

NB. The next two sections on Frequently Asked Questions were taken from the ELCA web site. Further information can be found there.

Frequently Asked Questions

About the 2009 Churchwide Assembly actions regarding human sexuality

About the Social Statement

What happened at the assembly in regard to the social statement?

The assembly adopted by exactly a two-thirds vote the 10th social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) entitled *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*. The statement is now available online at www.elca.org/assembly/actions and is expected to be published in mid-autumn.

What are social statements?

Social statements are an important means by which the ELCA addresses social concerns and carries out its active participation in society. They are theological and teaching documents that assist the ELCA and its members in forming judgments but also govern institutional policy in terms of the its witness as a public church. Other examples include statements on environment, economics, and health care.

How do social statements come into existence?

Social statements are developed through a participatory process over a 5-6 year period. In particular, this social statement involved a broad and reflective process of study, discussion, prayer, and dialog engaging the entire church beginning in 2002. It involved three studies and over 30,000 responses to those studies. In 2008, 111 synodical hearings took place. Forty-two synods adopted memorials to the churchwide assembly, some calling for its adoption (37) while others called for its rejection (5).

What is in the statement?

The social statement draws upon classic Lutheran themes to address the complex issues of sexuality. These include justification by grace through faith, trust, vocation, the Ten Commandments, and the freedom of the Christian for service to the neighbor. It addresses a broad scope of issues, including marriage, family, children, divorce, sexuality outside marriage, and friendship. It also speaks about social issues, including sexual abuse, global sex-trade exploitation, commodification of the body, professional misconduct, and social structures that support relationships and enhance trust.

What does the social statement say about homosexuality?

It states that the ELCA is opposed to all forms of violence or discrimination against homosexuals and is committed to welcoming all people, regardless of sexual orientation, and their families into our congregations. On the matter of whether or how to regard lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, the social statement describes several broadly representative positions that members in this church hold. It acknowledges that

these follow from strongly held different understandings of Scripture and tradition. The statement recognizes that these differing understandings will continue to exist among ELCA members and it affirms the possibility of living together in continued discussion despite our disagreements. We can do this by drawing deeply on the historical Lutheran tradition of respecting the other's conscience and seeking a caring response to the needs of the neighbor.

What is the relation of the social statement to previous statements and messages of our church?

Previous documents or statements on this topic, including the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops, the action of the Churchwide Assembly in 2005, predecessor church body statements, and previous messages will continue to provide guidance. If there are inconsistencies among these documents, the social statement, as a policy of this church, takes precedence.

What does "bound conscience" mean?

The idea of a conscience being "bound" to a particular interpretation of Scripture and confessional understanding is rooted in the Bible (See Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 for instance.) and the Lutheran heritage. It does not mean that a person simply declares "him or herself" to be bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture and tradition. Rather, it puts the emphasis on how each Christian is called to respect and protect other believers with whom they disagree when those positions are also tied to their faith and to a carefully reasoned, thoughtful interpretation of Scripture and tradition. This is one way that each person can bear the burden of the differences on this matter.

Where can I find more information about all of this?

Additional information including an *executive summary* of the social statement is (FAQs) available at by [clicking here](#).

About the ministry policy resolutions

What happened with regard to the recommendations concerning ministry policies and congregational recognition of publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?

The assembly adopted four resolutions that commit the ELCA to bear one another's burdens and respect bound consciences in these matters; to allow congregations that choose to do so to find ways to recognize and support lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships and hold them publicly accountable; and to find a way for people in such relationships to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA. The fourth resolution points toward a specific way to allow rostering while respecting bound consciences.

What is the content of the first resolution about bearing one another's burdens and "bound conscience?"

The assembly's first action was to vote by a 78 percent majority to require that, in the implementation of any resolutions on this matter, the ELCA would commit itself "to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor and respect the bound consciences" of all. This

sets a distinctive commitment for how the ELCA will move forward together, as was exemplified by the discussion at the assembly. As Dr. Ishmael Noko, the general secretary of The Lutheran World Federation observed during his speech, the members of the assembly spoke about these controversial issues with dignity and respect for each other in "a way that brought honor" to the ELCA and its witness to the world.

What about resolution #2 regarding same-gender couples?

After a great deal of passionate, but respectful debate, the assembly recorded a 60 percent vote (note: only a majority was needed to adopt any of these resolutions) that the ELCA should commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable couples who wish to have lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

Does this mean the ELCA has endorsed the blessing of same-gender unions?

No, the assembly was not asked to consider and thus took no action concerning a churchwide rite of blessing. The assembly's action means that a congregation, however, is *permitted* to find ways to hold publicly accountable same-gender relationships that intend to be lifelong and monogamous and to surround these couples and their families with prayer and support in a variety of ways. The action adopted does not require any congregation to do so. The fourth resolution does require public accountability of anyone in such a relationship who seeks to be an ELCA pastor, deaconess, diaconal minister, or associate in ministry.

What was the meaning of the final two resolutions regarding pastors and other rostered leaders of this church?

The assembly again deliberated long and seriously, frequently pausing for prayer, and voted by 56 percent to adopt a resolution that committed the ELCA to find a way for people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders. Subsequently, the assembly voted by 68 percent to affirm a series of directives indicating ways in which ELCA policies will be changed to create the means necessary to do this. The changes must honor the differences of convictions within the ELCA while maintaining this church's present approach of having consistent churchwide ministry policies that are applied by synods, congregations, and others according to local ministry needs. This intent was affirmed by the adoption of an amendment to the fourth resolution that "the ELCA make provision in its policies to recognize the conviction of members who believe that this church shall not call or roster people in publicly accountable, lifelong monogamous, same-gender relationships."

What are the policy documents that must be changed?

The relevant policies are spelled out in several documents of this church that guide candidacy, call, and discipline. They are "Vision and Expectations" for each of the rosters, "Guidelines and Definitions for Discipline," the "Candidacy Manual," and the "Manual of Policies for Management of the Rosters." These documents will be revised as directed by the Churchwide Assembly and approved as appropriate by the ELCA Church Council. The revisions need to be consistent with the governing documents of this church. In addition, other guidelines may need to be developed.

When will these changes begin?

These policy changes will not take place immediately, although work will begin very soon after the assembly with both a sense of urgency and a commitment to care and due diligence. Specific language must be developed by the appropriate churchwide committees and units in consultation with the Conference of Bishops. The Church Council has the responsibility to approve all final language. It next meets in November, although it is not clear if all necessary work can be completed by that time. Existing policies remain in effect until such time as the policy changes are approved by the Church Council.


What does "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" mean?

Policy documents will be revised to give guidance on how the phrase "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships" will be understood in reference to those seeking to serve in rostered ministry. These guiding documents would be revised through thoughtful and prayerful consultation among offices, units, committees of the churchwide organization, the Conference of Bishops, and global and ecumenical ministry partners before consideration by the Church Council.

FAQs on Bound Conscience

[Download the document](#) 

Why do the ideas of conscience and bound conscience seem so unfamiliar?

For a variety of reasons the idea of conscience has not had a major place in moral reflection for many decades. But the term “conscience” is used often in the New Testament (Acts, Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, 1&2 Timothy, Hebrews and 1Peter), and is common in moral thought throughout most of Christian history. In the Lutheran church, as evident in Reformation writings and its central theological principles, the concept plays an important part in ethics and pastoral care. Indeed, the Reformation’s frequent attention to conscience highlights the pastoral underpinnings of all Lutheran theology and the Lutheran rejection of both papalism and its individualistic equivalent, “enthusiasms” in ethical judgments. (See [Reflections on the Bound Conscience in Lutheran Theology](#) by Timothy J. Wengert  for definitions of these terms and for an extended reflection on the whole issue of bound conscience.)

How is conscience defined?

There is a vast amount of literature on this topic but we may take as our starting point Martin Luther's most comprehensive definition: "For conscience is not the power to do works, but to judge them. The proper work of conscience (as Paul says in Romans 2

[15]), is to accuse or excuse, to make guilty or guiltless, uncertain or certain. Its purpose is not to do, but to pass judgment on what has been done and what should be done...” (*Judgment on Monastic Vows* [Luther’s Works, 44: 298]).

What is meant, then, by “conscience”?

The first meaning of conscience, then, refers to the capacity of the human being to distinguish right from wrong and truth from falsehood. However, Luther and other Reformers also use the term “conscience” in a second way by drawing on Romans 2 and the Christian belief that human beings have an unconditional moral responsibility before God. They apply conscience more generally to mean the entire person as one stands before God and views one’s whole self in the light of God’s Word — God’s Word being understood as law and gospel. This sense that conscience describes the entire person makes clear that talk about conscience is not talk about lightly held or unconsidered “opinions” but about Christians in their personal identity as they stand before God. In most Christian moral traditions conscience provides a way to speak about the integrity of the individual moral agent in her or his deepest understanding of good moral actions and of actions that are wrong, destructive, and dehumanizing. For a person to act against his or her own conscience is itself always wrong because it involves self-contradiction and betrays one’s deep and settled convictions.

Is “bound conscience” in the Bible?

The phrase is not in the Bible, but the concept certainly is. This is most readily illustrated by Paul’s counsel in Romans 14 or 1 Corinthians 8 regarding the acceptability of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. It is crucial to recognize that in the Pauline churches these issues were not minor matters. Meat sacrificed to idols involved, on the one side, the very freedom of faith to declare the idols to be nothing and, on the other, the sense that eating such meat really is participation in idol worship. Paul clearly felt that eating such meat represented no danger to the faith of Christians and carried no taint of idolatry. And yet precisely because these matters were significant, Paul teaches that those Christians who believed this are obligated to walk in love by avoiding meat for the sake of the neighbor’s conscience. This is because that neighbor may well view the matter in such a way as to affect faith itself. If some members of the community are, after study and reflection, still deeply convinced that it smacks of idolatry, then everyone should refrain in order not to scandalize and offend these conscience-stricken members of the community. (It is significant to notice that Paul seems to assume a continuing conversation within the community as well.)

Where could I find references to the idea of “bound conscience”?

Perhaps the most well-known reference is Luther’s trial for heresy before the emperor in 1521 where he concluded by stating “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason... I am *bound* by the Scriptures I have quoted and *my conscience is captive to the Word of God*” [emphasis added]. This position was for Luther not an easy one to hold and it was not, as later historians often portrayed it, the first instance of a self-referencing conscience shedding the shackles of medieval religion. Luther’s conscience was not free but bound to and by God’s Word, which assured him of God’s free and unconditional forgiveness in Christ. Luther is careful to distinguish his

stand from willful and capricious rebellion out of pride or egotism. He has studied Scripture in great depth. He has debated with others. He has written articles and read responses and responded to responses. He continues to be open to future arguments. He could conceivably be wrong. But at the moment of his speaking, he literally has no choice. He *must* be true to what, at that moment, he understands Scripture to say. To do anything else would be self-contradictory, and deeply wrong. It would be duplicity or false witness before neighbor and before God. In moral and religious matters, Christians can experience themselves as bound by their relationship with God to particular understandings from Scripture.

But how does it apply to the debate about same-gender relationships?

Bound conscience describes the situation of those who, after careful reflection and discussion, hold a position on pastoral and ethical concern because they are convinced of it by particular understandings of Scripture and tradition and see it as inextricably linked with faithful living. It also emphasizes the importance of respecting the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ. The reference to bound conscience in relation to questions about same-gender relationships was first introduced to the ELCA conversation in the 2005 Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. (See [Report and Recommendation of the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality](#) (2005), p.11). This idea was foundational to the task force recommendation, later adopted by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly, that the ELCA “concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements...” on this matter. The passage from the report *also* draws attention to how Lutheran Reformers referred to bound conscience in matters regarding pastoral and ethical questions in relation to the life of faith.

What did the 2005 report state?

“When Christians disagree about an ethical issue of this magnitude, one important category for determining the policy of the church may be the recognition that participants in this debate are disagreeing not out of pride or selfish desires, but because their consciences are bound to particular interpretations of Scripture and tradition. The careful way Luther approached moral dilemmas (e.g., in *The Estate of Marriage* [Luther’s Works 45: 17-49] or *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* [Luther’s Works 46: 93-137]) showed a genuine concern for the integrity of conscience...”

So, is this all about each of us asserting our own conscience-bound understanding?

The very fact that several different positions may be bound to Scripture means that we cannot simply assert one interpretation of Scripture over another but are called to respect consciences in the community of faith on this matter. The emphasis of “conscience-bound” is not on declaring oneself to be conscience-bound; rather it is that we recognize the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:28–29). But not every opinion concerning appropriate behavior constitutes a settled matter of conscience. We grow and continue to mature throughout our lives. Much of our behavior is guided not by conscience but by customs and conventions that we have not fully examined. Our self-centeredness constricts our moral insights too, as does the inadequacy of our knowledge and our particular social context. It

is for this reason that Christians speak of the formation of conscience through study, dialogue, correction, and reflection within a community of faith. It is when we have come — by deep communal searching — to settled convictions so deep that they constitute our very moral identity that we may speak, in humility but with earnest conviction, about what we can and cannot do “in conscience.” In most cases, over time that communal searching will bring all members of the community to deep and shared convictions, but not always.

But still, couldn't anyone just declare themselves to be conscience-bound about anything?

No, the positions described by the task force regarding whether and how to regard lifelong monogamous, same-gender relationships are ones that have been refined and developed over the course of years of debate; each one has support by scholars, church leaders, and many others in the community of faith. Each position refers to careful readings of Scripture. Each understands the cultural and scientific information in different ways. Each is concerned deeply about loving the neighbor and serving the community of the church. Yet each position differs in its conclusion. Again, the point is not simply about toleration but more profoundly a call for bearing the burden of full respect for the fellow believer. It is about the generosity of refraining from coercing members to act in ways they deeply believe to be wrong. It is about speaking and acting with awareness that rejecting the other's stance might also shake that neighbor's faith and trust.

Can conscience be wrong?

Lutherans believe that human beings are fallible and that no one can achieve moral perfection. We believe that conscience is the power to make moral judgments about action but we do not believe that conscience is some sort of implanted, unerring message from God. Conscientious convictions can be wrong. However, even if one believes that the person with whom one disagrees is mistaken in her or his judgments, it is morally very dangerous to compel that person to act against her or his conscience. This is so partly because however deep one's own convictions on the matter are, one must acknowledge that they, too, may be mistaken. But it is also so because to compel someone to act against conscience is an attack on their very integrity as a moral agent, and from their point of view it will be experienced as an attack on the right and the good on which they may be prepared to stake their own well-being.

Is this matter of conscience so central that it determines whether one is saved?

No, it does not. While these questions about morality and ministry practice are significant for individuals and for the life of the church because they affect people deeply, it is important to be clear that in **the** most important sense, one's faith is *not* at stake.

Lutherans do not believe that our salvation rests on the correctness of morals or practice. Through Christ's atoning sacrifice we are “cloaked in the righteousness of God.” This is the good news by which we live. In gratitude for the love and mercy we have received, we seek, of course, to live into the life of Christ — that is, into the life of love in which the commands and law of God teach us to discover both our own failures and the ways to live that bless the world. While differing on the morality of same-gender sexual behavior, members of this church remain confident that it is by God's grace in Christ received in

faith that we are saved. Free in Christ and bearing one another's burdens, we can make decisions about this important matter according to our best reverent judgments, knowing that we but "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12) and are not of one mind. But we are called to do so praying daily that the Holy Spirit may work within us and among us in order that the sinful hearts of each and