

Foreword

"A wise pastor once noted that 'Life is a dramatic mixture of brokenness and grace.' Imperfect and forgiven, Christians live our callings in our homes and families, our work, our public roles, and our communities of worship. As the world and the church deal with various social, scientific, and personal interpretations of homosexuality, we in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are a community of faith seeking understanding, intent on bearing witness to the world of the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Faithful Conversation contributes to the quest for understanding and exhibits our commitment to public witness. When the conference of seminary presidents commissioned this project, we knew that the questions are hard and the answers are disputed. Before the ELCA authorized the current studies in sexuality and prior to his current appointment as the director, we asked Dr. James Childs to gather faculty from our seminaries so that they could consult with each other on these difficult concerns and prepare a volume for the church. We expected that they would argue with each other just as other faithful Christians disagree among themselves. We also anticipated that these trusted teachers of the church would respect each other and know how to keep the unity we share in Christ Jesus at the center of their conversation.

Now we hope that you who read these essays will follow the examples of these teachers. On first reading, you may be eager to discover which essays make arguments with which you agree. Please stay in the conversation longer, perhaps especially with those essays with which you first disagree. You might not change your mind, but you might at least benefit from the differences brought together in one place and gain a new understanding of a point of view that is not your own.

All of these authors are seeking to be faithful to the witness of scripture. All of them are firmly opposed to all sexual promiscuity and infidelity. None of their cases are built on narrow notions of sexual freedom or personal rights. So also, none of them resorts to a simplistic literalism, as if the letter of God's law were God's final word.

Even some Christian practices change. To choose an easier example, the Apostle Paul declared that it is shameful for a man to cover his head in prayer or for a woman to pray with her head uncovered (1 Cor 11:4-5), but those disputes about what is or is not shameful do not divide the church in our time. The questions of sexual orientation or response patterns also do not threaten our unity. But we disagree on the boundaries of intimacy between members of the same sex. Many Christians also disagree on the boundaries of intimacy between members of the opposite sex, but the question at hand is that of homosexual relationships. How deeply divided are we?

Some Christians see almost all sexual intimacies among members of the same sex as immoral, even when the people involved are expressing their love and care in committed relationships. Other Christians regard the protection of such committed relationships as a matter of justice both in public and in the church. Some take their stand defending the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman. Others intend to extend the circle of care and the security of intimacy

to the homosexual sons and daughters of our families and to all whom Jesus Christ calls to faith. At their extremes, both groups are tempted to claim God's righteousness or God's mercy for their own views. Ultimately, only God's Holy Spirit joins righteousness and mercy in Christ Jesus. And at our best, all Christians will advocate God's law as a protection of the neighbor and the community.

As members of the ELCA conference of seminary presidents, we invite you, dear reader, into these Faithful Conversations. We do not know how our church will eventually address the questions of blessing same – sex committed relationships or the ordination of homosexual persons in committed same – sex relationships. We do not endorse everything written in these essays, but we are grateful for the courage and conviction of our faculty authors. We are heartened by their mutual confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ, even as they sort many complex questions from several perspectives. We have learned from these teachers of the church. We pray for the counsel of the Holy Spirit for our church. May God's righteousness be accomplished among us forgiven sinners through God's mercy in Christ Jesus and for all people in the world God loves."

– Conference of ELCA Seminary Presidents
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