

1	Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust	
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42 **I Introduction**

43

44 Invited to answer the question, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus
45 answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and
46 with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall
47 love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”
48 (Matthew 22:36–40). Christians respond to these commands in the confident hope that by God’s
49 grace alone we are set free to worship God and love our neighbor.

50

51 This social statement addresses the question: how do we understand human sexuality within the
52 context of Jesus’ invitation to love God and love our neighbor (Romans 13:9–10; Galatians
53 5:14)?

54

55

56 **II A distinctly Lutheran approach**

57

58 Our first response to this question is to remember that, as Lutherans, we are the inheritors of a
59 rich theological tradition that assists us in discerning how to live faithfully in a complex world.
60 Our starting point is the foundational Lutheran understanding that we read and understand the
61 Bible in light of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This “good news” of the
62 Gospel that we are freed from captivity to sin (justification by grace through faith on account of
63 Christ) allows us to respond to God’s mercy through love for and service to the neighbor¹ (our
64 vocation in the world).

65

66 As Lutherans, understanding that God’s promised future is the transformation of the whole
67 creation, we believe that the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is engaged deeply and
68 relationally in the continuing creation of the world. We anticipate and live out the values of this
69 promised future concretely in the present. It is therefore in the midst of daily life in the world that
70 we are called to the vocational task of serving the neighbor.

71

72 Central to our vocation, in relation to human sexuality, is the building and protection of trust² in
73 relationships. As justified and forgiven sinners, our efforts to create trust are in response to God’s

¹ *Neighbor*, as used in this statement, includes various meanings. It often follows the use in Matthew 22 where Jesus clearly intends family, friends, coworkers, and local acquaintances. But it also can be enlarged to include groups and broad social networks, which are important in Scripture also (Galatians 6:10). The meaning here depends on the context.

² *Trust*, as used in this statement, is a fundamental characteristic of right relationship. God is unfailingly trustworthy to us and all of creation. Just as we learn by faith that a right relationship with God is a relationship of trust rather than rebellious self-assertion, a right relationship with the neighbor is one in which each seeks to be truly worthy of the other’s trust. The trustworthiness that both fosters and can bear the weight of the others’ trust emerges as a central value to cherish and promote. Broken promises and betrayed trust through lies, exploitation, and manipulative behavior are exposed, not just as an individual failing, but as an attack on the foundations of our lives as social beings. Trust is misunderstood if reduced to an emotion, an abstract principle, or a virtue of one’s disposition, although these all suggest its multidimensional role as an axis in human life.

In *The Responsible Self* (1963), H. Richard Niebuhr set Christian ethical reflection on a new course by

74 faithful (trustworthy) relationship of love for the world in Christ. We are called therefore to be
75 trustworthy in our human sexuality and to build social institutions and practices where trust and
76 trustworthy relationships can thrive.

77

78 ***Justified by grace through faith***

79 As Lutherans, we believe that we are justified by grace through faith. The Lutheran Confessions
80 guide us in our understanding of justification by identifying three intersecting affirmations: *solus*
81 *Christus*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. (Christ alone, grace alone, and by faith alone).³ Deeply
82 grounded in Scripture understood as the living Word of God, these together proclaim Jesus Christ
83 as central to the Gospel:

- 84 • *Solus Christus* (Christ alone) insists that the purpose of Scripture is to reveal Jesus Christ as
85 the Savior of the world. Scripture is to be interpreted through the lens of Christ's death and
86 resurrection for the salvation of all.
- 87 • *Sola gratia* (grace alone) affirms that we are saved by grace alone. As with *solus Christus*,
88 *sola gratia* means that there is nothing a person can do through his or her action that will
89 create a right relationship with God. Only God's grace can do that.
- 90 • *Sola fide* (by faith alone) affirms that, through the hearing of God's Word, the Holy Spirit
91 ignites faith (trust) in God within us.

92

93 These three emphases also tell us that sin does not have to do simply with the keeping or breaking
94 of rules or laws. Rather, we sin when we turn away from God and look to ourselves. Sin turns us
95 toward obsessive self-concern, with disastrous consequences for ourselves and others.

96

97 We live therefore within the paradox that in our sexuality, as in other aspects of life, we always
98 encounter both our own sinfulness and God's grace. It is only through Christ that we can turn in
99 faith to trust God, which leads immediately to our baptismal vocation to love and serve the
100 neighbor.

101

102

103

treating trust as the center of Christian thinking based on the question of trust or distrust of God as the fundamental option in human existence. In terms of human relationships, he wrote, "Faith as trust or distrust accompanies all our encounters with others and qualifies all our responses" (118). Philosophers and theorists such as Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, 1958), and Michael Polanyi (*Personal Knowledge*, 1958) have advanced reflection on the centrality of promise and networks of trusting reliance in human affairs and knowledge. Some social scientists have begun to identify social trust as an indispensable feature of healthy organizations, institutions, and whole societies, and social distrust as one of the destructive forces at work in the breakdown and dissolution of organized social arrangements. Such reflections operate in the background of this statement.

³ Each "sola" points to the same saving event. That is, they together proclaim Jesus Christ as central to the Gospel, each perceived from a different dimension. Other dimensions of God's saving work, other "solos," also have been associated with Lutheranism. Especially in the nineteenth century, Lutherans began to emphasize *sola Scriptura*, although the Confessions rarely used that phrase. Luther more often spoke of the Word of God alone (*solus Verbo*), by which he meant fundamentally the oral proclamation of the Gospel. For a key source suggesting the solas listed here, see *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV. 120 in: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

104 *Christian freedom in service of the neighbor*

105 Lutherans are not reluctant to live confidently within the difficult, complex, and ambiguous
106 realities of daily life. Lutherans understand that active engagement in the world is integral to
107 Christian identity. They are able to remain secure in Christ in the midst of the confusions, lack of
108 clarity, and struggle that God's calling entails. "Did we in our own strength confide," sang
109 Luther, "our striving would be losing." In Christ, "God is making his appeal through us" (2
110 Corinthians 5:20; 1 Peter 4:11). Lutheran theology prepares us precisely to hold in creative
111 tension the paradoxes and complexities of the human situation. This is also the case with regard
112 to human sexuality. God has created human beings as part of the whole creation and with the
113 intention that we live actively in the world (Romans 12–13; Ephesians 5–6).

114
115 In his letter to the Galatians, Paul testifies that the foundation of Christian identity is what God
116 has done for us through Christ (Galatians 2:20; 3:24–28). Luther echoes this affirmation in his
117 treatise, "The Freedom of the Christian," claiming that Christians are at one and the same time
118 radically freed by the Gospel and called to serve the good of the neighbor:

119 A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

120 A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.⁴

121

122 Luther believed that these two affirmations were the key to understanding the entirety of
123 Christian life in the world. Following Paul, he understood freedom to be the basis for Christian
124 life and ethics.⁵ Luther believed that this understanding of Christian freedom flowed from the
125 doctrine of justification as that which "preserves and guides all churchly teaching and establishes
126 our consciences before God."⁶

127

128 In other words, because we are radically freed in Christ, we are called in that freedom to love and
129 serve our neighbor as Christ loved and served us (Galatians 5:1; 5:13). Only in the freedom from
130 preoccupation with the self and the burden of unworthiness before the perfection of God's law
131 can such concern for the neighbor become possible.

132

133 The Lutheran theological understanding of God's salvation and our utter dependence on God's
134 grace, grounded as it is in Scripture (Romans 3:21–26; Ephesians 2:8–10), has crucial
135 implications for Christian ethics and discernment:

136 • In emphasizing that salvation is not a reward for morally approved behavior, Lutheran

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* in *Luther's Works 31* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344. This treatise is also available as part of *Three Treatises*, a printing of three key essays from 1520 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 277.

⁵ Luther wrote that this book "contains the whole of Christian life in a brief form, provided you grasp its meaning." *Ibid.*, 343. See also the editor's introduction, 329.

⁶ This citation is taken from Martin Luther's preface to the published doctoral thesis on justification for Peter Palladius, who defended them before Wittenberg's theological faculty on June 1, 1537 (Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe/ [Schriften/], 65 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993. Hereafter identified by "WA") 39 I, 205, 2–5) For the Lutheran Confessions, the article of justification is central for all church teaching. See, for instance, The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, III.6 (BC 2000:563), quoting the Apology, IV.2–3 (BC 2000: 120) and Luther's comments on Psalm 117 (Luther's Works 14:37). The connection to ethics is demonstrated in the Augsburg Confession, IV–VI and XX and the Apology, art. IV, especially par. 122–182 (BC 2000: 140–49).

137 theology teaches that salvation is by God’s grace alone and not dependent upon human
138 action. We receive in trust, as Paul declares, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus
139 Christ for all who believe” (Romans 3:21–22).

- 140 • Justified by faith, Lutherans understand that, because of God’s gift, their freedom in Christ
141 leads to a vocation of responsible and humble service to the neighbor (Romans 13:8–10).
- 142 • Our vocation of service leads us to live out our responsibilities primarily in light of and in
143 response to the neighbor’s needs, often in complex and sometimes tragic situations.
- 144 • God’s mercy and compassion instill in us the capacity to empathize with others as “the love
145 of Christ urges us on” (2 Corinthians 5:14). They teach us to walk with each other in joy,
146 humility, and tender care.
- 147 • The love of God and neighbor, fulfilled by faith alone, are the two commandments by which
148 Christ taught us to measure and interpret every other commandment in Scripture (Matthew
149 22:36–40).

150

151 *God’s continuing creation*

152 Christians believe that God is the creator of all that is and that this ongoing handiwork is good,
153 good, and very good! (Genesis 1:31). Both narratives of God’s creative activity in the book of
154 Genesis (Genesis 1 and 2) reveal God’s goodness and desire for close relationship with human
155 beings as integral to the ongoing handiwork of creation. In Genesis 1, this desire is expressed in
156 humanity’s creation—male and female—in the image of God. In Genesis 2, that close
157 relationship is revealed as God scoops up and breathes life into earth to form humankind. As a
158 mark of personal confidence, the Creator even entrusts to human beings the task of naming and
159 tending the inhabitants of the earth God so clearly loves. The tender love and goodness of God’s
160 creative activity includes sexuality and gendered bodies (Genesis 2:23–25).

161

162 Just as both creation narratives reveal how God intends a relationship of trust with humanity, so
163 also the creation of male and female (Genesis 1) and the companionship of Adam and Eve
164 (Genesis 2) reveal that human beings are created for trusting relationships with each other. In
165 these narratives of God’s creative activity, we understand from the beginning that love and trust
166 are at the heart of God’s relationship with human beings. We also understand that creation is
167 God’s ongoing activity and not yet complete.

168

169 The biblical narratives also depict how people violate God’s trust, turning away from God
170 (Genesis 3). They want to be like God. They make excuses and apportion blame. They hide from
171 God. They cover their nakedness. The full breakdown of relationship enters, complete with curses
172 and exile, as depicted in the betrayal of brother against brother (Genesis 4). The relationship of
173 trust with God and each other, entailed in the image of God, is broken: people sin, that is, human
174 beings resist their own God-given identity and destiny.

175

176 Nevertheless, God remains faithful, seeking out and inviting all into intimate relationship as sons
177 and daughters. This dignity of the human being reflects God’s deep love and stands against all
178 forms of violence, discrimination, and injustice. Scripture reveals to believers that just as God
179 does not abandon that which God loves, neither should we.

180

181 We recognize, therefore, our need for God’s law to order and preserve the world, expose our sins,
182 and to show us the depth of our capacity to turn away from God and neighbor.

183 And yet we are consoled and encouraged because, even in the face of broken trust, God includes
184 all of creation in the unfolding of the human community and the world. As human beings, we
185 participate in creation's work that continues even now in fruitfulness and productivity.⁷
186

187 For believers, it is hope in God's future, not in an idealized past,⁸ that inspires participation in
188 God's changing, open, and inexhaustible creation. Christians believe that God's promised future
189 includes the transformation of the whole creation (Romans 8:19–25). Guided by this vision,
190 Christians anticipate and live out the values of God's promised future concretely in the present.
191

192 Through the saving work of Jesus Christ, we understand how Scripture ultimately is future
193 oriented and filled with promise; creation is fulfilled in new creation (2 Corinthians 5: 17;
194 Revelation 21:1–5; 2 Corinthians 3:18, Isaiah 43:16–21). Even now, by the power of the Holy
195 Spirit, our lives may reflect the love of Christ crucified and risen. "The life I now live in the
196 flesh," declares Paul, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"
197 (Galatians 2:20). Thus, Christ-like love for the neighbor informs all our activities, sexual and
198 otherwise, now and into God's future. In anticipation of that future, the ethics of sexuality is thus
199 not purely a personal matter, but one that affects the witness of the Christian community and the
200 well-being of the larger community (1 Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 6:10; Revelation 21:8).
201

202 ***God's law at work in the world***

203 As Lutherans, we believe that God has given the law not only to reveal sin and order society (1
204 Timothy 1:9), but also to point us to God's intentions and promises for our lives.
205

206 Luther described two functions of the law, one *theological* and the other political or *civil*.⁹ The
207 *theological* use of the law reveals sin, confronting us when we have broken our relationship with
208 God and driving us to the forgiveness offered in the Gospel. When the law forces us to examine
209 the extent to which we are ensnared—individually and collectively—in patterns of self-serving,
210 exploitation, abuse, and shame, we experience the power of the theological use of the law in
211 revealing to us the brokenness of our relationship with God. Knowing that we can do nothing to

⁷ For one example of how Martin Luther describes creatures as the hands, channels, and means through which God continually creates and blesses, see *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par 26, 389 in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert,

⁸ "The attempt—with the origin and nature of humankind in mind—to take a gigantic leap back into the world of the lost beginning, to seek to know for ourselves what humankind was like in its original state and to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually created is hopeless. It fails to recognize that it is only from the Christ that we can know about the original nature of humankind.... Only in the middle, as those who live from Christ, do we know about the beginning." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 62.

⁹ See Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* in *The Christian in Society, Luther's Works 45* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 75–129. The term "third use" of the law, not named here, indicates the law's role in guiding Christians as they seek to orient and conduct their lives; it receives significant attention in the *Formula of Concord*. This social statement streamlines its discussion of law by focusing solely on the "two uses," but does recognize the role of law as a guide for Christians. Since the third use is defined in the Confessions as the civil use of the law by the repentant and reborn who keep the law with a willing spirit, this seems warranted. See *Formula of Concord, Epitome*, VI.6, 502 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

212 bring about our own salvation, Lutherans reject the notion that we can perfect either ourselves or
213 society.

214

215 The *civil* use of the law, at the same time, provides order in society to support the maintenance of
216 peace and justice in this imperfect world. The function of the civil law is, in a sinful world, to
217 protect from harm all those whom God loves, particularly the most vulnerable.¹⁰

218

219 Lutherans understand that God’s law, in its civil use, permeates and undergirds basic structures of
220 human society to support life and protect all people in a world that remains under the sway of sin.
221 Such social structures,¹¹ as the Lutheran Confessions identify them, include ministry, marriage
222 and family, civil authority, and daily work.¹² Because these structures are temporal, anticipating
223 the arrival of God’s promised future, they must respond continually to human needs for
224 protection and flourishing.

225

226 ***The Ten Commandments***

227 When asked to summarize what God requires in the law, most Christians will turn first to the Ten
228 Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) as God’s guide for their own behavior and that of others.

229 What is distinctive about these commandments for Lutherans is that we understand them in light
230 of faith, which confesses God as creator and redeemer of the world. Thus, in addition to revealing
231 human sin, they constrain wrong behavior and point the way for us to serve the neighbor and care
232 for the world.

233

234 The first three commandments together point to our need as sinful human beings “to fear, love,
235 and trust in God above all things.” The remaining seven describe our responsibility to serve the
236 neighbor, especially the most vulnerable. They identify those actions that violate trust and destroy
237 relationships between people and within community. They also instruct us how to protect and
238 nurture relationships and build up the community: to honor those wielding legitimate authority
239 (fourth); preserve and enhance life (fifth); support boundaries, decency, and faithfulness in sexual
240 relations (sixth); prevent exploitation (seventh); and put the best construction on the actions of all
241 (eighth).

242

¹⁰ *Smalcald Articles* III.2, 311–12 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

¹¹ In Lutheran theology these structures have often been called “orders of creation” to express the point that they exist as structures that God uses to order human life. The origin of the term “orders of creation” and its original conceptualization can be traced to Christoph Adolf von Harleß (see *Christliche Ethik*, 7th ed. [Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1875], 491), who proposed this term to highlight the provisional nature of human social arrangements. It soon became linked to a static notion of creation and the idea of “orders” began to be understood as fixed, one-time acts of God in the past.

As such they came to indicate the establishment of human society in a hierarchy of fixed and unchanging social arrangements. On this basis, at one time some Lutheran theologians objected to the democratic developments in modern states on the grounds of the divine right of kings, defended the legitimacy of Hitler’s regime, or rejected the ordination of women as contrary to nature. While “orders of creation” also has been theologically enriching within Lutheran tradition, the concept of social structures is used here because it is less technical and more suggestive of God’s ongoing creative activity to shape and reshape social structures for human protection and good.

¹² *Augsburg Confession*, XVI, 48–52; *Apology*, XVI, 231–33; *Small Catechism*, Household Chart, 365–67; *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, 400–25 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

243 The ninth and tenth commandments “fence the heart.” They show us that not only individual acts
244 but also thoughts, words, and legal actions done for base motives are wrong and they invite us to
245 right action. All these things honor God by loving the neighbor.
246

247 The sixth commandment relates in a particular way to human sexuality. To this end, as Luther
248 wrote in the *Small Catechism*, “We are to fear and love God so that we lead pure and decent lives
249 in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.”¹³
250

251 When this commandment is violated, many things are adulterated—relationships are damaged,
252 people are betrayed and harmed. Promiscuity and sexual activity without a spirit of mutuality and
253 commitment are sinful because of their destructive consequences for individuals, relationships,
254 and the community. The Apostle Paul’s list of vices (e.g., fornication, impurity, licentiousness,
255 idolatry) warns believers of the dangers of gratifying “the desires of the flesh,” thereby turning
256 away from belonging to Christ and God’s kingdom (Galatians 5:19–21). The breakdown of trust
257 through the sexual adulteration of the bonds of the committed, intimate, and protected
258 relationship of marriage wreaks havoc for the family and the community, as well as for the people
259 involved.
260

261 When this commandment is kept, however, care and attention are given to all aspects of life and
262 behavior, including sexuality, which creates marriage relationships and practices of trust. “There
263 is no law against such things,” declares Paul, because “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
264 generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” are the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–
265 26).
266

267 We are called to participate in God’s continuing creation as people who seek to fear, love, and
268 trust in God above all things. As such, we strive to lead lives that uphold relationships and a
269 social order where human beings can thrive, and to support one another in those endeavors. As
270 sinners justified through the Gospel we are able to receive creation fully as gift so that we can
271 serve our neighbor in need freely.
272

273 ***Our vocation to serve the neighbor***

274 We do not live in private worlds without thought or consideration for historic events or the impact
275 of our actions on individuals, the community, or the environment. Rather, the responsibility to
276 serve the neighbor through our daily callings seeks to shape human relationships and a world
277 community that honors God and anticipates God’s future transformation of all of creation. In so
278 doing, all people, in whatever situation they find themselves, are called to actively promote the
279 good of the neighbor.
280

281 We recognize the complex and varied callings people have in relation to human sexuality: being
282 in relationships, being single, being a friend, living in a young or aging body, being male or
283 female, being young or old, or having different sexual orientations and gender identities. In
284 whatever the situation, all people are called to build trust in relationships and in the community.
285

¹³*The Small Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 12, 353 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

286 The way we live out these callings, of course, will be flawed and imperfect. As forgiven sinners,
287 we recognize through faith that our imperfect lives are means by which God cares for and
288 sustains creation. We can live both humbly and boldly, knowing that our efforts are still infused
289 with God's love and blessing for ourselves, our neighbors, and the world. By the mercy of God,
290 in the midst of evil, betrayal, brokenness, loneliness, and loss, we dare to believe that
291 opportunities do open, forgiveness is sought and tendered, good may be rescued, and trust can be
292 restored.

293

294 *Lutheran social ethics*

295 Lutherans understand human sexuality, and ethics in general, to be part of God's rule in this
296 world, in contrast to God's rule in the coming world through the Gospel. "We know," declares
297 Paul, "that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the
298 creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait
299 for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22–23). Therefore, we believe that the way
300 we order our lives in matters of human sexuality, although important for us as people of faith, is
301 not central to the Gospel itself. We are able to be realistic and merciful with respect to our
302 physical and emotional realities, not striving for angelic perfection as if our salvation were at
303 stake. Even marriage is an earthly blessing on this side of heaven (Matthew 22:30).¹⁴

304

305 A Lutheran approach to ethics makes use of Martin Luther's understanding of the two realms of
306 God's action.¹⁵ With the *left hand* (worldly realm), God rules in this world, maintaining order and
307 restraining evil through the law and reason. With the *right hand* (spiritual realm), God brings in
308 the coming world of Christ's rule where sin, death, and evil will reign no longer. This new world
309 is experienced by faith alone, most clearly when God announces in Word and sacraments the
310 forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

311

312 Set free by the death and resurrection of Christ (the spiritual realm), Christians are sent back into
313 this created world, which is experienced no longer as a threat, but as God's gift. There we are
314 called to love and serve the neighbor, and to uphold and promote human community and the
315 preservation of creation. This is work we undertake not only with other Christians, but together
316 with all people of good will.

317

318 As we determine how to love and serve the neighbor in a complex world, Lutherans rely on the
319 Scriptures. We also are guided by the Lutheran Confessions, and we bring to this task a particular
320 appreciation for the gifts of knowledge and learning. We believe that God also provides insights

¹⁴ "The Lutheran reformers developed a helpful approach to dealing with matters of morality and ethics. It serves both to safeguard the Gospel against the temptations for additional requirements than the grace of God, and to see within which context the issues of family, marriage and human sexuality can be addressed from a Lutheran point of view. Hence, we suggest that the doctrine of the two kingdoms can be applied as a useful tool to deal with these matters." The Lutheran World Federation: Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue, LWF Report, 6. www.lutheranworld.org/Council/2007/20070322-Council.html (February, 1, 2009) (The link for the report can be found at the bottom of the Web page.) This report was received at the LWF Council in March 2007 and commended to LWF member churches.

¹⁵ This teaching about the two realms of God's action often is called the "doctrine of the two kingdoms." See *op cit.* *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, especially 88–93.

321 to us through reason, imagination, the social and physical sciences, cultural understanding, and
322 the creative arts (Philippians 4:8). One reason Lutherans have engaged so deeply in education
323 and research is that we believe God works through such means to guide us in reading Scripture
324 and in understanding how we will live in a world of continuing complexity and change.¹⁶
325

326 Thus, we recognize that this church’s deliberations related to human sexuality do not threaten the
327 center of our faith, but rather require our best moral discernment and practical wisdom in the
328 worldly realm. We also understand that in this realm faithful people can and will come to
329 different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action. Therefore, this social statement
330 seeks to assist this church in discerning what best serves the neighbor in the complexity of human
331 relationships and social needs in the midst of daily life.
332
333

334 **III Trust and human sexuality**¹⁷ 335

336 God loves human life so much that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). We know, therefore,
337 that God’s love embraces us totally, including our sexuality. We also know that God created each
338 of us not only as individuals, but also as people who live in a variety of social communities and
339 contexts. In response to God’s love for us, we seek life-giving relationships with others and create
340 social structures and practices that support such relationships.
341

342 *The complexity of human sexuality*

343 God created human beings to be in relationship with each other and continually blesses us with
344 diverse powers, which we use in living out those relationships. These include powers for action,
345 reasoning, imagination, and creativity.
346

347 Sexuality especially involves the powers or capacities to form deep and lasting bonds, to give and
348 receive pleasure, and to conceive and bear children. Sexuality can be integral to the desire to
349 commit oneself to life with another, to touch and be touched, and to love and be loved. Such
350 powers are complex and ambiguous. They can be used well or badly. They can bring astonishing
351 joy and delight. Such powers can serve God and serve the neighbor. They also can hurt self or
352 hurt the neighbor. Sexuality finds expression at the extreme ends of human experience: in love,
353 care, and security; or lust, cold indifference, and exploitation.
354

¹⁶ The long-standing Lutheran emphasis on education stems, in part, from understanding it as an arena for service to the neighbor. See *Our Calling in Education* (Chicago: ELCA, 2007), 7–10.

¹⁷ This statement attempts to maintain the distinctions frequently made between “sexual/sexuality,” “sex,” and “gender.” Generally speaking “sexual/sexuality” here refers to biological facts, while “sex” refers to behavior, as in “having sex.” “Gender” is reserved, most often, to designate the social and cultural classifications and constructions of biology and behavior. These distinctions are, of course, hard to maintain with precision, but are consistent with dictionary definitions. The following selected definitions are taken from William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1969–1970.): *Sexuality*: “The quality of possessing a sexual character or potency.” *Sex*: “The sexual urge or instinct as it manifests itself in behavior;” or “Sexual intercourse.”; *Gender*: “Classification of sex.”

355 Sexuality consists of a rich and diverse combination of relational, emotional, and physical
356 interactions and possibilities. It surely does not consist solely of erotic desire. Erotic desire, in the
357 narrow sense, is only one component of the relational bonds that humans crave as sexual beings.
358 Although not all relationships are sexual, at some level most sexual relationships are about
359 companionship. Although some people may remain single, either intentionally or unintentionally,
360 all people need and delight in companionship and all are vulnerable to loneliness.

361
362 The need to share our lives with others is a profound good (Genesis 2:18). The counsel to love
363 and care for the neighbor is not a command that is foreign to our created natures; rather, reaching
364 out in love and care is part of who we are as relational and sexual beings. Even if we never have
365 sexual intimacy, we all seek and respond to the bonds and needs of relationships.

366
367 Sexual love—the complex interplay of longing, erotic attraction, self-giving and receiving
368 defined by trust—is a wondrous gift. The longing for connection, however, also can render
369 human beings susceptible to pain, isolation, and harm. The desire for sexual love, therefore, does
370 not by itself constitute a moral justification for sexual behavior. Giving and receiving love
371 always involves mixed motives and limited understanding of individual and communal
372 consequences.

373
374 The sharing of love and sexual intimacy within the mutuality of a mature and trusting relationship
375 can be a rich source of romance, delight, creativity, imagination, restraint, desire, pleasure, safety,
376 and deep contentment that provide the context for individuals, family, and the community to
377 thrive.

378
379 Though sexual love remains God’s good gift, sin permeates human sexuality as it does all of life.
380 When expressed immaturely, irresponsibly, or with hurtful intent, then love—or its counterfeit,
381 coercive power—can lead to harm and even death. Too often lust is mistaken for love, which in
382 turn becomes the rationale for selfish behaviors. When infatuation, lust, and self-gratification take
383 the place of the responsibilities of love, cascading consequences result that can be devastating for
384 partners, children, families, and society.

385
386 In recognizing the many ways in which people misuse power and love, we need to be honest
387 about sin and the finite limitations of human beings. We also recognize the complexity of the
388 human and societal forces that drive the desire for companionship, for intimate relation with
389 another, for belonging, and for worth. The deep interconnectedness of the body with the mind and
390 spirit suggest the complexity of such situations. The biblical narratives both rejoice in the
391 splendor of sexual attraction (Song of Songs 4) and are candid about the harm that can result from
392 human sexuality (2 Samuel 11; 2 Samuel 13; Matthew 5:27–30).

393
394 ***Social trust and the common good***

395 Trust is a critical element that holds together couples and relationships, households and families,
396 social structures and institutions. We normally relate concepts of trust, promise, loyalty, and
397 reliance to individual relationships. These concepts, however, also describe economic life,
398 political arrangements, social policies, and social structures. Contemporary social scientists call
399 attention to these almost invisible bonds of trust and reliance that are necessary for a well-

400 functioning society.¹⁸ They are beginning to articulate what close-knit communities have long
401 known: social trust undergirds healthy societies.

402
403 Trust is essential for the good of society. This is true in general terms for the proper functioning
404 of communities and pertains especially to the social practices and institutions that affect and are
405 affected by human sexuality. The development of social trust must be a central concern for all
406 who seek the good of the neighbor in the pursuit of justice and the common good. Lutherans
407 understand that social structures cannot create faith, hope, and love, but they trust that God does
408 bless and provide appropriate gifts through such structures and, in some cases, in spite of them.

409
410 The concept of social trust has long been central to both Jewish and Christian social and political
411 thought through the focus on the common good and the need of the neighbor. As the Apostle Paul
412 writes, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...” (Galatians
413 6:10).¹⁹

414
415 When human beings serve their neighbor rather than themselves, they are acting in ways that
416 enhance social trust. However, the challenge of establishing, maintaining, and fostering social
417 trust involves more than private actions. It also requires shaping legal, commercial, technological,
418 and civic structures for the common good. Examples include the social institutions of the family,
419 the conduct of commerce, laws enacted and enforced by government, and community standards.
420 A justice-oriented legal code, social contracts and institutions that protect the weak and most
421 vulnerable, and the protection of human rights all illustrate the kinds of things that can contribute
422 to and support social trust.²⁰

423
424 Social trust is grounded in the practice of mutual respect for the dignity of all people and their
425 consciences. Strong communities ensure social trust when they provide social support for
426 disagreement and dissent, and nurture the values of mutual respect and regard for the opinions of
427 others. Within the church community, we contribute to respect for the understandings and
428 experiences of others by living out the eighth commandment: “We do not tell lies about our
429 neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we...come to their defense,
430 speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”²¹

431
432 As this church and its members engage the changes and challenges of contemporary society
433 related to human sexuality, careful thought must be given to which changes enhance and which
434 erode social trust. The development of social trust must be a central concern for Christians who

¹⁸ One excellent source in the literature is theorist Niklas Luhmann. See *Trust and Power: Two Works by Niklas Luhmann*; trans. Howard Davis, John Raffan, Kathryn Rooney Chichester (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979).

¹⁹ Scripture uses the words obedience (Romans 13) or honor (Exodus 20) not to refer to the slavish following of rules, but to the relationship of mutual trust spoken of here in which the repentant sinner willingly responds to God’s commands. Luther captures this scriptural attitude well in his exposition of the fourth commandment in *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, especially par. 167–178, 409, in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

²⁰ It is no accident, for example, that in economics “credit” plays a crucial role and uses a word from the same Latin root as “creed.” Credit literally means “he or she believes” that a person will repay a loan.

²¹ *Small Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 16, 353 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

435 seek the good of the neighbor in the pursuit of justice and the common good. This church must be
436 a leader in refocusing attention on practices and attitudes that build social trust. Likewise, it must
437 contribute to the development of responsible economic and social policies and practices that
438 shape the expression of sexuality within social life.

439
440 ***Human sexuality and our calling to establish trust***

441 Sexual relationships may be among our most profoundly intimate, crucial, and self-giving
442 expressions of trust. Here our human lives are vulnerable to joy and delight and to hurt and
443 exploitation. From spiritual intimacy with God to the closest physical intimacy with another,
444 relationships flourish according to the depth and trustworthiness of commitments. In the arena of
445 human sexuality, no human relationships can thrive in the absence of trust.

446
447 Human beings learn about trust from God. When the Lutheran Confessions discuss faith in God,
448 they understand it fundamentally as trust²² or absolute confidence in God. In faith nurtured by the
449 Holy Spirit through Word and sacrament, we entrust our whole lives to God. We experience
450 God's unfailing trustworthiness in God's relationship with us through the Gospel and through
451 God's deep mercy and compassion in response to our human frailty. In response, as forgiven and
452 justified people, we seek to respond to God's love for us through care for the neighbor, fostering
453 trust in order that individuals and society might flourish.

454
455 What then, does trust in relation to human sexuality look like when understood in terms of service
456 to the neighbor? In responding to this question, we reflect on God's love for and continuing
457 involvement in creation and on the saving action of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world.
458 We look to Scripture, to the Lutheran Confessions, to the social and physical sciences, and to
459 human reason, mercy, and compassion. In so doing, we boldly but humbly affirm that trustworthy
460 relationships and social structures will:

- 461 • promote, value, and respect the human dignity of each individual;
462 • protect all from physical, emotional, and spiritual harm;
463 • demonstrate mercy, compassion, and justice for all, especially the "least of these"— those
464 who are most vulnerable in relationships and in society;
465 • ensure accountability and responsibility in relationships and the community;
466 • promote the welfare of individuals and the common good of society; and
467 • value the security and protection afforded through the making of promises, including social
468 and contractual commitments.

469
470 These foundational and protective conditions provide the necessary context and support for
471 trusting relationships that are:

- 472 • loving, that include and reflect an abundance of *agape* (unlimited love, forgiveness,
473 compassion, care and concern), *eros* (passion, excitement and joy), and *philia* (care for the
474 neighbor);
475 • life-giving, where affirmation is mutually shared, encouragement is given and received, and
476 individual talents are nurtured and supported;
477 • self-giving in the face of both opportunities and challenges;
478 • fulfilling, that is, a place where a spirit of joy and an atmosphere of peace prevails;

²² The Latin version of the Augsburg Confession uses the word *fiducia* (trust).

- 479 • nurturing of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being;
- 480 • marked by truth-telling and honesty;
- 481 • faithful in word and deed, including sexual fidelity;
- 482 • committed, demonstrating loyalty in the face of difficult as well as good times;
- 483 • supportive for all who grow old, are vulnerable or weak;
- 484 • hospitable, offering support and encouragement to others;
- 485 • a blessing to society and serving the good of the neighbor.

486
487

488 **IV Sexuality and social structures that enhance social trust**

489

490 Lutherans believe that God works through social structures for the good of society. The Lutheran
491 Confessions identify marriage and the family as foundational structures that support human
492 community.

493

494 ***Marriage: shelter and context for trust***

495 Trust is a quality of relationship that, while never perfected, is nurtured and reinforced over time.
496 The trust and mutuality afforded by marriage can make marriage one of the most beautiful,
497 abiding, and transformative forms of human relationship. Depth of care, matched to an intimacy
498 of touch, creates relationships much stronger than simple and momentary erotic interest. Sexual
499 intimacy, together with promises of fidelity and public accountability, nurtures bonds that allow
500 people to thrive and provides a rich context for the care and support of children.

501

502 This church understands marriage as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope
503 authorized legally by the state and blessed by God. The historic Christian tradition and the
504 Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman,
505 reflecting Mark 10: 6–9: “But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.
506 For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two
507 shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined
508 together, let no one put asunder.” (Jesus here recalls Genesis 1:27; 2:23–24.)

509

510 Lutherans have long affirmed that the public accountability of marriage, as expressed through a
511 legal contract, provides the necessary social support and social trust for relationships that are
512 intended to be sustained throughout life and within changing and often challenging life situations.
513 In this country, pastors carry both legal and religious responsibilities for marriage. In carrying out
514 these responsibilities, pastors hold and exercise pastoral discretion for the decision to marry
515 legally. In the community of the church they preside over the mutual promises made between a
516 couple seeking the lifelong, monogamous, and faithful relationship of marriage.

517

518 Marriage requires constant care and cultivation. It is intended to protect the creation and nurturing
519 of mutual trust and love as one foundation of human community. It is a binding relationship that
520 provides conditions for personal well-being, the flourishing of the partner, and the possibility of
521 procreation and the nurturing of children. It is also intended to be a blessing to the community
522 and the world. Because of promises of fidelity and public accountability, marriage provides a
523 context of love, trust, honesty, and commitment within which a couple can express the profound
524 joy of relationship as well as address the troubles they encounter throughout life.

525 Christians believe that marriage is not solely to legitimate physical sexual intimacy, but to
526 support long-term and durable communion for the good of others.²³ It is a communion within
527 which the play and delight of physical love are crucial expressions of the depth of trust, and in
528 which lovemaking can be a tender and generous act of self-giving that tends to the joy and
529 pleasure of the other.

530
531 The public character of marriage also implies a civil responsibility. Marriage is intended not only
532 to protect the people who are married, but to signal to the community their intention to live a
533 peaceful and mutually fulfilling life, even as they endeavor to strengthen the community in which
534 they live. The public promises of marriage between a man and a woman, therefore, also protect
535 the community by holding people accountable to their vows. Fidelity to promises blesses all who
536 depend on this trust within and beyond the marriage.

537
538 The Christian commitment to marriage recognizes that sin enters all relationships, both within
539 and outside the institution of marriage. All marriages fall short of intentions and difficulties are
540 inevitable, both because of the different needs and desires of the two individuals, and because of
541 sin, which places the anxious concern for self before the needs of the other. Infidelity to marriage
542 promises betrays the intimate trust of the partner, the security of the family, and the public trust of
543 the community.

544
545 Precisely because marriage is the place where deep human trust and needs abide, it also can be a
546 place of great harm. Many experience neither love nor trust within marriage. Harming another
547 emotionally, physically, or spiritually, including through the misuse or abuse of power, is a
548 profound injury. It is also a betrayal and violation of the shelter and trust that are intended within
549 the marriage relationship. Particular care must be taken to support and find safe haven for all who
550 are at risk within a marriage. This includes those whose sense of self is destroyed or damaged
551 within the marriage relationship and, therefore, whose ability to act or advocate for their own
552 health and safety maybe inhibited or lost.

553
554 This church recognizes that in some situations the trust upon which marriage is built becomes so
555 deeply damaged or is so deeply flawed that the marriage itself must come to a legal end (Matthew
556 19:3–12). This church does not treat divorce lightly nor does it disregard the responsibilities of
557 marriage. However, in such situations, it provides support to the people involved and all who are
558 affected. Divorced individuals are encouraged to avail themselves of pastoral care, to be assured
559 of God’s presence, forgiveness, and healing, and to remain in the communion of the church,
560 recognizing the all-encompassing mercy of God.

561
562 This church will provide supportive pastoral care to those who are divorced. Further, it believes
563 that those who wish to remarry may gain wisdom from the past and may be assured of the
564 Gospel’s freedom, in the midst of brokenness and forgiveness, to enter into their new
565 responsibilities in joy and hope. This church will tend pastorally to the special concerns of

²³Luther’s concluding explanation of the sixth commandment says about marriage: “...above all it is essential that husband and wife live together in love and harmony, cherishing each other wholeheartedly and with perfect fidelity.” *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 219, 415 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

566 blended families, children of divorced parents, and to the particular tensions that may accompany
567 family breakdown and transition.

568
569 Despite its awareness of the presence of sin and failure in marriage, the Christian tradition places
570 great emphasis on the value of marriage for a husband and wife. It is in marriage that the highest
571 degrees of physical intimacy are matched with and protected by the highest levels of binding
572 commitment, including legal protection. It is in marriage that public promises of lifetime
573 commitment can create the foundation for trust, intimacy, and safety.

574
575 Both the couple's intent in their lifelong promises and the civil requirements for marriage are
576 important. Mutual promises of enduring care and fidelity, made before God, allow a couple to
577 open themselves to each other. They permit the sharing of profound and tender affection as well
578 as deep vulnerabilities and anxieties. The legal contract creates a public arrangement within
579 which a couple may safely and equitably share their assets and resources, arrive at joint decisions,
580 anticipate children, protect and nurture them, and plan for a shared future.

581
582 The church's historical experience supports its confidence that solemn promises, made before a
583 company of witnesses who ask for God's blessing on a man and a woman, have the power to
584 create a unique framework within which two people, a new family, and the community may
585 thrive. This church has confidence that such promises, supported by the contractual framework of
586 civil law, can create a lifetime relationship of commitment and cooperation.

587
588 It must be noted that some, though not all, in this church and within the larger Christian
589 community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar
590 benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong monogamous
591 relationships. They believe that such accountable relationships also provide the necessary
592 foundation that supports trust and familial and community thriving. Other contractual agreements
593 such as civil unions also seek to provide some of these protections and to hold those involved in
594 such relationships accountable to one another and to society.

595
596 ***Lifelong monogamous same-gender relationships***

597 Within the last decades, this church has begun to understand and experience in new ways the
598 need of same-gender-oriented individuals to seek relationships of lifelong companionship and
599 commitment as well as public accountability and legal support for those commitments. At the
600 same time, public debates and deliberations have continued regarding evolving understandings of
601 human sexuality in medicine, social science, and corresponding public policy about same-gender
602 relationships.

603
604 We in the ELCA recognize that many of our sisters and brothers in same-gender relationships
605 sincerely desire the support of other Christians for living faithfully in all aspects of their lives,
606 including their sexual fidelity. In response, we have drawn deeply on our Lutheran theological
607 heritage and Scripture. This has led, however, to differing and conscience-bound understandings
608 about the place of such relationships within the Christian community. We have come to various
609 conclusions concerning how to regard lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships,
610 including whether and how to publicly recognize their lifelong commitments.

611

612 While Lutherans hold various convictions regarding lifelong, monogamous, same-gender
613 relationships, this church is united on many critical issues.²⁴ It opposes all forms of verbal or
614 physical harassment and assault based on sexual orientation. It supports legislation and policies to
615 protect civil rights and to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public services. It
616 has called upon congregations and members to welcome, care for, and support same-gender
617 couples and their families, and to advocate for their legal protection.

618
619 The ELCA recognizes that it has a pastoral responsibility to all children of God. This includes a
620 pastoral responsibility to those who are same-gender in their orientation and to those who are
621 seeking counsel about their sexual self-understanding. All are encouraged to avail themselves of
622 the means of grace and pastoral care.

623
624 This church also acknowledges that consensus does not exist concerning how to regard same-
625 gender committed relationships, even after many years of thoughtful, respectful, and faithful
626 study and conversation. We do not have agreement on whether this church should honor these
627 relationships, uplift, shelter and protect them, or on precisely how it is appropriate to do so.

628
629 In response, this church draws on the foundational Lutheran understanding that the baptized are
630 called to discern God's love in service to the neighbor. In our Christian freedom, we therefore
631 seek responsible actions that serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the
632 conscience-bound beliefs of others. We understand that, in this discernment about ethics and
633 church practice, faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of
634 Scripture²⁵ and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on
635 the basis of "the bound conscience,"²⁶ will include these different understandings and practices
636 within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.

²⁴ See ELCA Church Council minutes for 1993 and ELCA Churchwide Assembly minutes for 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1999 respectively: CC93.03.37; CA91.07.51; CA93.03.4; CA95.6.50; CA99.06.27. These actions may be found at www.elca.org.

²⁵ "The difference between interpreters should not be understood as a conflict between those who seek to be 'true to Scripture' and those who seek to 'twist the Bible' to their own liking. The disagreements are genuine." This is the conclusion of Dr. Arland J. Hultgren and Dr. Walter F. Taylor Jr. Both are members of the ELCA and both are highly regarded scholars and teachers. The citation is from Arland Hultgren and Walter Taylor, *Background Essay on Biblical Texts for Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality*. (Chicago: ELCA, September, 2003), 18. This essay was written at the request of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. It can be accessed at: <http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/historical> (February 1, 2009).

²⁶ The Apostle Paul testifies to conscience as the unconditional moral responsibility of the individual before God (Romans 2:15–16). In the face of different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action, the concept of "the conscience" becomes pivotal.

When the clear word of God's saving action by grace through faith is at stake, Christian conscience becomes as adamant as Paul, who opposed those who insisted upon circumcision. (Galatians 1:8). In the same way Luther announced at his trial for heresy, "Unless I am persuaded by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason ... I am conquered by the Scripture passages I have adduced and my conscience is captive to the words of God. I neither can nor desire to recant anything, when to do so against conscience would be neither safe nor wholesome" (WA 7: 838; Luther's Works 32:112).

However, when the question is about morality or church practice, the Pauline and Lutheran witness is less adamant and believes we may be called to respect the bound conscience of the neighbor. That is, if

637 This church recognizes that, with conviction and integrity:
638

- 639 • On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that same-gender sexual
640 behavior is sinful, contrary to biblical teaching and their understanding of natural law. They
641 believe same-gender sexual behavior carries the grave danger of unrepentant sin. They
642 therefore conclude that the neighbor and the community are best served by calling people in
643 same-gender sexual relationships to repentance for that behavior and to a celibate lifestyle.
644 Such decisions are intended to be accompanied by pastoral response and community support.
645
- 646 • On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that homosexuality and even
647 lifelong, monogamous, homosexual relationships reflect a broken world in which some
648 relationships do not pattern themselves after the creation God intended. While they
649 acknowledge that such relationships may be lived out with mutuality and care, they do not
650 believe that the neighbor or community are best served by publicly recognizing such
651 relationships as traditional marriage.
652
- 653 • On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does
654 not address the context of sexual orientation and lifelong loving and committed relationships
655 that we experience today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served
656 when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public
657 accountability, but they do not equate these relationships with marriage. They do, however,
658 affirm the need for community support and the role of pastoral care, and may wish to
659 surround lifelong monogamous relationships or covenant unions with prayer.
660
- 661 • On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does
662 not address the context of sexual orientation and committed relationships that we experience
663 today. They believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender
664 relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the
665 same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage. They surround
666 such couples and their lifelong commitments with prayer to live in ways that glorify God,
667 find strength for the challenges that will be faced, and serve others. They believe same-
668 gender couples should avail themselves of social and legal support for themselves, their
669 children and other dependents, and seek the highest legal accountability available for their
670 relationships.
671

salvation is not at stake in a particular question, Christians are free to give priority to the neighbor's well-being and will protect the conscience of the neighbor who may well view the same question in such a way as to affect faith itself. For example, Paul was confident that Christian freedom meant the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not at stake in questions of meat sacrificed to idols or the rituals of holy days (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8:10–14; and 10:23–30). Yet he insisted that, if a brother or sister did not understand this freedom and saw eating this meat as idolatry to a pagan god, the Christian was obligated to “walk in love” by eating just vegetables for the neighbor's sake! (Romans 14:17–20).

This social statement draws upon this rich understanding of the role of conscience and calls upon this church, when in disagreement concerning matters around which salvation is not at stake, including human sexuality, to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), honor the conscience and seek the well-being of the neighbor.

672 Although at this time this church lacks consensus on this matter, it encourages all people to live
673 out their faith in the local and global community of the baptized with profound respect for the
674 conscience-bound belief of the neighbor. This church calls for mutual respect in relationships and
675 for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community. Regarding our life
676 together as we live with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one
677 another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect.
678

679 ***Loving families: ground and source for social trust***

680 One of the places where social trust is most important is in the context of the family. In
681 contemporary society, the term “family” includes a variety of forms, more akin to the older term
682 of “household,” exclusively employed by Luther to include immediate family members, relatives,
683 and others.
684

685 Lutherans understand that intimacy, trust, and safety, particularly for those most vulnerable, are
686 best sheltered within families. When safety and trust are eroded or destroyed within the family, it
687 becomes a dangerous or even demonic place where abuse can reign. Thus, Lutherans take great
688 care to support whatever creates and sustains strong families as a foundation and source of trust.
689

690 Children learn either trust or distrust from their earliest relationships of dependence upon parents
691 and others in the household. Patterns of loyalty and confidence established in the family can reach
692 into all future relationships. Those who do not learn to trust face significant obstacles to
693 becoming trustworthy individuals in the more complicated relationships of modern life and may
694 find it difficult to develop a mature and healthy sexuality.
695

696 The family is a primary source of trust precisely because of the remarkable level of commitment
697 and care that characterizes familial bonds. While scripture places family as secondary to the
698 community of God’s people (Matthew 10:37; 12:49), it also attests to the family’s foundational
699 role in protecting and nurturing human community (Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1–4). The
700 Lutheran Confessions recognize this role²⁷ and the connection between family and sexuality in
701 their discussions of the commandments related to each.²⁸
702

703 This church regards the family as an indispensable social institution because of its role in
704 establishing conditions of trust and protection of the vulnerable. As such, society properly both
705 regulates and shelters families through family law that exists to ensure that these critical
706 responsibilities will be met and that dependent family members will be protected and treated
707 justly when households dissolve.²⁹

²⁷ This is evident in Luther’s commentary on parental responsibilities. See *Small Catechism*, Preface, par. 19–20, 350, and *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 167–78, 409–10 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

²⁸ See, for instance, Luther’s reference to the fourth commandment while discussing the sixth: *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 167–78, 413ff.; see also par. 206 and 218 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

²⁹ These include laws governing marriage, dissolution of marriage, inheritance, guardianship, custody, parental rights and duties, property, pensions, social security, taxes, and health benefits. The interdependence and mutual responsibilities of married couples are crucial in welding them into a legal unit as well as a loving household. Parents and guardians are legally compelled to attend to the welfare, support,

708 Social service ministries of this and other churches work to secure the well-being of families in
709 many ways. They give particular attention to those who have no family or to families with limited
710 resources. They raise their moral voice to affirm and celebrate the life-giving importance of
711 familial covenants of care. They teach others to embrace these callings of responsibility and love.
712

713 At the same time, realistic awareness of weakness and sin prevents Lutherans from romanticizing
714 family life or setting up false ideals. In particular, sexual abuse or betrayal of promises and
715 commitments within the family constitute flagrant harm precisely because they occur within the
716 context where trust is most assumed.
717

718 This church recognizes its responsibility in congregations and through social ministry
719 organizations to support its members and others in all the difficulties that beset family life and to
720 seek ways to ensure and support the protection of the most vulnerable.
721

722 Many current social trends³⁰ in the United States and elsewhere properly raise concerns about the
723 health of families. While these trends do involve individuals who carry personal responsibility for
724 their choices, they also are driven by economic and social forces that are both complex in origin
725 and significantly resistant to correction.
726

727 In this country and throughout the twentieth century, the legally married, heterosexual “nuclear
728 family” has been supported by strong social conventions.³¹ The nuclear family is well-structured
729 to foster the development of trust in children and youth. The experience of millions of people and
730 recent social science findings demonstrate its ability to do so.³² This does not mean, however,
731 that it has always done so effectively. Families can shelter sexism or domestic violence and, in
732 such situations, the safety of children or others who are harmed is of utmost importance.
733

734 In this country and in our congregations, families are formed in many ways. There are natural and
735 adoptive families, foster families, blended families, families with a missing generation, and
736 families where the parents are the same gender. Millions of households in the U.S., and many in
737 our church, are headed by single parents—mostly women—whether widowed, divorced, or never
738 married. The critical issue with respect to the family is not whether it has a conventional form,

protection, and education of their children and youth.

³⁰ Such trends include remarkably large numbers of physically or psychologically absent fathers and teenagers with parenting responsibilities for which they are not prepared. They include the reluctance of some men and women to commit themselves in marriage. Stresses on marriages and individuals in marriages contribute to high rates of divorce with accompanying concerns for children and other extended family members.

³¹ Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions assume and encourage households, similar in some ways to this model, but historically and currently there are wide variations that include many other family members, widowed heads of households, laborers, and the like.

³² This point and the supporting data may be found in various sources. One source is the attempt by Don S. Browning to summarize and employ that data for a constructive proposal in *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005). See especially the citations in chapters four and seven.

739 but how it performs indispensable individual and social tasks. All families have responsibility for
740 the tasks of providing safety, shielding intimacy, and developing trustworthy relationships.³³

741
742 This church's first response toward families and households should be one of welcome and
743 support that includes particularly the care for and safety of children. Children are to be invited
744 into the community of the baptized regardless of their family situation.

745
746 This church responds to the needs of families through its ministry and service in various settings.
747 It also has the task of addressing and advocating against social and economic trends that counter
748 the development of strong families.

749
750 Through the proclamation of God's Word and the sacraments, God creates and strengthens faith
751 and supports believers both inside and outside of families. Family life also is supported when its
752 members strive to meet reasonable expectations to forgive and seek forgiveness and to bear each
753 other's burdens responsibly. These practices honor God and, when learned in the context of a
754 loving and committed family, may lead to mature and healthy expressions of sexuality. When
755 trust has been betrayed in such situations, then forgiveness, loving correction, and reconciliation
756 must be attempted.

757
758 This church acknowledges with regret the way in which the misuse of historical teachings
759 concerning sexuality has harmed individuals, deepened suffering, or torn families apart. This
760 includes actions that abandon or shun people for unwed pregnancy or for a same-sex orientation.
761 Hate crimes and violence against those who are regarded as sexually different sometimes have
762 been publicly perpetrated in the name of Christ. Not only must such behaviors be denounced, but
763 this church must work toward greater understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity. It
764 must seek that which is positive and life-giving while protecting from all that is harmful and
765 destructive.

766
767 Since social trust is directly related to social justice, this church must call for justice in matters
768 relating to families and sexuality. Complex and profound changes have occurred in family law
769 over the past fifty years relating to divorce, alimony and child support, custody, adoption,
770 parental rights, and civil unions. The continuing evolution of family law is of vital importance as
771 legislators and courts strive to protect dependent individuals and justly assign responsibility for
772 their care.

773
774 These laws have a direct impact on patterns of social trust within households and networks of
775 kinship. Criminal statutes, state enforcement, and judicial handling of matters related to sexual
776 abuse, sexual harassment, sexual threats, and domestic violence require our close attention.
777 Victims of sexual violation must be able to rely on public institutions for intervention in troubled
778 relationships. They must be able to expect protection when their trust in an individual has been
779 abused.

780
781 Society at large must ensure that all who are dependent upon others in the family for spiritual,
782 emotional, and physical well-being are protected by social policies and practices. Even social

³³ Ibid.

783 institutions and practices not directly related to family institutions can and should facilitate and
784 support familial care and responsibility. Examples include: tax and poverty law, real estate and
785 zoning regulations, and insurance industry policies and practices.

786
787 The ELCA will support familial relationships as central to nurturing and sustaining trust and
788 security in human relationships. It will advocate for public policies that support and protect
789 families. This church commits itself to continued attention to and discernment about changing
790 family configurations and how they serve to shelter and protect relationships of mutual trust.

791
792 ***Protecting children and youth in and for trusting relationships***

793 A strong and healthy family is a significant factor in the development of healthy individuals. The
794 context of a healthy family nurtures growth, enhances trust, and offers protection. This is
795 especially true for children and youth as they grow into sexual maturity.

796
797 Safety within and outside the family is of overriding importance because the damage done to
798 children and youth through sexual abuse or molestation can be remarkably deep and lasting. Such
799 harmful behavior may include inappropriate touching, exposure to pornography, exposing
800 genitals to children or inducing children to do the same, and sexual or genital relations involving
801 minors.

802
803 Criminal statutes prohibiting abuse and molestation contribute to the protection of children and
804 youth. This church supports the prosecution of any individual who commits a sexual crime
805 against a minor, including people in leadership positions in the church. Further, this church
806 affirms appropriate laws requiring the reporting of suspected child abuse to authorities in order to
807 prevent future harm to vulnerable minors who cannot protect themselves.

808
809 The ELCA also recognizes that congregations and other ministry sites must continue in their
810 efforts to be safe places for children and youth. Much work already has been done to help
811 congregations protect children. This church will continue its efforts for the protection of minors
812 who participate in church-sponsored events and programs. This church calls for the adoption of
813 preventive measures including educational programs, appropriate policies, and screening of
814 individuals who care for, supervise, or work with children within this church.

815
816 Matters of concern to both society and the church extend beyond abuse and molestation to
817 organized sexual exploitation. Commercial sexual exploitation is widespread throughout the
818 United States and around the world. It continues to grow and involves surprising numbers of
819 youth by taking advantage of their vulnerabilities.³⁴

820
821 This church strongly reaffirms its 2001 message, *Commercial Sexual Exploitation*, which states,
822 “Sexual exploitation in any situation, either personally or commercially, inside or outside legally
823 contracted marriage, is sinful because it is destructive of God’s good gift [of sexuality] and
824 human integrity.” This message notes that this is especially true with respect to the demonic
825 harm sexual exploitation visits on children and youth.³⁵

³⁴ “Commercial Sexual Exploitation” (Chicago: ELCA, 2001), 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

826 Children and youth live in a highly sexualized world. They are exposed early to patterns of adult
827 sexuality and are pressured to associate their bodies with practices that devalue them. Examples
828 include child beauty contests, sexually suggestive clothing, sexually charged prime time, cable
829 television programs, and movies. At an early age, children listen to sexualized music that is
830 deliberately marketed to them. They “date” as couples and engage in genital activity at earlier
831 ages. Children and youth are targets of sexual bullying, destructive language, and vicious humor.
832

833 The ELCA regards the over-exposure of emotionally maturing children and teens to adult
834 sexuality as a failing on the part of adults and society. It challenges all individuals and institutions
835 in society to fulfill their responsibility to protect and nurture children and youth and provide for
836 their appropriate development. Congregations should offer opportunities for adults to express
837 these concerns and explore solutions together.
838

839 Expanding cyberspace and other electronic media create new challenges to the protection of
840 children and youth. It is important that parents, society, and lawmakers continue to be extremely
841 vigilant to protect the well-being of children and youth in this electronic world with its often
842 hidden dangers. The widespread electronic availability of violent and degrading pornography
843 threatens children and youth as well as adults. It has the capacity to damage the normal sexual
844 development in those who view it, often obsessively and in secret. How to address this problem is
845 one of the most important child-protection issues of our time, and our church will be an active
846 participant in this important conversation.
847

848 The sexual education of children and teens will be supported as a priority by this church.
849 Anecdotal evidence among teens suggests that few parents or congregations meaningfully engage
850 young people in either sex education or healthy conversations about sexuality, even though teens
851 would welcome it.³⁶ This lack of engagement is astonishing, especially considering the associated
852 dangers. This church will give particular attention to how children and youth are supported,
853 nurtured, and accompanied in their sexual and relational formation.
854

855 Toward that end, this church reaffirms what it has said previously about providing comprehensive
856 sex education within the context of Christian faith.³⁷ This education must begin early and
857 emphasize responsibility and mutuality. Such education should focus on sustaining conversation
858 about what is good and what is harmful in ways appropriate to growing maturity levels. It should
859 avoid simply requiring compliance with approved or rejected behaviors, but should emphasize the
860 exploration of why certain behaviors are rejected because they are damaging, why and how some
861 pressures should be resisted, and what differentiates mature and rewarding sexual love from
862 exploitative and demeaning forms.
863

864 Information about birth control, including the encouragement and support of sexual abstinence, is
865 an important component of responsibility. Such education should engage all in conversation
866 about the shared responsibility of couples to ensure the physical, emotional, and spiritual
867 protection of each person.

³⁶ Reports were quite consistent on these points both anecdotally and in informal polls among youth and youth leaders attending workshops in 2007 and 2008 for *Free in Christ to Care for the Neighbor: Lutheran Youth Talk about Human Sexuality* (Chicago: ELCA, 2007).

³⁷ The ELCA social statement on *Abortion* (Chicago: ELCA, 1991), 4–5.

868 It therefore follows that the ELCA reaffirms its interest in and responsibility for the care and
869 protection of vulnerable children and youth. It understands itself as called to this mission through
870 the vocations of its members, its own institutional practices, and its public policy positions. This
871 work involves all adults, not only parents, since all contribute to the well-being of children and
872 youth in untold creative ways. It understands that all children and youth, both inside and outside
873 the church, are deserving of this church's concern.

874
875

876 **V Sexuality and trust in relationships**

877

878 *Sexuality and self*

879 Both sexuality and trust are fundamentally relational and grow out of the web of family ties and
880 social interaction. Healthy, trusting relationships shape confident, healthy, and responsible
881 people. We bring our failings, imperfections, and sin with us into our relationships, but part of
882 living out the calling and freedom of the Christian in those relationships includes being the best
883 we can be as individuals. This requires appropriate care for all aspects of a person, including the
884 body.³⁸

885

886 We are sexual beings from the beginning of our lives. The ancient psalmist envisioned the divine
887 mystery of our embodied lives long before science investigated our biological and genetic
888 complexity: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's
889 womb" (Psalm 139:13). The realities of our sexual bodies are visible in physical features and
890 powerful in less visible characteristics.

891

892 This means much more than that we are born with male, female, or sometimes with ambiguous
893 genitalia.³⁹ Our cells carry sex chromosomes and our endocrine systems infuse our bodies with
894 hormones. In ways that are still not fully understood, we develop strong gender identities at a
895 very early age. While there is still much to be learned about the biological complexity of human
896 beings, we have come to understand that this complexity suggests a variety of sexual orientations
897 and gender identities.

898

899 Sexuality and gender are features of each person's very being. This is both a discovery and a gift,
900 and a perplexity and a challenge at all life stages and in all relational situations. The medical and
901 social sciences continue to explore how the range of human sexual identities and behaviors are
902 understood, cared for, and regulated in various cultures and religions.

903

904 Sexual capabilities and experiences are part of life for all ages and physical abilities. One can
905 experience the sexual in music, art, literature, and the beauty of people and nature. One can take

³⁸ See Luther's brief but pointed comments regarding how care for one's body should be understood as a Christian work in *The Freedom of a Christian in Career of the Reformer: Vol. 1, Luther's Works 31* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 365.

³⁹ Some experts estimate that as many as 1 in every 1,500 babies is born with a disorder of sex development (DSDs). See www.apa.org/topics/intersx.html (February, 1, 2009). The phrase used here, ambiguous genitalia, is one form of DSD and indicates a birth defect in which the outer genitals do not have the typical appearance of either a boy or a girl. See www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003269.htm (February, 1, 2009).

906 sensual pleasure in food, touch, sound, smells, and activities. One can find expression for the self
907 and for sexuality through the spoken word, touch, dance, music, and movement.

908

909 One does not need to be in a relationship to experience one's sexuality. Bodies do not suddenly
910 become sexual at puberty and do not cease to be sexual when, for example, there are physical or
911 developmental limitations, menopause, erectile dysfunction, or the absence of a sexual partner.
912 This means that throughout our lives we need to find life-enhancing and appropriate ways of
913 giving expression to this complicated dimension of ourselves.

914

915 We all have sexual identities that will find expression in our lives. We have sexual feelings that
916 we are aware of and sometimes need to be negotiated when we are interacting with friends,
917 courting a potential life partner, working closely with colleagues, or sharing our lives with
918 another. Moreover, we must evaluate and respond constantly to the ways in which the sexuality
919 of others is expressed. We must respond to sexual stimuli in the environment, including the
920 varieties of human touch, which may vary from casual contact through flirtatious appreciation to
921 invitations to intense physical intimacy.

922

923 A healthy sense of sexuality is related to having a healthy body image. This church teaches that
924 caring for the body and following practices that lead to physical and emotional wellness are part
925 of the stewardship of created goodness.⁴⁰ It recognizes that a positive sense of one's own body
926 supports a healthy sense of one's gender identity and sexuality.

927

928 Sexually mature, healthy individuals learn to be comfortable with their bodies and are able to
929 entrust themselves to others. They call frankly upon others to respect and honor their privacy,
930 their bodily integrity, and their wishes concerning welcome and unwelcome touch.

931

932 Sometimes, it can be very hard to develop and maintain positive attitudes about one's body. Too
933 many people struggle for a healthy sense of body as a result of experiences of degradation or
934 shaming by others, including family members and intimate partners. This church will support all
935 in affirming and reclaiming a sense of healthy sexuality.

936

937 This church calls attention to the danger of embracing standards of physical attractiveness that
938 exclude many, including the aged and people with disabilities, and which distort the
939 understanding of what it means to be healthy. The young whose bodies are changing and growing
940 may be especially vulnerable to idealized and commercialized images of a "perfect body" that
941 play on insecurities and destructive self-loathing.

942

943 A holistic understanding of the interrelationship of body, mind, and spirit challenges such narrow
944 understandings of beauty. It enables us better to affirm the many dimensions of beauty and to
945 celebrate human variety and particularity. This church is committed to affirming throughout life
946 the value, beauty, and health of the human body and human sexuality. It is mindful that physical,
947 emotional, relational, and spiritual wellness contribute to a lower incidence of at-risk behaviors
948 for all people, including youth.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor* (Chicago: ELCA, 2003).

⁴¹ A variety of research supports this claim in relation to sexual activity. See, for instance, Peter C. Scales,

949 ***Gender and friendships***

950 This church also calls attention to the immense value of friendship for people in all stages of life.
951 Human life in relationship includes many different forms of rewarding human companionship.
952 Friendships express our longing for human connection, touch, and growth. They allow space for
953 self-revelation in the shelter of various degrees of mutual commitment and regard. The ELCA
954 encourages and celebrates all situations and initiatives that engage people in relationships of
955 friendship and trust, both inside and outside the church community. It also recognizes the
956 importance of strong social support for friendships.

957
958 Many of our understandings of our own sexuality and sexual relationships may be formed or
959 nurtured through conversations and confiding in friends. Friendships may help us develop a sense
960 of our own beauty and the integrity of our bodies. As with parents or family members, we may
961 learn from friends a sense of caring and safe touch in trusting relationships. Friendship, like
962 family life, is a trust that can be betrayed, abused, and violated. It also must be recognized that
963 dysfunctional friendships may be detrimental to health, development, and well-being.
964

965 This church calls people to be good, trustworthy friends who support one another in mature self-
966 understanding and healthy companionship. Friends together have the shared power and
967 responsibility to contradict demeaning and demoralizing messages from the media about
968 sexuality and to overcome the effects of physical and emotional abuse. Friends also have the
969 responsibility to respect one another's physical and emotional boundaries.
970

971 Community and workplace relationships are spheres of human life in which friendships and
972 companionship can and do thrive. They are also places where trust and distrust mix in
973 complicated ways.
974

975 Sometimes friendships become sexual in the narrower sense of giving rise to overtly erotic
976 impulses and stimulation. Erotic interest between adults open to a romantic relationship can be a
977 desired part of the growth of trust and intimacy. Erotic interest can also create conflicts and
978 danger. These have to be faced honestly when one or both of the people involved already have
979 made promises of fidelity to another. The conflicts and dangers have to be recognized, also,
980 whenever one of the involved individuals does not welcome a deeper and more complicated
981 closeness.
982

983 Reintroducing distance into such friendships or breaking them off may entail an acceptance of
984 loss that requires courage and maturity. The violation of trusting relationships for sexual purposes
985 is offensive, unacceptable, and, when criminal, should be punished accordingly. A particularly
986 egregious violation of friendship is acquaintance rape.
987

988 ***Commitment and sexuality***

989 Human beings remain sexual creatures for life. As a result, they must cultivate and manage
990 relationships along a spectrum that runs from casual associations to intense intimacy. The
991 deepening of trust and commitment is a lengthy process that requires deliberate attention and

992 effort. Recognizing this provides a way of thinking about how people come to select life partners
993 and about their sexual conduct in that process.

994

995 Couples, whether teenage, young adult, mature, or senior, move from a first acquaintance into a
996 journey of increasing knowledge, appreciation, and trust in each other. This journey involves
997 spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions of self-understanding. When these
998 dimensions develop at similar rates, trust and entrusting are established and secured. When they
999 are out of balance, trust may either not exist or disintegrate.

1000

1001 As trust and entrusting are established in a relationship, physical expression naturally becomes
1002 more intimate. That is, sexual intimacy would be expected to follow the same pattern of growth
1003 marked by the other dimensions of mutual self-understanding.

1004

1005 For this reason, this church teaches that degrees of physical intimacy should be carefully matched
1006 to degrees of growing affection and commitment. This also suggests a way to understand why this
1007 church has taught that the greatest sexual intimacies, such as coitus, should be matched with and
1008 sheltered both by the highest level of binding commitment and by social and legal protection,
1009 such as found in marriage. Here, promises of fidelity and public accountability provide the
1010 foundational basis and support for trust, intimacy, and safety, especially for the most vulnerable.

1011

1012 This is why this church opposes non-monogamous, promiscuous, or casual sexual relationships of
1013 any kind. Indulging immediate desires for satisfaction, sexual or otherwise, is to “gratify the
1014 desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16–19). Such transient encounters do not allow for trust in the
1015 relationship to create the context for trust in sexual intimacy.

1016

1017 Such relationships undermine the dignity and integrity of individuals because physical intimacy is
1018 not accompanied by the growth of mutual self-knowledge. Absent the presence of physical,
1019 emotional, intellectual, and spiritual trust and commitment, such sexual relationships may easily
1020 damage the self and an individual’s future capacity to live out committed and trustworthy
1021 relationships. Fleeting relationships misuse the gift of sexual intimacy and are much more likely
1022 to be unjust, abusive, and exploitative.

1023

1024 Although this church strongly discourages such relationships, it nevertheless insists that every
1025 sexual relationship entails responsibility. All sexually active people have the responsibility to
1026 protect their sexual partner from both emotional and physical harm as well as to protect
1027 themselves and their partners from sexually transmitted diseases.

1028

1029 ***Sexual intimacy and adult cohabitation***

1030 Many contemporary pressures encourage adult cohabitation. When marriage is delayed for years
1031 beyond the age of physical sexual maturity, the emotional and physical pressures for intimacy
1032 may grow. Social trends in this society, such as extensive schooling, downward wage pressure,
1033 and even the desire for expensive weddings may further encourage that delay.

1034

1035 While some of these trends are the result of individual choices, they also may be influenced by
1036 broader social forces: the increasing number of failed marriages, social acceptance of casual sex,
1037 and the strong cultural influence of individualism that largely ignores social responsibility and

1038 accountability. All are examples of why many may question the need for—and sometimes even
1039 the rationale for—binding relationships.

1040

1041 In addition, certain laws and economic realities in this society may create extreme economic
1042 hardship for some, including older adults, who desire to be legally married. This church calls for
1043 altering laws and the factors that create a significant impediment for such people to be married.

1044

1045 Because this church urges couples to seek the highest social and legal support for their
1046 relationships, it does not favor cohabitation arrangements outside of marriage. It has a special
1047 concern when such arrangements are entered into as an end in themselves. It does, however,
1048 acknowledge the social forces at work that encourage such practices. This church also recognizes
1049 the pastoral and familial issues that accompany these contemporary social patterns.

1050

1051 In cases where a decision is made for cohabitation, and regardless of the reasons, this church
1052 expects its pastors and members to be clear with the couple regarding the reasons for the position
1053 of this church as well as supporting the couple in recognizing their obligation to be open and
1054 candid with each other about their plans, expectations, and levels of mutual commitment.

1055

1056 It should be noted that some cohabitation arrangements can be constructed in ways that are
1057 neither casual nor intrinsically unstable. In earlier generations, betrothal carried obligations
1058 similar to those of marriage. In certain situations, conventional or even legal obligations
1059 accompany cohabitation arrangements. In some states, for instance, laws govern “common law
1060 marriages.” Such arrangements may differ markedly from more transitory forms of cohabitation.

1061

1062 This church believes, however, that the deepest human longings for a sense of personal worth,
1063 long-term companionship, and profound security, especially given the human propensity to sin,
1064 are best served through binding commitment, legal protections, and the public accountability of
1065 marriage, especially where the couple is surrounded by the prayers of the community and the
1066 promises of God.

1067

1068

1069 **VI Sexuality and social responsibility**

1070

1071 *Sexuality and society*

1072 Neither individuals nor families can succeed alone; they need healthy and supportive
1073 communities.⁴² Individuals are deeply social and therefore profoundly shaped by these
1074 communities, even in their most private and intimate moments. Given this reality, we must
1075 appreciate the significant influence, both positive and negative, of social forces and social
1076 contexts on human sexual behavior.

1077

⁴² Statistically, the healthier family and community institutions are, the higher the number of developmental assets found among its members, especially youth. Strong community institutions have a significant impact on lowering the incidence of at-risk behaviors among young people, including intimate sexual activity at young ages. The relative health of a community’s institutions, such as schools, churches, and civic organizations, matters significantly. *op. cit.* Benson.

1078 This church must be prepared to speak out where such forces cause harm. In particular it will
1079 oppose all forms of sexual exploitation within and outside this church. Justice for women in
1080 church and society must continue to be an important dimension of Lutheran concern and action.

1081
1082 This church also will attend to the need for equal protection, equal opportunities, and equal
1083 responsibilities under the law, and just treatment for those with varied sexual orientation and
1084 gender identity. Such individuals are disproportionately and negatively affected by patterns of
1085 stigma, discrimination, and abuse. Likewise it will attend to the particular needs of children and
1086 the families of those with actual or perceived differences in sexual orientation or gender identity
1087 because they are especially vulnerable to verbal, physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, and
1088 sexual abuse.

1089
1090 This church notes with grave concern the public commodification⁴³ of the human body as an
1091 economic asset. The sexual body is never to be used as an object for commercial purposes, and
1092 this church will speak against the public idolatry of pleasure, freedom, and wealth that undergirds
1093 such practices.

1094
1095 Especially deplorable is the billion dollar global sex market and the economic systems that thrive
1096 on it, both in the United States and abroad.⁴⁴ The people trapped in this system are damaged and
1097 often destroyed by degradation, abuse, and, sometimes, torture. Companies that profit from this
1098 enterprise need to be identified and strongly denounced. This church supports building
1099 international agreements and national laws to prevent these practices.

1100
1101 The possibility of profit is not a sufficient moral basis to use human sexuality for purposes that
1102 harm individuals or undermine social trust.⁴⁵ The ELCA opposes the sale and purchase of
1103 pornography. It also objects to commercial and technological efforts to sell sex, including mass
1104 media and commercial marketing, since these negatively impact individuals and society in
1105 significant ways.

1106
1107 Christian responsibility includes naming economic forces and monitoring the ways in which they
1108 constrain or support healthy individual choices and social structures. This church will advocate
1109 against all that systematically undermines efforts to raise healthy children and to build solid
1110 marriages and trusting relationships, including the portrayal of responsible sexuality as abnormal
1111 and burdensome and promiscuous sexual activity as normal and consequence-free.

1112
1113 This church will respond in situations where business and corporate enterprises seek profit
1114 through disrespectful treatment of the human body. This church will work with public and private
1115 institutions⁴⁶ to create structures, policies, and practices of accountability to support social norms
1116 of protection. These include codes of practice that protect society, especially children and the
1117 most vulnerable, from the misuse and abuse of sexuality for profit.

⁴³ The transformation of any created blessing of God into a commodity to be bought and sold.

⁴⁴ This multiple billion dollar system often is perpetuated by slave-like conditions and outright slavery.

⁴⁵ “While a market economy emphasizes what individuals *want* and are willing and able to buy, as people of faith we realize that what human beings *want* is not necessarily what they *need* for the sake of life.”

Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All (Chicago: ELCA, 1999), 3.f

⁴⁶ This includes many varieties of social, economic, and business institutions.

1118 This church will work with all people to craft fair and comprehensive laws particularly aimed at
1119 protecting the weakest and most vulnerable among us, especially children, from sexual harm.

1120

1121 This church supports the development and use of medical products, birth control, and initiatives
1122 that support fulfilling and responsible sexuality. This church also recognizes the important role
1123 that the availability of birth control has played in allowing women and men to make responsible
1124 decisions about the bearing and rearing of children.

1125

1126 This church, in its concern for the neighbor, has a responsibility to be concerned about public
1127 health issues. All people who have contracted a sexually transmitted disease have an absolute
1128 responsibility to inform their sexual partners and all who are at risk.

1129

1130 Care must be taken in sex education materials and processes to inform about the dangers of
1131 diseases without teaching that sexual expression is intrinsically dirty and dangerous. Efforts at
1132 public education and protection from disease should be supported. This includes efforts that
1133 challenge stigma and discrimination, especially against those living with and affected by HIV and
1134 AIDS. This church, including its institutions and agencies, should be an active partner in
1135 discussions about how to address and contain epidemics of such diseases.

1136

1137 This church supports social policies and practices that encourage the growth of healthy
1138 relationships and will question publicly those that erode social trust or undermine the structures
1139 within which trust is learned and preserved. The traditional concerns of this church for social
1140 justice and the protection of the vulnerable also will guide its teachings and practices in relation
1141 to social trust and sexuality.

1142

1143 *Sexuality and public ministry*

1144 This church does not tolerate the abuse of the ministerial office for personal sexual gratification.

1145 This church holds high expectations for those individuals called to serve as rostered leaders.

1146 Pastors, associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers who abuse the trust placed in
1147 them by engaging in promiscuity, infidelity, adultery, or forms of sexual abuse violate those high
1148 standards. Such violations severely damage the credibility of the public ministry to which this
1149 church and its leaders are called.

1150

1151 *Sexuality in the workplace*

1152 In all workplaces, supervisors, coworkers, professionals, and clients must negotiate complex
1153 relationships. The sexual dimension of these relationships, both in the general sense and in the
1154 sometimes more specifically erotic sense, needs to be honestly recognized.

1155

1156 Employers and supervisors, including within this church, must pay particular attention to work
1157 relationships between colleagues, especially where there are power differentials, and where the
1158 workplace environment is rendered sexually offensive or hostile by the conduct of coworkers.

1159

1160 The workplace requires appropriate boundaries that are maintained through respect, good sense,
1161 best practices, and legal protections. This church remains committed to its own efforts to help
1162 make congregations, synods and the churchwide organization safe and healthy places to live and
1163 work. The ELCA will not tolerate sexual harassment within the workplace.

1164 **VII Conclusion**

1165

1166 *Human sexuality and moral discernment*

1167 This social statement grows out of the foundational theological understanding that Lutherans read
1168 and understand the Bible in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The “good news”
1169 of the Gospel that we are freed from bondage to sin (justification before God) allows us to
1170 respond to the Triune God’s mercy through love for and service to the neighbor (vocation in the
1171 world). The social statement further affirms that because God’s promises are trustworthy, each of
1172 us is called in Christian freedom to be trustworthy in our relationships with one another and to
1173 build social institutions and practices that create trust.

1174

1175 Because of the love of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are a people set free for
1176 lives of responsibility committed to seeking the good of all. This statement responds to this
1177 church’s call for a foundational framework⁴⁷ that will help it discern what it means faithfully to
1178 follow God’s law of love in the increasingly complex sphere of human sexuality. It does not offer
1179 once-and-for-all answers to contemporary questions. Rather, it seeks to tap the deep roots of
1180 Scripture and the Lutheran theological tradition for specific Christian convictions, themes, and
1181 wisdom that will assist people of faith to discern what is responsible and faithful action in the
1182 midst of the complexity of daily life.

1183

1184 It proposes guideposts to direct this church’s discernment as it tries to be faithful. It provides
1185 markers by which individual and communal decisions can be tested under the guidance of the
1186 Holy Spirit. It seeks to describe the social realities of this age and to address them pastorally. In
1187 so far as it is possible, it also seeks to speak in ways that can address both religious and secular
1188 discussions of these matters.

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1190 *The necessity of mercy, always*

1191 Human lives are littered with broken promises and betrayed trust. Not everyone knows how to
1192 trust and not everyone is trustworthy. Relationships end because trust has been broken. Given
1193 finitude and sin, many things happen in even the strongest relationships that threaten trust.
1194 Forgiveness and reconciliation, then, join with mutuality and justice to support trust and
1195 trustworthiness in relationships.

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1197 Seeking the Spirit’s guidance, we discern direction for living faithfully in terms of human
1198 sexuality. We do this not in some abstract ideal realm, but amid all the complexities, conflicts,
1199 sorrows, discoveries, and joys of actual social and individual life. It is a task that this church
1200 accepts as a redeemed community. As simultaneously captive to sin and yet liberated and
1201 forgiven people of faith, we walk together both humbly and boldly toward God’s promised future.

⁴⁷ The development of this social statement was mandated by the 2001 Churchwide Assembly. Reference can be found in the 2001 Churchwide Assembly minutes, CA01.06.45.

Implementing Resolutions

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Resolved:

1. To embrace as a church our legacy of a rich theological tradition that proclaims God's gracious love expressed in Jesus Christ as the basis of our salvation, hope, and unity, and to call upon members of this church on this basis to commit themselves to finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements;
2. To call upon this church to affirm the various studies created for the Journey Together Faithfully series as resources for ongoing deliberation and discernment, and to direct the program unit for Church in Society to maintain their availability as long as demand continues;
3. To request the Office of the Presiding Bishop to explore the feasibility of developing liturgical resources for use by rostered leaders, individuals, and families at the time of divorce;
4. To encourage Augsburg Fortress, Publishers to consider developing education curricula with particular attention to the needs of children, middle school, high school youth, and their parents for understanding Christian values and making responsible choices;
5. To recognize that organizations like Women of the ELCA, Lutheran Men in Mission, Lutheran Youth Organization, and campus ministries foster and support friendships; to encourage them to lift up and celebrate the value of strong friendships and to support the formation of voluntary associations for nurturing them;
6. To call upon all congregations, pastors, and other rostered leaders to reach out in welcome to all in accord with previous Churchwide Assembly actions as reaffirmed by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly (CA05.05.18), and to assist members to understand what it means to be hospitable to all in the name of Christ regardless of sexual orientation;
7. To call upon the ELCA to amend the eligibility provisions of the ELCA Pension and Other Benefits Program to include individuals in same-gender marriages, civil unions, and domestic partnerships, consistent with applicable state and federal laws;

- 1243 8. To call upon this church to encourage the availability and funding of
1244 comprehensive sex education programs in public schools, as well as in Lutheran
1245 private schools;
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- 1247 9. To affirm the 2001 ELCA Message, *Commercial Sexual Exploitation*⁴⁸ and its
1248 continuing value for the mission and ministry of the ELCA;
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- 1250 10. To call upon this church's advocacy and corporate social responsibility ministries
1251 to support and advocate measures consistent with this social statement;
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- 1253 11. To express appreciation for the work being done by the churchwide organization,
1254 synods, institutions, and congregations to prevent sexual harassment and
1255 misconduct; to encourage strengthening these efforts by all expressions and
1256 ministries of this church, and to ensure the availability of effective resources for
1257 dealing with sexual misconduct and sexual harassment within this church.
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- 1259 12. To call upon teaching theologians, bishops, pastors, diaconal ministers, associates
1260 in ministry, deaconesses, educators, and others to continue to extend theological
1261 and biblical reflection as well as theoretical and practical understanding of human
1262 sexuality through intellectual discourse, moral deliberation, continued research,
1263 discussion, and writing;
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- 1265 13. To recognize that the ELCA [has adopted]⁴⁹ a strategy that will guide its response
1266 to the HIV and AIDS epidemic, and to call upon all units and expressions of this
1267 church to support that strategy;
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- 1269 14. To call upon all congregations, synods, early childhood education centers,
1270 elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, seminaries, campus
1271 ministries, outdoor ministries, social ministry organizations, public policy
1272 advocacy ministries, and all churchwide units to carry out the substance and spirit
1273 of this statement; and
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- 1275 15. To call upon Church in Society and other appropriate churchwide units to oversee
1276 a process of implementation and accountability for this social statement and to
1277 report on implementation to the Church Council in early 2012.

⁴⁸ The ELCA message on "Commercial Sexual Exploitation" (Chicago: ELCA, 2001).

⁴⁹ The ELCA Church Council will consider the adoption of this strategy at its March 2009 meeting.