

10 Questions

1. Is this whole debate just about homosexuality? Certainly not¹. Though the ELCA's 2009 vote to allow ordination of non-celibate homosexuals is indeed the "trigger issue" that has ignited the debate, the much larger issue is the source of authority for the teachings and practice of the church². The Lutheran Confessions hold that "Holy Scripture [is the] Only Norm and Rule of Doctrine"³ However, in recent times there has been a growing tendency within the ELCA to look to other sources, such as individual experiences or societal perceptions, as being equally or even more authoritative.
2. Isn't that just an opinion expressed by some who are unhappy with the ELCA? Not at all. Even the Presiding (national) Bishop of the ELCA, the Rev. Mark Hanson, has observed that the church is divided by two competing and "irreconcilable" ways of interpreting Scripture.⁴ Whereas the traditional Lutheran way relies on allowing "Scripture to interpret Scripture"⁵ and seeks the ordinary sense of the words as they were perceived by the original readers, the new "contextual" interpretation relies on the understanding that a group of readers might agree to apply to their own context. This has given license to some within the ELCA to overturn clear Scriptural teachings for understandings that are completely foreign to traditional Christian belief.⁶
3. What kind of foreign understandings? We will cite two examples: in the ELCA's Lutheran Study Bible, commentary notes included with the Great Commission and elsewhere state that there are ways of achieving salvation that do not rely on faith in Christ⁷. In the ELCA's social statement on sexuality, Gift and Trust, it is taught that the ultimate standard for morality is not adherence to God's commands, but maintaining trust between individuals and groups.⁸
4. So why has the "Authority of Scripture" issue just become important now? In fact, there have been several "reform" groups within the ELCA who have been steadfastly opposing its drift away from Scriptural grounding for some time. However the 2009 ELCA actions resulted in major policy changes that were not only ungrounded in Scriptural support, but which the vast majority of Christians, both past and present, understand to be a violation of clear Biblical teachings⁹. Further, the ELCA handled this issue in a manner that seems clearly engineered to achieve this outcome, despite the conscience-bound objections of a large number of its members.¹⁰ Thus, this issue has become the "final straw" for many ELCA Lutherans.
5. Isn't it foolish to believe that an ancient document can guide us today? It is clear that many contemporary voices in our world are of that opinion. However, we trust that God, in His infinite love and wisdom, has spoken through the human authors to instruct us in that which is true and essential for our relationship to Him. Though some have argued that Scriptural prohibitions no longer apply, such arguments do not seem to us as consistent with the faithful, loving, and compassionate God who guides us through his Holy Word.¹¹
6. But doesn't Jesus direct us to love our neighbor? Absolutely, and every Christian must take this command with the utmost seriousness. The only area of debate is how that love is expressed. It is significant to note that the injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself" that Jesus cited (Lev 19:18 cited in Mark 12:31) is intimately coupled to the injunction to "You shall reprove your neighbor, or

you will incur guilt yourself" (Lev 19:17).¹² Since Jesus has warned us in the strongest terms that unrepentant sexual immorality is a matter that places human souls at risk (Matt 5:27-30), we cannot lovingly condone that which we believe to be contrary to our Creator's will.

7. So just how will the ELCA decisions affect the church? Technically the resolutions ratified at the 2009 Churchwide assembly do not require all ELCA Lutherans to conform, but the reality is that implementation of those measures does change official church policy in ways that do affect each ELCA congregation today¹³, and can be expected to have even greater ramifications for the future. In the Social Statement Gift and Trust, the ELCA has signaled that questions of sexual morality are of little concern to the church.¹⁴ This, ultimately, is the message that our children and youth will be hearing in their contacts with the church.
8. Isn't leaving the ELCA contrary to Jesus' will? Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers (John 17:20-23). However, we need to remember that Jesus was not speaking about denominations, but rather the unity of all believers. Disunity within our denomination was forced upon us by the ELCA's 2009 decisions. What faces us now is the choice of how best to preserve the ministry of this congregation. By leaving the ELCA we would not be leaving the Body of Christ, and in fact we would be in better alignment with the majority of Lutherans in both the U.S. and around the world who have expressed dismay with the ELCA's decision.¹⁵ But in no case should our departure be taken as an excuse to regard ELCA members as other than our brothers and sisters in Christ.
9. In leaving the ELCA, wouldn't we be isolating ourselves from a lot of ministry opportunities? There will certainly be some ramifications to this decision, but there are many strong opportunities for ministry outside of the ELCA, and in fact, many of our benevolences are channeled through pan-Lutheran organizations in which we can continue to participate¹⁶. Unless the ELCA so decides, there also would be no reason why we could not continue to engage in cooperative ministries as we currently do with many other denominations and groups.
10. How will joining the NALC affect this congregation? It is not expected to have much effect at all on the way in which our church operates on a day-to-day basis¹⁷. First of all, those who have founded the NALC are Lutherans from a traditional "centrist" strand, compatible with our congregation's historic beliefs and practices. Further, a guiding premise of the NALC is that authority in this denomination will be from the bottom-up with the local congregations playing the primary role in determining church policy.¹⁸ Many of us are frankly excited about what we consider to be better opportunities for being engaged in meaningful ministry within the NALC.¹⁹ Most importantly, however, joining the NALC will allow this congregation to be aligned with a body of believers who hold fast to St. Paul's injunction:

"... continue in what you have learned and firmly believed ... [from] the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

Endnotes: (Supplementary material referenced from “10 Questions”)

¹ It is very important to recognize that the debate is not about the morality of sexual orientation. Scripture does not condemn a homosexual orientation any more than it condemns a heterosexual orientation – it is when sexual impulse translates into inappropriate sexual behavior that sin is incurred. Neither is there any distinction between heterosexual and homosexual sinners, nor in the Grace that is available to both. We all rely entirely and confidently on the forgiveness earned for us by Christ.

² Dr. James R. Crumley (former National Bishop of the LCA and participant in the formation of the ELCA) has referred to the issue as: “a confessional matter that goes to the very heart of our faith and of our faith as Lutheran Christians. I fear that many of our people fail to see the depth of the action taken at the assembly and discuss it only in terms of homosexuality. Both issues are important but the matter of our confession has to take priority.” <http://reformfromwithin.com/downloads/Remarks%20of%20Dr.%20Crumley.pdf>

³ The phrase “Holy Scripture, that Only Norm and Rule of Doctrine” is from the title page of the Book of Concord, published in Leipzig Germany in 1584, and underscores the Lutheran Confessions’ emphasis on the primacy of Scripture over all other modes of receiving knowledge of God’s will and plan of salvation for us. The Book of Concord is the collection of the Christian Creeds plus distinctively Lutheran writings such as Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms, and the Augsburg Confession, which all ordained pastors in the ELCA (as well as all other Lutheran denominations) vow to uphold. The Formula of Concord which concludes the Book of Concord, is a lengthy summary of the teachings, and begins with this paragraph:

We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic books of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written in Ps. 119,105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal 1,8.

⁴ The proper understanding of Scripture is indeed at the heart of the current ELCA debate as illustrated by the following news item (the Greek word hermeneutic means “a method of interpretation” and in this context refers to interpretation of Scripture). In a report to the ELCA Council of Bishops:

“[Presiding Bishop Mark] Hanson said: Two “hermeneutics” or paradigms are at work among the members of the ELCA that make agreement difficult on scriptural and theological matters. The Rev. Craig L. Nesson, academic dean and professor of contextual theology, Wartburg Theological Seminary, an ELCA seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, writes that there is a “traditional approach” and a “contextual approach” in interpreting Scripture, both of which are valid and irreconcilable, Hanson told the bishops. Similarly, Dr. Marcus J. Borg, Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, Corvallis, writes that there are two irreconcilable “paradigms” in which Christians differ in their understandings of the Christian tradition and their interpretation of Scripture, creeds and the confessions, he said. Hanson said he’s heard people with different understandings of Scripture and theology seeking to find a place for their views in the sexuality recommendations.” (From the ELCA News Service, March 11, 2005. Emphasis added. http://archive.elca.org/ScriptLib/CO/ELCA_News/encArticleList.asp?article=3020)

⁵ The principle of “using Scripture to interpret Scripture” seeks to inform our understanding of specific Scriptural passages by using other passages or precedents found in the Bible. For example, in Paul’s exhortation that “women should be silent in the church” (1 Cor 14:34) our understanding takes account of the fact that this is within a section of the letter that is talking about orderly worship, not morality. When we further note that Paul elsewhere advises women to not “prophesy” (preach) with their heads uncovered, it clearly indicates that women did sometimes speak during public worship (1 Cor 11:5). And when in Romans (16:1-3) Paul commends “our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae” and greets “Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquilla” (with the wife mentioned first as befitting the more prominent member of this missionary team), it seems clear that women were not just passive listeners in the early church. Thus, when we read Scripture as an entirety, we interpret Paul’s instruction about “silence” as having to do with localized concerns about decorum in the Corinth congregation versus an all-time pronouncement about women’s role in the church. Consequently, both the ALC and the LCA (the predecessor bodies that joined to become the ELCA) concluded on the basis of such internal Scriptural evidence that ordination of women into the clergy was appropriate. When Scripture itself is used to interpret a difficult passage of Scripture, this traditional Lutheran discipline helps to prevent us from reading in our own biases as we face decisions for the church. Conversely, an interpretation that is not supported elsewhere in Scripture should be regarded with great suspicion.

⁶ Jesus observed that “No man can serve two masters” (Matt 6:24), and the principle certainly also holds true for a church attempting to recognize two “irreconcilable” ways of understanding “Scripture, creeds, and the confessions” (see endnote 4). To better understand what these irreconcilable differences might entail, it is instructive to note that Marcus Borg (the individual quoted by Bishop Hanson in endnote 4) is an active member of the “Jesus Seminar,” a group which is notorious for its “deconstruction” of the Gospels. Borg perceives Jesus as a “spirit person” who became the “Face of God” and that “Easter does not have to involve something happening to Jesus’ body.” According to Borg, “The Gospels are seen as the developing traditions of early Christian communities.” (www.aportraitofjesus.org/gospels.shtml) From this position, it is a rather easy step to assuming that the “developing understandings” of the early Christian community can be freely superseded by contemporary understandings that develop in our own communities. While we certainly don’t want to impugn anyone with “guilt by association” it is more than a bit disturbing that Bishop Hanson cites Borg as an influential voice, since it is clear that Borg’s way of looking at Scripture (and the interpretations that result) are very far removed from: “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.” (ELCA Confession of Faith). Since the stated goal of the ELCA leadership is to maintain a superficial “unity” despite such deep-seated and far-reaching differences, this necessarily results in a watering-down of the historic teachings of the church. Thus, even though the ELCA does not officially embrace this “alternate paradigm,” a willingness to accommodate it has the same ultimate effect. For rank-and-file Lutherans, the question becomes this: If the church cannot agree on how to discern God’s will for us, how can it offer clear guidance in matters of faith and life? And if this cannot be done, then in what sense is it functioning as our church?

⁷ The existence of an “alien” way of reading the Bible sometimes surfaces in literature produced by the ELCA. The following quotes are taken from marginal notes in the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB) published by Augsburg Fortress press, copyright 2009:

Commenting on the Great Commission (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Matt 28:18-20), the LSB marginal note states:

"[This] does not mean to make everyone disciples. Most people who are helped by Jesus and believe in him never become disciples. Jesus includes in salvation people who do not believe in him or even know about him (5:3-10, 25:31-45)." LSB p 1658, emphasis added.

Turning to the first cited reference we then find in Matt 5:3-10 (The Beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in Spirit...") an associated marginal comment which reads in part:

"The Beatitudes create what they declare. ... Notice that they do not depend on faith or even on knowing Jesus. This is one way God creates salvation." LSB p 1611. emphasis added.

Then turning to the second cited reference (the account of the last judgment) in Matt 25:31-45 there is this comment:

"The parable speaks of a surprising way that the unbelieving nations have a relationship to Jesus. What they do to these little ones they do to Jesus. Jesus makes these little ones who suffer and are broken, the place of his presence in the world, even for those who do not believe in him or know about it. This is one way Jesus creates salvation for those who do not even know him." LSB, p 1650, emphasis added.

These remarks encompass enough different "heresies" to disturb Christians of every time and denomination. Surely it is clear to even casual Lutheran readers that this teaching is in direct contradiction to Luther's foundational principle of justification by faith alone (not works). It is our understanding that in reaction to complaints, one or more of these egregious comments were deleted from later printings of the LSB, but how did something like this find its way into a Bible published by the ELCA in the first place? As Dr. Robert Benne (a well-respected "traditional" Lutheran theologian) has observed: "The ELCA has now replaced the Gospel of Redemption [with] the Gospel of Inclusion."

Similarly, blatant propaganda revealing a distinct social agenda is found in the LSB notes accompanying Paul's discussion of sexual morality in 1 Corinthians 5 & 6, which is interpreted by the LSB as a condemnation of "how the privileges of the elite have distorted the church's common life." (LSB p 1880). Paul's list of "wrongdoers [that] will not inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9-10) is said to be concerned with "injustice" (LSB p 1881) despite the obvious fact that the transgressors named (adulterers, fornicators, idolaters, "man-bedders," thieves, drunkards, etc.) express a theme of traditional immorality. According to the LSB note regarding Paul's condemnation of those who consort with prostitutes (6:15-20): "In condemning this behavior, Paul is refusing another privilege of the prosperous." (LSB p 1881). Apparently, it is only the "privileged elite" who can be immoral!

Is this a Bible you want your child or grandchild to rely on? If we can't trust our denomination to publish a "Study Bible" that we don't need to be ashamed of, how can we trust the ELCA to provide trustworthy spiritual guidance for us and those we love? (Refer to the essay A Tale of Two Bibles on Emmanuel's website for a longer discussion.)

⁸ The ELCA's Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust was ratified at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. The document is 45 pages of mostly innocuous "politically correct" moralizing that draws deeply on contemporary social perceptions. What it most decidedly is not is a reasoned Scripturally-based study of sexual morality. For example, Gift and Trust addresses none of the five Biblical texts cited in endnote 9. In fact, it does not make any attempt to discuss the Biblical stance on same-gender sexual relations at all, other than to note that people in the ELCA disagree about how Scripture applies. (Remarkably, there is not a single Scriptural citation of any sort in the three pages devoted to a discussion of "Lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships." G&T p18-21)

Another thing that Gift and Trust is not about is an attempt to discern God's will regarding sexual behavior – unless, that is, one assumes that God's will is synonymous with our contemporary concepts of human empowerment. Indeed, the last seven of the ten commandments are summarized as follows: "They identify those actions that violate trust and destroy relationships between people and within community." (G&T p 7) Well, yes – but the notion that those actions are wrong because they offend our Creator is absent from the discussion. Thus there is a neat inversion of motives from the traditional Judeo-Christian ethic: rather than obeying God's commands, trusting that they are intended for our ultimate good, the new "trust" morality encourages people to behave as they think best, assuming that this will please God. But this ignores the pervasive reality of our sinful human condition which obscures the truth of God's good gift of sexuality (Rom 1:24-25). The culmination of this teaching is the elevation of "trust" between individuals and in community as the norm that defines what is moral and what is not – God's expressed will is not of concern. Given the bold nature of this conceptualization, one would reasonably expect to see examples cited as to how the standard of "trust" is employed in Scripture as the basis for moral discernment – but you won't find that in Gift and Trust because you just don't find that standard employed in the Bible either. Instead, what you will find in Scripture are repeated calls to be obedient to God regardless of what seems to make sense to us. Otherwise, what is the point of Abraham's obedience to God's command to sacrifice Isaac? (Genesis 22:1-18) or of Noah allowing his neighbors and kinfolk to drown (Genesis 7)? In human terms, are those "trustworthy" behaviors? Yet these men are held up as paragons of faith. When Jesus was asked a question about sexual morality, He did not speak about trustworthy relationships, but focused instead on what the Creator intended (Mark 10:6-9, Matt 19:3-6). When Paul condemned an incestuous relationship (1 Cor 5) or spoke against consorting with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15-20), the notion of "what fosters trustworthy relationships" is nowhere on his radar – he was concerned with what destroys the soul. Call us naïve and old-fashioned if you like, but we believe the Bible clearly teaches that many things are wrong simply because they offend our Creator. We realize that this is not the opinion of our world, which only cares about what is legal and socially congenial, but we find no permission in Scripture to think otherwise.

The Gift and Trust document is a classic example of the kind of ELCA "doubletalk" that permeates much of the communication emanating from this church in recent years. It is not so much that "wrong" statements are made, but there's a reluctance to also stress the counter-truths that would result in true balance. (Refer to endnote 14 for an example.) Consequently, Gift and Trust utterly fails in its stated purpose of: "... assist[ing] this church in discerning what best serves the neighbor in the complexity of human relationships and social needs in the midst of life." (G&T p 10). It fails because it mostly ignores God's expressed will for His creatures, which is the standard of love-for-neighbor that overrides all others.

⁹ Scripture consistently celebrates the unity of man and woman in marriage as a God-pleasing reflection of God's own nature and His intimate relationship to humanity. Genesis 1:27-28 speaks of God's creation of complementary genders in the context of His own image and His on-going creative work. Genesis 2:24 emphasizes God's intended unity of the male-female partners. These passages are the normative prescription that Jesus himself cited regarding sexual morality (Matt 19:4-6). The entire book of the Song of Solomon is a celebration of the God-pleasing sexual passion of man and woman. Ephesians 5:25-33 speaks of the relationship of husband and wife as a "great mystery" reflecting the relationship of Christ to the Church. Numerous passages in both the OT and NT use the images of bride, bridegroom, and wedding as a symbol of holy joy and God's relationship to His people. So there are many positive images of heterosexual relations in the Bible. Since the Bible also consistently condemns every form of sexual intercourse outside of marriage, it has been the uniform understanding of the historic church that marriage between man and woman is a uniquely holy union in which God Himself is invested.

The Scriptural stance relative to homosexual practice is perhaps most succinctly stated by Dr. Dan O. Via (professor emeritus of New Testament at Duke University) who while arguing the pro-homosexual position states: "... I agree that Scripture gives no explicit approval to same-sex intercourse" and "[My opponent] and I are in substantial agreement that the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally." (Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views, Fortress Press, P94, P93. {Augsburg Fortress Press is the publishing house of the ELCA}). The five specific Biblical texts that are conventionally cited as having direct bearing on homosexual relations are Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:8-11. (Genesis 19:1-29 and Judges 19 also express a disapproval of homosexual actions, but as these are also accounts of sexual violence, they do not provide unambiguous guidance.) A satisfactory discussion of these texts is well beyond the scope of this brief document, but for further reading we would recommend the reflections of Ron Belgau, a Christian homosexual young man who has chosen a life of celibacy. His essay (as well as that of a homosexual young man with the opposite view) may be found at www.gaychristian.net/rons_view.php.

Recognizing the seriousness of this issue relative to the faithfulness of the church in its ministry to homosexual persons, concerned ELCA Lutherans have naturally turned to our leaders for sound Scriptural guidance. Such guidance has not been forthcoming, however. Rather, the official position of the ELCA is to "straddle the fence" with a newly-minted principle of "bound-conscience" according to which Lutherans are acknowledged to hold multiple positions on this topic and "everyone is correct" in doing what their conscience tells them. By taking this position, the ELCA has not only abdicated its responsibility to teach and guide the church relative to this particular issue, but has established a dangerous precedent relative to how other teachings and doctrines of the church may be manipulated to suit the contemporary environment. Rather than striving to be governed by God's will through careful study of Scripture, the ELCA is now settling for the opinions of its members.

¹⁰ The action of the ELCA relative to the ordination of practicing homosexual persons was handled in a very irregular manner. In brief, the long-standing position of the ELCA (and its predecessor bodies) was to require celibacy of clergy who were not married, and applied equally to both heterosexual and homosexual persons. Resolutions to change this policy to permit ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons were brought before the 2005 and 2007 Churchwide assemblies, but failed to achieve the 2/3 "supermajority" vote that is required for major changes in church policy. Prior to the 2009 Churchwide assembly, the ELCA Church Council decided that this matter would now be decided by a simple majority, ignoring both the unanimous advice of its Constitution and Legal Committee and the recommendation of the Council of Bishops that a supermajority was required for such an important decision. The resolution did then pass by a bare majority of 55%. This sequence of events clearly indicates the intent of the ELCA leadership to facilitate a desired outcome. (A more complete documentation of this history is found in Inquiry into the ELCA's Actions and Rationale, by Larry and Jane Von Thun, which may be found on Emmanuel's website.)

¹¹ The commonly expressed argument that the OT and NT writers had no knowledge of a homosexual orientation seems to make neither historical nor theological sense. To make that argument work, one has to assume at least one of the following: (a) that homosexual orientation did not exist at all in ancient times, or (b) that God himself didn't understand this reality, or (c) that God was not involved in what appears in the Bible. That ancient peoples knew of a homosexual orientation is witnessed by the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium (ca 380 BC) in which gay, lesbian, and heterosexual orientations are explained as natural and intrinsic to various individuals. We have no way of knowing if Paul was himself familiar with such concepts through his contacts with Greek culture, but it really doesn't matter since if Paul was just speaking his own opinions in Romans (1:24-27) and 1 Corinthians (6:9-11), then how can these letters, which are so instrumental in shaping Christian thought, provide guidance to

us in other matters? And if God spoke faithfully through Paul regarding salvation, why would He allow Paul to incorporate a falsehood that would cause so much pain? Thus, the question is not really about what Paul and the authors of Leviticus knew about sexual orientation, but whether God really speaks faithfully to us through the Scriptures.

¹² We need to be very careful to distinguish between that which God forgives, and that which is acceptable before God. The question which is dividing the ELCA is not whether God loves all sinners and forgives the penitent – of that there is no debate. There is also no question that Jesus reached out to sinners and lovingly drew them to Him – and that is what we also must do relative to our homosexual brothers and sisters. However, this does not change the fact that Jesus called upon those whom He loved to make the hard choices of discipleship (Luke 14:26-27, 33; Matt 19:16-22; Mark 8:34-38; John 8:11) and we too must act in true loving concern for the immortal soul of our neighbor. Many people are fond of quoting Jesus when He said “Judge not and you shall not be judged” (Matt 7:1) but seem to forget that He also said “When your brother sins rebuke him” (Luke 17:3). Saint Paul makes it clear that we have a special obligation to correct our fellow believers, in loving concern for their souls (1 Cor 5:1-5,9-13).

¹³ The 2009 actions of the ELCA’s Churchwide Assembly have resulted in immediate changes to the church policies that affect the rostering of church leaders. (Rostered leaders are those that are officially approved by the church and may be called or assigned to serve congregations and other ministries such as chaplaincies.) In particular, the ELCA has amended its Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline of Ordained Ministers that as it relates to the behavior of Ordained Ministers, homosexual relationships are no longer forbidden and same-gender partnerships are now an alternative to marriage. Evidence of this fact can be seen in that document by the specific substitutions in the following:

- A sentence which read: “Practicing homosexual persons are precluded from the ordained ministry of this church” was deleted from “Definition and Guidelines.” Instead, references to a pastor’s spouse now include the option of the pastor having a “same-gender partner.”
- A sentence which read: “Ordained ministers who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships” was deleted from Vision and Expectations. In its place is a sentence that reads: “An ordained minister who is in a publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationship is expected to live in fidelity to his or her partner, giving expression to sexual intimacy within a publicly accountable relationship that is mutual, chaste, and faithful.”

Similarly, the ELCA has changed its official position regarding the ideals of marriage as follows:

- A sentence in Definitions and Guidelines that asked pastors “to uphold Christian ideals of marriage in their public ministry as well as in private life” has been changed to read: “Ordained ministers of this church are expected to uphold this church’s ideals of marriage, family, and relationship in their public ministry as well as in private life.”

¹⁴ The ELCA is increasingly employing language which deemphasizes the traditional Christian condemnation of sexual immorality. Consider for instance this statement from Gift and Trust (p 9): “Therefore, we believe that the way we order our lives in matters of human sexuality is important to faithful living, but is not central to determining our salvation.” This is a classic example of distortion by telling the truth selectively. It is certainly true in the sense that even the most grievous sins are forgiven in Christ’s all-atoning sacrifice. However, missing from the picture is the necessary element of repentance. The implication is that continued and willful sexual immorality

may have no bearing on our salvation, in complete disregard of warnings such as Matthew 5:28-30 and Ephesians 5:5. To appreciate how wrong-headed this statement really is, try this substitution: "... the way we order our lives in matters of murder is ... not central to determining our salvation." Or how about child molestation? Hate crimes? Genocide? Surely even such horrific sins are forgiven the penitent, but none of us would shrug them off with such a bland statement if they were practiced as an ongoing way of life. That lack of the traditional Lutheran balance of Law and Gospel is what makes Gift and Trust such a dangerous document. By abandoning such balance in its official Social Statement, it seems clear that the ELCA is determined to minimize the role of traditional sexual ethics in the life of the church. So long as we trust each other, it is now all right to do as we please!

¹⁵ When we speak of the unity of the church, we need to think outside of our own congregation and even our own national denomination. When viewed globally, the ELCA actions have done enormous damage to our relations with a number of our historic mission partners. To put things in perspective, there are approximately 66 million Lutherans worldwide:

- 36 million in Europe (mostly state churches in Scandinavia and Germany where actual participation is low)
- 13 million in Africa (other estimates are as high as 17 million)
- 8.4 million in North America
- 7.3 million in Asia
- 1.1 million in Latin America
- 0.9 million in New Guinea

The ELCA listed its 2010 membership as 4.5 million (down from approximately 5.2 million in 1988) and thus represents a little more than one half of the Lutherans in North America. The fastest-growing Lutheran bodies in the world are in Africa, but these are among the churches that are deeply offended by the actions of the ELCA. In an official statement dated April 29, 2010, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (5.6 million members) forcefully renounced the actions of the ELCA (and other Lutheran churches in Europe) and stated in part:

This Church, (ELCT), stands firmly on the foundation of the **Word of God**; that marriage is as taught in the Bible through the texts [cited earlier]. These texts are being given perverse interpretations, which we cannot accept. All of us in this church, and elsewhere in the world, who reject same-sex marriages, believe that the Bible is self interpreting; and does not need imposition and wishes according to certain people, certain place, or certain authority. Holy Scripture is accurate, fixed and unchangeable. (www.elct.org/news/2010.04.004.html)

In a news release dated Nov 4, 2010, the Ethiopian Evangelical Lutheran Church Mekane Yesus (5.3 million members) has stated that it is questioning its alliance with the ELCA and is allowing one year for the ELCA to rescind its decision regarding ordination of practicing homosexuals:

In a letter addressed to the Right Reverend Mark Hanson, Presiding Bishop of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) reiterated her firm stand, in rejection to the decision of the ELCA that allows gays and lesbians to become clergy and engaged in the Church ministry. The letter further underlined that ELCA's un-biblical direction has compelled the Council to question the place of mutual belonging, unity of purpose and mutual care for the well-being of the whole body that encompasses the EECMY and the ELCA and others who are united in the body of Christ. ... Accordingly, the council unanimously voted to call on the ELCA to consider lifting its decision for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ, the universal Church to which all true Christians belong together. ...The Council further decided that "having given notice to the partners in question, petitions and intercessory prayers be carried out for the Church bodies concerned; by all EECMY members at all levels of the Church during the one year of waiting, that they may truly return to the inspired Biblical teaching." (www.eecmy.org/?page=!news&article=62)

The pain and disruption that has been inflicted on our Lutheran brothers and sisters is evident in the following remarks by Evangelist (Pastor) Challa Baro, speaking for the "Communion of African Lutheran Churches across North America" at an address to a Lutheran Core convocation in Fishers Indiana (Sept 2009):

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I stand before you as a very proud Evangelical Lutheran Church leader. I have been proud of my Lutheran identity along with my fellow African Lutheran leaders across this denomination and beyond. We have served Lutheran churches on both sides of the Atlantic. Currently we the leaders of this vibrant community and the flock of Christ we are called to care for are in the state of confusion, bewilderment and brokenness.

During the [2009 ELCA Churchwide] assembly in Minneapolis our voice was totally shunned. Through persistence we were able to get only two opportunities for two minutes each. During those times we tried to voice our plea and humble request to the assembly. Our request was simple and clear, it was asking the assembly to reconsider its drastic action and exercise righteous restraint from leading the largest Lutheran body in North America into utter Chaos and departure from faithfulness to the Holy Bible and its' own confessions of faith.

Our pleas were seen as [the] unworthy voice of a backward culture from a dark African continent where some assembly partners would never choose to visit. Our voice was diminished to the voice of unfit person from uncivilized culture who is not worthy of sharing his/her opinion. Those words were clearly heard across the continent, as far as we are concerned they were not necessary, unchristian and uncalled for. The assembly leaders should have openly admonished speakers who are utterly disrespectful, biased and full of wrong assumptions about a continent where there are more than 17 million vibrant Lutherans. These 17 million Lutherans are not condoning, approving or blessing polygamy as they were blatantly accused at the assembly, however to the contrary they have relinquished old ways of life to openly live for Christ and witness God's love to the world through their words and actions. Therefore those accusations made from the assembly floor by ordinary delegates all the way to Bishops were blatantly wrong and baseless. Nonetheless we offer our forgiveness for holding grudges or disappointments against brothers and sisters is not what we choose to do.

..... Right now most of our churches are already distracted [by the ELCA decision] from focus on mission; our pastors are facing a difficult task of interpreting and explaining things that are biblically, morally, ethically and culturally despicable and very farfetched from what they know. The common counsel they get from church hierarchies is that it doesn't apply to them. How can a teaching social statement and ministry policy adopted by a given denomination apply to one and exempt the other. Where is the unity in teaching, in faith and in life?

In the last few weeks we have lost hundreds of our Lutheran members to our neighboring Baptist, Pentecostal and evangelical churches. Our leadership team is doing its best to stop this crisis, which is why we are saying that our presence here is not just for a show of face but in search of a real solution for this dangerous Missiological [relating to Missionary work] challenge of our day.

www.lutherancore.org/papers/oromo_reflections.shtml

Similarly pained responses are being voiced by Latino, Asian, and African-American congregations. Thus, the ELCA which has made "inclusiveness" a primary objective, has instead inflicted great damage on our mission-support and outreach efforts.

¹⁶ Many ELCA Lutherans do not appreciate that a great deal of ELCA ministry is conducted under the auspices of pan-Lutheran affiliations. For example, Lutheran World Relief and the Lutheran World Federation are open to all Lutheran Denominations (though not all choose to participate). In fact, a perusal of the ELCA web site will show that the majority of ELCA ministries are referred to as "partnerships." Ministries like Glade Run Social Services welcome support from all donors. Lutheran Social Services is an independent agency that welcomes support from all denominations. Camp Lutherlyn programs are open to youth of all denominations, and Emmanuel members

currently involved in volunteer work at this camp see no reason why they would not continue. Lutheran Marriage Encounter is also a pan-Lutheran organization. The status of such endeavors as the annual Bible Bowl and Youth Gatherings are indefinite at present, as is continued participation in Women of the ELCA. Without question, leaving the ELCA would result in a number of adjustments; however we also anticipate that if some doors close, others will open through our participation with a new group of committed churches. There is no lack of opportunity to continue in mission outside the ELCA.

¹⁷ Per Emmanuel's constitution (approved by the ELCA), Chapter 7.03 states that if 2/3 of the members vote to join another Lutheran denomination, the property ownership will transfer with the congregation.

¹⁸ Unlike the ELCA where decisions may be imposed on the entire denomination by the vote of a quota-based majority at a national assembly (at which our congregation is typically not represented) the constitution of the NALC requires important decisions to be ratified by two-thirds of the member congregations.

¹⁹ One guiding premise of the NALC is to maintain as "lean" an organizational structure as is practical, as opposed to the ELCA with its large central offices, staffs, and committee expenses. We believe this will result in more opportunity for our benevolence dollars to go directly to ministries that help people. Whereas the ELCA is preoccupied with social ministries and causes such as global warming, the NALC is committed first and foremost to bringing the Gospel to all people, an objective which, in terms of traditional Evangelism, is sadly deemphasized in the present ELCA. (Those inclined to challenge that assertion are invited to reflect on how rarely the Prayers of the Church in our ELCA worship materials mention bringing souls to Christ in comparison to the numerous petitions related to social welfare and environmental concerns.) We also like the NALC plan to couple each congregation with a sister congregation to encourage mutual support and shared ministry. Very importantly to many of us, the formation of the NALC has been strongly encouraged by the very foreign mission partners who have been so alienated by the actions of the ELCA (see endnote 15). Both the Tanzanian and Ethiopian Lutheran churches sent representatives to the convocation that formed the NALC, and a bishop from Tanzania participated in the installation of Paull Spring, newly elected bishop of the NALC.

For further information about the NALC, we strongly encourage visiting the website www.thenalc.org.