

**Summary of Bethel's 4-part class:
The ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality
and
the Churchwide Vote to Ordain Partnered Gay/Lesbian Pastors**

The purpose of the class was to present information about the ELCA and its August 2009 social statement on human sexuality and vote to ordain partnered gay/lesbian clergy.

- The starting point: Many people of faith have strong and divergent views about homosexuality, so we examined why views vary so widely and what the vote means for this congregation. We continually asked, "How we live together as the body of Christ in the midst of diversity and disagreements?"
- The class was not intended to offer definitive answers to "what the Bible says about homosexuality," nor was it meant to be a forum for debating homosexuality.

The class began with an overview of how Lutherans read the Bible, because differences in how we read are one reason we come to different conclusions about what it says about homosexuality or whether it even addresses a modern understanding of sexual orientation.

- As Lutheran Christians, we read all texts through the "lens" of the Christ; how does the gospel of Christ Jesus – that ***we are justified by grace through faith*** – inform our understanding of any biblical text?
- ELCA constitution states:
 - *2.02.c The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.*
 - *2.03. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.*
 - *The ELCA believes scripture to be the "Divinely Inspired Word of God" as opposed to the "inerrant Word of God" which is a much more literal interpretation.*

- **Literalism vs. interpretation.** For a literalist, the starting point is that seven particular texts say same-gender sexual relations are sinful. For those who believe the Bible must be interpreted, the starting point is to study the historical, literary and other aspects of the texts to understand the context for the original hearers.
- Lutheran Christians use **four ways** to read Scripture: **Devotional** (what is God saying to us as we read today?), **historical** (what was happening in the time and place in which this was written?), **literary** (is this a poem, a letter, a parable, etc.?) and **theological** (how does *justification by grace through faith* inform our reading?).
- **Five principles** shape our Lutheran interpretation of the Bible: Both **law and gospel** are present in Scripture; all of **Scripture reveals the Christ** (not just the four gospels or the New Testament); **Scripture interprets Scripture** (we use the easier texts to interpret the more difficult ones); Scripture's "**plain meaning**" is what would make sense in the context of the original hearers; Scripture needs **public interpretation** (because while private mediation has value, the Bible speaks to the community of Christ, not just to individual believers).

The class also noted that people have different views on whether homosexuality is an orientation or a choice. If one sees it as a choice, and reads the seven texts (see below) as literal and definitive for all times and places, one may conclude homosexuality is sinful. If one sees it as an orientation, and reads the Bible with interpretation that starts with the lens of the Christ, one may conclude that homosexuality is not sinful.

- **The 3-Legged Stool:** Theology, reason, personal experience.

The sources of authority in the Lutheran Christian life are threefold: reason, scripture, and experience. Picturing these as a three-legged stool offers a visual aide to guide us in considering complex topics and to arrive at the truth of a given problem or proposition, whether theological, ethical, or spiritual. If we consider an issue and leave out one leg, the stool topples. If we over-emphasize one of the three legs, the stool wobbles. A balance of these three sources of authority helps us arrive at an informed opinion that can then be offered in dialogue with other informed opinions on a given topic.

Information was presented on why the ELCA issues social statements; who votes at the Churchwide Assembly and what the vote means for congregations; and how the ELCA has engaged in study concerning homosexuality, some historical issues of inclusion/exclusion, and the seven texts that refer to same-gender sexual relations.

- **Social Statements:** The Social Statements of the ELCA are not the “Law” of the church but rather serve as the foundation for ongoing advocacy around the ethical issues and struggles of a complex world. *They are under constant review and change as new information, scientific or otherwise comes to the forefront of an ever changing world and social order.* They are meant to be a source for guidance in addressing social issues. *Although they are the groundwork for setting church policy and represent the official position of the church, ELCA members and participants are NOT required to agree with all aspects of these statements.*

- **Churchwide Assembly:** While each of the ELCA’s 65 synods hold assemblies annually, the churchwide assembly is held every other year. Voting members at each are lay people and clergy elected at the synod assemblies. The ELCA social statements are approved by a two-thirds vote of the Churchwide Assembly. **The August 2009 vote does not mandate that congregations must call gay/lesbian pastors.** Since early in the formation of the ELCA, congregations were free to call a **celibate** gay/lesbian pastor, if they so chose (see Background on Sexuality Studies, below); the 2009 vote now allows a congregation to call a gay/lesbian pastor in a committed relationship.

* **Studies on homosexuality, historical issues of inclusion/exclusion, and the seven texts that refer to same-gender sexual relations:**

1) Background on sexuality studies

Predecessor bodies of the ELCA had social statements on sexuality, including an LCA statement in 1970 and an ALC statement in 1980, which said that homosexual relations were counter to biblical teaching. When the ELCA was formed in 1988, three PLTS seminarians who were certified for candidacy for ordination were removed from the list of available candidates when they announced they were gay. The ELCA document “Visions and Expectations,” which was approved in 1990, called for gay/lesbian pastors to remain celibate; it also called for all single pastors to live a “chaste life.” A task force was formed to study sexuality matters.

*Journey Together Faithfully: Part One, 2002 – “A Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions.”

*Journey Together Faithfully: Part Two, 2005 – “Background Essay on Biblical Texts: The Church and Homosexuality.”

*Journey Together Faithfully: Part Three, 2006 – “Free to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality”

*The Social Statement on Human Sexuality, 2009 – “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.” **This statement does not focus on homosexuality but on a variety of issues ranging from sexual**

slavery and the sexualization of children in our society to marital fidelity and opposite-gender friendships.

2) Historical issues of inclusion/exclusion

Debates on how to interpret Scripture and the tradition existed from the start:

***Gentiles** in the early church (John 13:31-35. Peter directed by God to call no food or people “unclean.” But then the new church debated whether Gentiles had to become Jews before becoming Christians.)

***Slavery** in 19th Century America (Scripture quoted by *both* sides)

***Divorced** pastor and **women** pastors (the latter ordained for 40 years).

* **Gay/lesbian** clergy

3) The seven texts that refer to same-gender sexual relations

Genesis 19:1-11 and Judges 19:16-30; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10.

Participants read the texts and answered the following questions:

- What is clear in the text?
- What is difficult to interpret?
- What does this mean to you today?

In the final class session, we noted that reactions to the 2009 vote throughout the ELCA have varied.

- Of 10,200 ELCA congregations, 62 had voted as of March 2010 to leave the ELCA. Another 135 congregations had passed the first of two votes needed to leave. If all of those 135 leave the ELCA, that will be 197 congregations total. Another 79 congregations had first votes that failed.
- At the May 2010 Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly, the assembly approved a resolution inviting two San Francisco congregations that had been removed from the ELCA for calling gay/lesbian pastors to rejoin the ELCA. In addition, Bp. Mark Holmerud lifted the 1999 synodical public censure of University Lutheran Chapel, Berkeley, for calling Pr. Jeff Johnson.

Next was a presentation of Martin Luther’s writing on Bound Conscience. The class considered an essay on Luther's understanding of the bound conscience in Reformation history and Lutheran tradition. Luther himself made several ethical judgments in his ministry that were

controversial because they challenged societal norms and traditional church teaching. For example, he once counseled a woman with an impotent husband to take a "secret husband" in addition to her legal husband in order that she and her legal husband might be able to raise children and fulfill their desire for a family. For Luther, the ability to read the bible and his culture through the eyes of God's mercy was truer to the spirit of God's grace than strict adherence to civil or biblical law. The class also considered the biblical example of Paul's advice to the Corinthians regarding eating meat sacrificed to idols as a scriptural analogy to many difficult modern issues, perhaps including our modern understanding of human sexuality. And the example of Deitrich Boenhoffer's choice to align himself with an assassination plot (thus clearly breaking a commandment) in order to avoid greater evil was also considered.

In conclusion, the vote to ordain partnered gay/lesbian clergy was not made by "officials" of the ELCA, but by voting members of the ELCA. Congregations of the ELCA are autonomous, and so cannot be "forced" to call any particular pastor.

In the end, some participants expressed frustration at not getting "answers". Some said it was not always comfortable to hear a different perspective than their own. Some said they were thankful for the chance to come together and learn about how the ELCA functions and examine some reasons why people have such divergent views. The ever-present question remains: Given that people of faith disagree on how to read the Bible, given that people disagree on what the Bible says about homosexuality or whether it even addresses it in a modern understanding, and given our "3-legged stool" perceptions, ***how do we live together as the body of Christ amidst diversity and disagreements?***

Is there one point on which we can all agree?

"This is my body, given for you; my blood, shed for you."