



**Upper Susquehanna Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

*Pastoral Letter*  
*from Bishop Robert Driesen*

*The First Week in Lent,*  
*February 26, 2009*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This is a difficult letter to write, because I realize that it touches the lives of so many, all of whom are seeking to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite our differences, however, all of us should be able to agree that questions related to human sexuality, while going to the core of what it means to be a human creature, are transformed, like every aspect of our lives, by our baptism into Christ. The sciences and other human disciplines, while informative, are not determinative, as we wrestle with what God's intention is for us, having created us as sexual beings.

The ELCA Social Statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, is the result of a long process that had its beginning in a request made by the voting members of the 2001 Churchwide Assembly, with an additional mandate provided in 2007 related to the rostering of homosexual persons in committed and faithful relationships. In many ways, it is unfortunate that this statement will be overshadowed by the rush to focus on the single issue of homosexuality, and, in particular, the ministry standards of this church.

I find the statement's starting place a good one. The gift of sexuality is seen within the context of the two great commandments: love of God, love of neighbor. Since human sexuality is an expression of human love, it should reflect God's love, including God's faithfulness and trustworthiness. Trust in relationships is a significant theme throughout the document.

While much more can be said about human sexuality from a theological perspective, there is little (but some things) in the statement with which I can disagree. Clearly, however, on matters related to rostering, the task force recognizes no consensus in this church, nor does it see a consensus building. Instead, the task force, in response to the mandate given it by the 2007

**Sexuality Statement**



# Upper Susquehanna Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

## Sexuality Statement

Churchwide Assembly, returns the question to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, providing it with several resolutions that propose that this church engage in a process of clarifying its intent and agreeing to principles before moving on to practice.

If the Assembly answers the questions posed by the task force in the affirmative, this church would move in the direction of providing what many describe as a “local option.” Bishops, synods, synodical candidacy committees, congregations, congregation councils, and call committees would decide whether they believe that God is calling a particular person to rostered ministry who is in a faithful, committed same-sex relationship. If so, this church would add its assent in this particular instance and in this particular place.

I appreciate the skill with which the task force seeks to move our discussion of this question away from the usual way of suggesting that there are but two mutually exclusive, competing answers. That is, most who argue that we must maintain our present policy (unmarried persons regardless of their sexual orientation are called to a life of celibacy) do so by insisting that this is simply a matter of fidelity to Scripture. Those, on the other hand, who seek to change the policy often argue that this is a matter of justice. Both arguments, in my humble estimation, are overly simplistic.

Utilizing the notion of “bound consciences,” the task force seeks to end the tug-of-war between the two extremes, asking whether we can accept the bound consciences of others as also binding on us, by our giving honor to those whose convictions lead them to a different conclusion than our own.

I believe this is an interesting, respectful approach, and far better than what I so often hear. Nonetheless, I share with you my personal concerns about what this proposal would mean for this church, its place in the one, holy catholic and apostolic church, and the potential insurmountable challenges it would present to good order.

As I have often jokingly suggested, if this church elected me pope (God forbid!), the issue would be decided for good or ill, once and for all. But, for



# Upper Susquehanna Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

## Sexuality Statement

the reasons offered by Martin Luther and the confessors, this would be unwise—even disastrous. It is also true, however, that just as threatening to the Church as it would be for one person to bind the consciences of all Christians, an equally disastrous and opposite danger would be for all Christians to be their own popes. While this is not what the task force is suggesting--it insists upon the community's assent--I worry, nonetheless, about what would happen, in practice, if I reached a conclusion that was completely opposed to all those referenced above. While I would hope that the synod council and everyone else--including call committees and congregations--would willingly be bound by my bound conscience, is this what is truly best for this church, and is this what actually would happen in every case? After all, we are also in bondage to sin. Sin will always enter our discussions, and even our decisions. Therefore, will not “structured flexibility” be chaos in the end? Frankly, I do not know, but it deeply concerns me. Even more so, I worry about what this means for us as we seek to be this expression of the Church in the world.

While I know that this ongoing discussion has become tiresome, I much prefer continuing the discussion until, at last, we can say, “It seems good to us and the Holy Spirit.” This is Christ’s Church, not mine, and not yours. While I felt compelled as your bishop to share some of my thoughts, I recognize that others may have far more thoughtful responses than I. Whatever your views, may it be Christ who guides your thinking, not in isolation, but wherever two or three gather together in his Name.