have a lot in common. Our congregation already is a group with similar values, heritage and goals. We don't appreciate having this polarizing obstacle placed in front of the already important issues in our congregation and in our mission. We also care for one another, and want to find a way for our congregation to move forward together.

This matter needs the attention of the Congregation. Council is preparing a survey to determine the level of importance the Congregation places on this subject and to gauge the actions that should or should not be taken. Surveys will be made available in print and online to the Congregation from this Sunday until November 21. From the survey, the Council will be leading the congregation toward appropriate action. However, the Council will not take action without endorsement by the Congregation.

As we move forward, it is very important that we are accurate. On the following pages I have summarized the actions of the Churchwide Assembly and have given the source documents. I will make copies available in the gathering area on Sunday or they can be found on our website, [www.stlukeslima.org](http://www.stlukeslima.org). I would encourage you to read the full documents and ask questions. If you have immediate concerns, please call me at (419) 648-4668 or contact a member of Council.

Yours in Christ,



James Williams  
Council President

These are excerpts from the documents.

Please refer to the source document to obtain complete descriptions and to obtain context.

**From the Executive Summary of “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”:**

*“ELCA social statements are theological and teaching documents. They assist the ELCA and its members to reach informed judgments on social issues from a perspective of faith. They are intended to cultivate individual community deliberation and moral formation. They govern this church’s institutional policy in terms of its social witness and guide its work as a public church. Social statements are developed through an extensive process of deliberation involving the whole church and are adopted by a two-thirds majority of a churchwide assembly.”*

**[document available at [www.stlukeslima.org](http://www.stlukeslima.org) -- 30 pages]**

**From “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”:**

- *“On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that same-gender sexual behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law. They believe same-gender sexual behavior carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin. They therefore conclude that the neighbor and the community are best served by calling people in same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle. Such decisions are intended to be accompanied by pastoral response and community support.*
- *On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that homosexuality and even lifelong, monogamous, homosexual relationships reflect a broken world in which some relationships do not pattern themselves after the creation God intended. While they acknowledge that such relationships may be lived out with mutuality and care, they do not believe that the neighbor or community are best served by publicly recognizing such relationships as traditional marriage.*
- *On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and lifelong loving and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability, but they do not equate these relationships with marriage. They do, however, affirm the need for community support and the role of pastoral care, and may wish to surround lifelong monogamous relationships or covenant unions with prayer.*
- *On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage. They surround such couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God, find strength for the challenges that will be faced, and serve others. They believe same gender couples should avail themselves of social and legal support for themselves, their children and other dependents, and seek the highest legal accountability available for their relationships.*

*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.”*

**[document available at [www.stlukeslima.org](http://www.stlukeslima.org) -- 5 pages]**

From *A Brief Summary of Actions of the Eleventh Churchwide Assembly*  
and *Recommendation on Ministry Policies From the ELCA Church Council to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly*

**Ministry Resolutions Adopted:**

- *“Resolved, that in the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.”*
- *“Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”*
- *“Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”*
- *“This resolution called upon members to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree; declared the intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making about candidacy and the call process; eliminated the prohibition of rostered service by members in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships; recognized and committed to respect the conviction of members who believe that the ELCA should not call or roster people in committed same-gender relationships; called for development of accountability guidelines; directed that appropriate amendments to ministry policy documents be drafted and approved by the Church Council; and urged that this church continue to trust congregations, bishops, synods and others responsible for determining who should be called into public ministry.”*

**[both documents available at [www.stlukeslima.org](http://www.stlukeslima.org) each is 2 pages]**

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**Definition of Terms: (with thanks to Pastor Olson)**

Churchwide Assembly: Every two years, the ELCA holds a gathering of people elected to be voting members from each synod to attend. This assembly has the highest legislative authority in the ELCA. Matters decided here pertain to the whole ELCA. Voting members are not representatives of either their congregation or synod.

Synod Assembly: Each synod of the ELCA holds an annual Synod Assembly. Members from each congregation are chosen to vote on matters of the local synod, elect bishops (every 6 years), and tell their congregation about the work of the synod.

Social Statement: The ELCA adopts social statements to inform its members about important issues. These are meant as teaching documents. As such, they are not official policy of the ELCA, but they do influence policies of the ELCA, synods, and congregations. We are free to ignore, oppose or adopt these statements. These documents must be adopted at Churchwide Assembly by 2/3 vote. The latest one, “Human Sexuality: Gift & Trust” was adopted by **exactly** 2/3.

Ministry Policy Recommendations: Based on the work of the taskforce which debated, wrote, and presented “Human Sexuality: Gift & Trust,” four ministry policy recommendations were put forth. These have become policy of the ELCA by majority vote at Churchwide Assembly. These changes in policy needed only 50% +1 to be approved. It remains to be seen how these policies will actually be implemented, because the details were not agreed upon at Churchwide Assembly.

Bound Conscience: One’s “bound conscience” is not simply one’s opinion, but what one believes to be God’s will. The assembly agreed to care for the bound conscience of those with whom you disagree. There is a lot of vagueness around this idea still.

“publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships”: This does not mean any homosexual relationship. We are not talking about “one night stands” or other promiscuous behavior. This wordy term tries to describe committed homosexual relationships that may range from informal commitment between 2 persons, to marriage of same sex individuals.

Rostered Leaders: the ELCA has 3 different rosters: Clergy, Diaconal Ministers, and Associates in Ministry. Most rostered persons are pastors. To be rostered, a minister must go through a discernment process, have some theological education, and receive a call from a congregation. Furthermore, rostered leaders agree to live in accordance with a document called “Visions and Expectations,” which asks rostered leaders to be faithful in matters of sex, money, family, witness, teaching, preaching, etc.