

March 13, 2008

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

First draft of a proposed Social Statement on Human Sexuality released by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

Response of E. Roy Riley, Bishop, New Jersey Synod, ELCA

The release of the first draft of a proposed ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality marks another step in a long journey together for the Lutheran Church toward deeper understanding and discernment in the increasingly complex sphere of human sexuality.

This is a first draft. Over the next eight months, congregations of this church will have opportunity to study and discuss the draft and make proposals for revision. In early 2009, a proposed social statement will be written based on this draft and the responses, eventually coming to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis for consideration (August 2009).

The length of the draft (50 pages with footnotes) indicates both the complexity of the subject matter and the deep seriousness with which the task force has undertaken the work of declaring the theological and confessional grounding. I trust that the responses of the church will be offered out of the same in-depth, open-minded, and prayerful deliberation.

In my initial reading of the draft, I have noted in particular the following thoughts:

- While love is to be at the center of all relationships, the statement gives great and important emphasis to the matter of trust in every relationship.
- Ethics for some are rule-driven; the ethics from this statement are responsibility-driven: responsibility for our selves, our neighbors, and the common good.
- There is a very strong emphasis on the critical role of families as the primary places for learning what love and trust are all about.
- The draft places enormous importance on the protection of the most vulnerable in matters of human sexuality, especially children.
- The draft recognizes that families are found in a variety of forms beyond the traditional, nuclear family.
- An especially strong affirmation of traditional marriage is provided.
- In all relationships, *the degrees of intimacy should be matched to degrees of affection and commitment; thus the highest degrees of physical intimacy, such as intercourse, should be matched with and sheltered by the highest level of legally binding commitment, as is found in marriage.*

- The range of life circumstance is recognized honestly and pastorally, from the young delaying marriage, to those who choose to remain single, to those who are single-again as a result of divorce or death of a spouse, to the marriage versus economics issues of senior citizens.

In the consideration of homosexuality, the draft offers a number of significant statements, including the following:

- *confesses with regret the way in which Lutheran historical teachings concerning homosexuality sometimes have been used to tear apart families with gay or lesbian members;*
- acknowledges that after many years of study and conversation, *this church does not have consensus regarding loving and committed same-gender relationships;*
- recognizes that while *some pastors and congregations will advocate repentance and celibacy, other pastors and congregations will call our same-gender-oriented brothers and sisters in Christ to establish relationships that are chaste, mutual, monogamous, and life-long.*

The draft also addresses a variety of other concerns, including the commercialization of sexuality and its enormous negative impact on the common good.

I am grateful for this church that takes so seriously its own faith and God's call to take that faith into a very complex and sometimes deeply ambiguous world. We welcome all who wish to engage with us in this continuing journey of faith and life.

[Portions in *italics* are quoted from the draft statement.]