

MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

IN THE ALBERTA CONTEXT

PREAMBLE

[This document is a re-edit of the Statement issued in the fall of 2008. Some suggestions made in the responses to the document from congregations and individuals have been incorporated into this present draft. Where additions to the document have been made, those additions have been underlined. +RBM July 2009]

1 Marriage, family and human sexuality are the aspects of life in which we experience
2 our most intimate relationships with other human beings. These relationships are
3 integral to who we are as humans and they provide the living context for us to love
4 our neighbour as we have been loved by God. As much as anywhere, the Two Great
5 Commandments (love of God and love of neighbour) are kept, or they are broken, in
6 these intimate relationships. Humanly speaking, it is in these living contexts that we
7 experience deeply meaningful relationship, deep loneliness and solitude, or
8 something else along the continuum between.

9 The pastoral statements that follow are made necessary because the Church, as the
10 Body of Christ, has a holy obligation to relate to, and be in ministry to, the society of
11 which it is a part.

12 In this regard, we are mindful of what we believe, teach and confess in the Formula of
13 Concord, Solid Declaration, Article IV: Concerning Good Works (para.7, page 575)
14 and Article X: Ecclesiastical Practices (para. 25-31; page 640, *Book of Concord*, Kolb
15 and Wengert, 2000):

16 ...there is no argument among our people on the following points: that it is God's
17 will, order, and command that believers shall walk in good works; that true good
18 works are not those which people invent for themselves or that take their form
19 according to human tradition but rather are those that God himself has prescribed and
20 commanded in his Word; that true good works are not performed out of our own
21 natural powers, but they are performed when a person is reconciled with God through

22 faith and renewed through the Holy Spirit, or, as Paul says, “created” anew, “in Christ
 23 Jesus for good works” [Eph. 2:10*].¹

24 And,

25 ...everyone can understand what a Christian community and every individual
 26 Christian, particularly pastors, may do or omit in regard to indifferent things without
 27 injury to their consciences, especially in a time when confession is necessary, so that
 28 they do not arouse God’s wrath, do not violate love, do not strengthen the enemies of
 29 God’s Word, and do not offend the weak in faith.

30 ^a1. Accordingly, we reject and condemn as false the view that human commands
 31 are to be regarded in and of themselves as worship of God or some part thereof.

32 ^a2. We also reject and condemn as false the procedure whereby such commands
 33 are imposed by force upon the community of God as necessary.

34 ^a3. We reject and condemn as false the opinion of those who hold that in a time of
 35 persecution people may comply and compromise with the enemies of the holy gospel
 36 in indifferent things, since this imperils the truth.

37 ^e4. Likewise, we regard it as a sin worthy of punishment when, in a time of
 38 persecution, actions contrary and opposed to the confession of the Christian faith are
 39 undertaken because of the enemies of the gospel, either in indifferent things or in
 40 public teaching or in anything else which pertains to religion.

41 ^a5. We also reject and condemn it when such indifferent things are abolished in
 42 such a way as if the community of God did not have the liberty to use, in a manner
 43 appropriate for specific times and places, one or more such things in Christian
 44 freedom as best serves the churches.

45 ^aFor this reason the churches are not to condemn one another because of
 46 differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the
 47 other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching and in all the articles

¹Kolb, R. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis

48 of the faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments. As it is said,
49 “Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei” (dissimilarity in fasting shall
50 not destroy the unity of faith).³¹⁷

51 In the past four decades since one of our predecessor bodies, the Lutheran Church in
52 America, adopted a Social Statement, marriage, family and human sexuality have
53 changed and evolved in most profound ways. These most intimate human
54 relationships in our ‘here and now’ are no longer what they were in the ‘there and
55 then’.

56 What can be said, regardless of the passage of four decades of history, is that while
57 the Church must be aware of the social forces influencing the understanding of
58 sexuality and sexual behaviours, it must primarily be attuned to God’s will as
59 revealed in Scripture.

60 Increasingly, men and women relate to each other today without benefit of marriage.
61 Nearly half of marital relationships in the Alberta context are common-law
62 relationships established by the mutual decision of partners to cohabit. Nearly half of
63 traditional marriages terminate in divorce. Today we commonly see serial
64 monogamy as individuals enter into numerous relationships over the course of their
65 lives – one after another.

66 The Canadian government’s 2005 *Civil Marriage Act* changed the definition of
67 marriage from one man and one woman who are not closely related to “the lawful
68 union of two persons to the exclusion of all others.” Addressing this change in law,
69 the ELCIC in Convention in 2005 and 2007 considered motions “to encourage
70 Synods to develop ways to best minister to people who live in committed same-sex
71 relationships, including the possibility of blessing such unions.” These motions were
72 defeated but discussion and debate continue.

73 In recent history, a family consisted of a mother, a father and 2.2 children. Today
74 there are many configurations of family: traditional, single-parent, blended, families

75 headed by two fathers or two mothers, step-families, provisional or short-term
76 families, and so on.

77 Sexuality has been deified (or demonized) by society – a society that seemingly
78 cannot get enough of sex. Advertising, the entertainment industry, the clothing
79 industry, and all the media have discovered that sex sells. In response, they sell sex –
80 real or imaginary. Pornography is rampant and readily available. Trafficking in
81 women and children is a burgeoning industry, nearly eclipsing the trafficking of drugs
82 and arms. Reserving sexual intimacy with another until marriage is a rare thing today
83 – considered a nostalgic and quaint practice. Casual sex and ‘hooking up’ are the
84 norm for many people today. Ours is plainly an over-sexed and sexualized culture.
85 Every culture of every era has had trouble dealing with sex and sexual issues. The
86 Puritans tried to deny it, the Kings and Queens had their illicit liaisons, the milkman
87 stories are legion from time immemorial, and how many relationships did Jacob,
88 David or Solomon have. On the outside we have been one thing. The public persona
89 has been a mask while privately something else has been going on in the lives of the
90 rich, the famous, the poor, the professors, the clergy, the men and women of life.

91 Same-sex orientation and behaviour, as well as same-sex civil unions or marriages
92 have gained the credence of our society, at least to the extent that these are recognized
93 and protected in the legislation of the land. Homosexuality continues to be a matter
94 of debate in faith-communities; for the majority of global faith-groups, sexual
95 behaviour other than heterosexual has historically been, and continues to be,
96 condemned. There is no consensus in our Church today on other than heterosexual
97 behaviour and relationships.

98 This culture is not waiting for the Church’s pronouncements on marriage, family and
99 sexuality. The Church’s “yes or no,” “right or wrong,” “sin or not-sin” quite frankly
100 falls on almost deaf ears in the general population. Nevertheless, the Church will, and
101 must, continue to speak – even as it will and must speak on a host of life-issues.

102 More important than what the Church says to society today is the question of how the
103 Church relates to, ministers to, and brings God’s Word – the Gospel - into a
104 meaningful interface through proclamation to the people living their lives in the ‘here
105 and now.’ As disciples of Christ, we recognize that the ones to whom we can

106 minister, the ones with whom we can share and be the Gospel, are the people around
 107 us in our society. Society's views concerning marriage, family and sexuality do not
 108 reflect the viewpoint, ethics or values generally accepted by Christians. They never
 109 have. Yet this is the reality in which we must live, and move and have our being as
 110 followers of Jesus and proclaimers of the impinging reign of God.

111 In this context, the Synod of Alberta and the Territories of the Evangelical Lutheran
 112 Church in Canada established a Task Force to address long-standing theological
 113 convictions and practices with respect to marriage, sexuality, and family. While the
 114 Task Force was ultimately not able to reach consensus on the theological
 115 underpinnings for statements on marriage, family and sexuality, it did make
 116 considerable progress in preparing such statements for this contemporary context. A
 117 blue ribbon panel, convened by the bishop of the ABT Synod, endeavoured to take up
 118 the Task Force's work and move it ahead to working draft form. After prayerful,
 119 charitable, and considered discussion, we offer these statements for consideration.

120 ***The Theology of the Cross as our Theological Foundation***

121 *(We are indebted to Douglas John Hall, eminent Canadian theologian and Luther scholar, who*
 122 *articulates Luther's theology of the cross in an accessible way in his book The Cross in Our Context,*
 123 *Fortress Press – Minneapolis, 2003. We draw heavily on this book to explain the premises of the*
 124 *theology of the cross.)*

125 In April of 1518, Martin Luther penned the Heidelberg Disputation in which he first
 126 introduced the basis of his theology of the cross. The key theses are numbers 19, 20
 127 and 21:

128 [19] That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon
 129 the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those
 130 things which have actually happened (Rom. 1:20 NRSV).

131 [20] He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the
 132 visible and manifest things of God seen through the suffering of the cross.

133 [21] A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross
 134 calls the thing what it actually is. (as quoted in Hall, p. 16)

135 Luther's theology of the cross is grounded not in a vague optimistic humanism but in
 136 a deep sympathy with human weakness and wretchedness (Hall, p. 21). Since for
 137 Luther human existence is a frail and uncertain business, God's chief characteristic is
 138 not sovereign omnipotence but astonishing compassion. For Luther, then, the essence
 139 of God is God's "suffering-with." (Hall, p. 22)

140 The theology of the cross tells us first about God. God does not view humankind as
 141 so wretched that it deserves death and hell. On the contrary, God views humankind
 142 and the whole creation as so beautiful, so precious, that its fulfillment and its
 143 redemption are worth dying for. (see Hall, p. 24) In a sermon based on Luke 24:12-
 144 24, Joseph Sitler concludes:

145 ... this story makes very clear that there is a steady growl of anger at the heart of the
 146 holy, that the love of God for his human family has a hard and resolute intention.
 147 What that is, and certainty about God's will to see it through, comes out in the phrase
 148 "...that my house may be filled." Not our house, but his house; not according to our
 149 specifications, but according to his will; not according to our preferences, but in ways
 150 appropriate to the awesome carelessness of his love. (See further The Care of the
 151 Earth, by Joseph Sitler, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Facets ed., 2004.)

152 The most poignant expression of this awesome love is found in Matthew 9:36...
 153 "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were
 154 harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." *Com-passio* literally means
 155 "suffering with". But to understand the depth and degree of this "suffering with" we
 156 need to plumb the Greek text for the verb *splanchnidzomai* which bears the meaning
 157 "to enfold the other with your innards" – to make the other's condition and situation
 158 your own. In the case of Matthew 9, what is expressed is Jesus' profound
 159 identification with, and accompaniment of, the last, the least and the lost... the
 160 harassed and helpless.

161 This means something radical and (for Lutherans) something uncomfortable.
 162 Doctrine must pass the test of real life. Doctrine must serve life, not life doctrine. So
 163 if, in order to hold onto doctrine I have to lie about life as it really is, or repress what
 164 is actually happening to real people in the real world, then doctrine is functioning

165 falsely. (see Hall, p. 28) A caveat is in order here: doctrine that holds to the authority
166 of Scripture – even when the society of which we are a part cannot relate to it because
167 it cannot relate to Scripture – is not false doctrine. Society, outside of a relationship
168 with God, will “see, but not perceive... hear, but not understand” (Matt. 13:14).

169 The theology of the cross invites us to set aside the simplistic, “textbook easy
170 answers” to very difficult human questions. We are stuck with the questions and
171 cannot leave them behind, since the world God loves cannot be left behind. The
172 questions will be there, Hall contends, long after the religious, philosophical,
173 scientific, and other answers have been given. (Hall, p. 32) Do we actually believe
174 that our own ideas and agendas might need to be “crucified” so that we can hear
175 God’s agenda for us? How quickly do we “crucify” the ideas or suggestions by
176 appealing to literalism on the one hand, and tolerance on the other?

177 If we understand the cross of Jesus Christ to be God’s movement toward the world,
178 then we must also understand that as followers of Jesus we are drawn into this same
179 movement. Discipleship means being sent with increasing insistence “into all the
180 world”. The world to which we are sent is not in stasis; it is, instead, a roller coaster
181 of constant and unrelenting change. (see Hall, p. 40, 41) Nor is this call toward the
182 world a great comfort to many Christians, who find living out their faith within the
183 confines of the sanctuary and their individual lives much less of a stress than
184 engaging our kaleidoscopic society. In this, we are not much different than Peter
185 who, that morning on the Galilean shore, heard these ominous words from his Lord:
186 “When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you
187 wished. But when you grow old (can we read “mature” here?) you will stretch out
188 your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you
189 do not wish to go.” (John 21: 18, 19 NRSV) Relentlessly interfacing with our society
190 and its people may very well feel this way for many Christians – being taken where
191 we would rather not go. The problem is that we have few others to relate to in Jesus’
192 name other than these harassed and helpless ones whom we cannot avoid seeing if we
193 dare to look with eyes of faith and compassion. We know all too well that
194 unprotected exposure to the world is never painless, even at the best of times. (p. 53).
195 Suffering is not the object of discipleship, only its consequence (p. 55). We must

196 assume that the cross, while it is for us the cross of Jesus Christ, is also a symbolic
197 statement about the human predicament. (p. 70)

198 Douglas John Hall speaks of the grandeur, and the misery, of the human being. The
199 grandeur? – this has to do with humanity’s having been created in the very image of
200 God. And the misery? – one need merely consider the woundedness and brokenness
201 so rampant in our own lives, and the lives of those around us in our culture. Hall
202 gives voice to this when he writes:

203 “The truth that the cross of Christ embodies about us is certainly that we are loved by
204 God, but that we are loved as prodigals, as problematic creatures, as beings whose
205 alienation from God, from one another, from ourselves, and from the inarticulate
206 creation is so great that we will accept love only on our terms, when it corresponds
207 with our desire to be affirmed without asking of us that we repent and become
208 authentic, without requiring of us any depth of commitment comparable to the love
209 that is being shown to us.” (p. 102)

210 The theology of the cross gives rise to a church of the cross. If we preach a theology
211 of the cross, we will have to become a community of the cross. Anything else would
212 represent a kind of hypocrisy (see Hall, p. 140). If the church does not see this
213 suffering and if, seeing it, it does not take the burden of it upon itself, then its whole
214 life must be called into question. (p. 152, 153) It could be said of the theology of the
215 cross that its chief end is the birth of a community pushed toward the world despite its
216 own resistance and reluctance. (p. 183)

217 The institutions of marriage and family, and the questions around human sexuality in
218 today’s context cannot be avoided nor can they be dealt with or solved by the Body of
219 Christ. Nevertheless, remembering the grandeur and the misery of humanity,
220 remembering Jesus’ compassion for the harassed and helpless before his eyes, there is
221 nothing else to do but enter into the suffering of our society, and – indeed – the
222 suffering of our Church around these issues. And while we “suffer with” our society
223 we extend the ministry of Word and Sacrament, pastoral care and empathetic
224 accompaniment to all. The love of Christ compels us, and the grace of God empowers
225 us to enter fully into this difficult reality.

226

*Statement on Marriage*227 **Prologue**

228 The recent Statistics Canada report *Family Portrait*, summarizing data on families
 229 and households from the 2006 census, provides clear evidence of significant changes
 230 regarding marital relationships in Canadian society. The report notes that, “For the
 231 first time in 2006, there were more unmarried people aged 15 and over in Canada
 232 than legally married people.”

233 **Statement**

234 Marriage is a gift of God. It is an expression of God’s creation, intended for the joy
 235 and support of those who enter it and for the well-being of the whole human family.
 236 In marriage, God blesses us with the gift of companionship, gives us a relationship in
 237 which (ideally) we grow in love, celebrate our sexuality, and provide a place for the
 238 birth, care and nurture of children. God intends marriage to be a life-long relationship
 239 of caring commitment.

240 Jesus affirmed the covenant of marriage as our originally expressed in Genesis
 241 2:27,28..² The Holy Spirit calls those who are united in marriage to be living signs of
 242 God’s grace, love and faithfulness. This union expresses God’s loving purpose to
 243 create and enrich life. It is meant to be a mutual relationship in which love is
 244 expressed and experienced daily as we learn to bear one another’s burdens and share
 245 each other’s joys. The public expression of mutual vows of lifelong commitment and
 246 fidelity establishes a foundation in which the support of the Christian community and
 247 the community at large is experienced. Within the Christian community, the blessing
 248 of God is invoked.

² Mark 10:6–9. NRSV

249 We follow the Lutheran reformers in viewing marriage as a sacred vocation to which
250 many are called. According to this view, marriage is an expression of God’s will for
251 maintaining good order in all of society. Martin Luther believed marriage should be
252 held “in high esteem as a divine work and command.”³

253 Many persons are single, either by choice⁴ or due to the circumstances of life. As our
254 Church has said, “There should be no exaltation of either the single or the married
255 state, one over the other.”⁵ We acknowledge the special needs of single persons,
256 whether widowed, divorced, never married, or conscientiously celibate, and
257 endeavour to support them in the community of faith.

258 Many Canadians are choosing cohabitation over marriage for a variety of reasons.⁶
259 There may be forces that provide impetus for entering into such a cohabiting
260 relationship. We believe that the full value of the marriage covenant and God’s
261 promise for the couple cannot be achieved through cohabitation. We encourage
262 cohabiting couples to consider carefully whether the status of their relationship truly
263 seeks the best for each other and the community and offers the best framework for a
264 trusting relationship to grow in depth and mutuality.

265 Divorce is not God’s intention, but may be a necessity in some circumstances,
266 particularly when a relationship becomes abusive and there is no desire or ability to
267 change, or when trust and fidelity are broken and there appears to be no chance for
268 reconciliation. We declare God’s forgiveness and grace for such broken relationships
269 and invite persons who have experienced the loss of trust, fidelity, companionship
270 and security in such circumstances into our community to experience the healing love
271 of Christ.

³ Luther, *A Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors*.

⁴ 1 Cor. 7:8. NRSV

⁵ *A Statement on Sex, Marriage, and Family*, Adopted by the Fifth Biennial Convention of the Lutheran Church in America, Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 25–July 2, 1970, affirmed by the ELCIC in 1991.

⁶ Although “married couples constituted the largest group (68.6%)” of census families in Canada, “their proportion has been steadily decreasing for the past 20 years.” “A census family is composed of a married couple or a common-law couple, with or without children, or of a lone parent living with at least one child in the same dwelling. A couple can be of the opposite sex or of the same sex.” (Statistics Canada, *Family Portrait: Continuity and Change in Canadian Families and Households in 2006, 2006 Census*)

272 We call our church to respect the rights of all people, including members of our
273 communities whose sexual orientation is other than heterosexual. We condemn
274 violence and discrimination based upon sexual orientation. We encourage continued
275 dialogue with Christians of other sexual orientations and their families to foster
276 greater understanding and awareness, as we re-examine our practices as a Christian
277 community.

278 As the Synod of Alberta and the Territories, we acknowledge that we do not have full
279 consensus. We have disagreement in the interpretation of Scripture. We are not of
280 one mind on the matter of same-sex behaviour or marriage, or any other sexual
281 orientation or configuration, and we bear the burden of human frailty. We continue
282 upholding the freedom to discuss the differences we voice, in the hope that God will
283 reveal to us God's will and that God will provide us the means and the will to
284 preserve the unity of the church.

285 We invite the congregations and rostered ministers throughout the Synod to enter into
286 a similar dialogue in order to better understand marriage in the present context and to
287 enhance the ministry of the church to all.

288 *Statement on Family*

289 Family is a gift of God. Genesis describes the first human family: its inherent
290 diversity of gender, temperament, and avocation. Family is the first and most
291 important unit of community that we experience. It provides us with our most
292 intimate experience of sacrificial love, personal nurture, spiritual inspiration, and
293 social preparation for life in the many and varied manifestations of the larger
294 community in society. Our civil and faith communities are modelled on the concept
295 of family members living in supportive relationships that adhere to mutually agreed
296 upon expectations (i.e., a *covenant*). The family lives within various levels of public
297 community.

298 During his earthly ministry Jesus expanded the understanding of family. When told
299 that his mother and brothers were outside, wishing to see him, pointing to his

300 disciples, Jesus said ... “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother
301 and sister and mother.”⁷

302 We are children of God through Christian Baptism. In this rebirth we are joined to the
303 ultimate *extended* family that we call the communion of saints. Our birth families are
304 still where we begin the journey, but we are called out of the nuclear family to find a
305 fuller identity in the Body of Christ. From there we are called into the world to
306 witness and serve our neighbours worldwide.

307 Human beings create families in ways that are strange, even frightening, to some. The
308 church has long included single-parent families and blended families. Co-habiting
309 couples and their children are now part of many congregations. Same-sex couples are
310 coming forward, seeking baptism and Christian education for their children. Jesus
311 welcomed the little children; so too do we, as a Church. We say this because *the*
312 *welfare of children is paramount*. We must bear clear witness here: children need
313 healthy, stable and loving families. If we fear for some of these families, have doubts
314 about them, or even disapprove of them, then all the more reason for us to bring them
315 into the sanctuary of the Christian community.

316 Furthermore, there are childless families – such as the elderly, members with health
317 challenges, and others who are vulnerable – also needing and deserving our support.

318 We recognize the threat to families from such stresses as poverty, our consumer
319 mentality, and negative images of family in the media. These forces serve to erode the
320 covenantal values of family. Our Church is called daily to name and unmask the
321 sources of these stresses on family and to help in this milieu.

322 Here in Alberta and the Territories, we find that our boom-and-bust economy, driven
323 by forces largely outside our provincial and national boundaries, presents enormous
324 challenges to child-rearing families. Parents are separated from their children and
325 each other. Adult children are separated from their aging parents, and the old are
326 separated from their grandchildren. All struggle to provide the basic needs of life in a
327 materialist culture that increasingly assumes that every adult must be engaged in

⁷ Matthew 12:48-50 (NRSV)

328 remunerative employment – such that children are a luxury, part of a so-called
329 lifestyle choice.

330 Families, composed as they are of broken human beings, are always challenged from
331 within. A fallen world's materialism, idolatry and violence threaten to overwhelm
332 our families from without. Lutherans, as members of the priesthood of all believers,
333 are called to actively support our neighbours' families and our own, in obedience to
334 our baptismal call to serve the family of the risen Christ.

335 *Statement on Human Sexuality*

336 Human sexuality is a gift of God. Sexuality has to do with maleness or femaleness
337 and how that is experienced and expressed solitarily and in groupings of individuals.
338 It is that God-given aspect of our humanity which moves us toward relationship,
339 intimacy and companionship. It involves the capacity to form deep and lasting bonds,
340 give and receive, conceive and bear children, commit oneself to life with another,
341 touch and be touched, love and be loved. We demonstrate our true humanity in
342 personal relationships, the most intimate of which is expressed through physical
343 sexuality.

344 Our human sexuality, like all parts of our human nature, has been corrupted by sin.
345 Desiring power over others in all its forms (lust) rather than love often influences how
346 we understand our human sexuality. Sex can also be engaged in such a way that the
347 partner becomes a sex-object over which power and control can be exercised. This is
348 a misuse of sex and a sin against one's partner as well as one's own body. Our pursuit
349 of the desires of the body, and our faith in human wisdom and righteousness,
350 damages our relationships with each other and with God.

351 Human sexuality and love are intended to be the extension and embodiment of divine
352 love into human form. God created us as sexual beings – male and female. Through
353 the creation narrative of Scripture we understand God holds both male and female to
354 be of equal value in fulfilling God's purpose in creation.

355 The marriage relationship is the primary means God gives us to fulfil our sexual
356 desires in loving and joyful ways. While it is a wondrous gift, physical sexuality does
357 not by itself constitute moral justification for any and every sexual behaviour. Our

358 sexuality is to be a source of joy and fulfilment, not a source of enmity, strife, self-
359 gratification or a means of gaining popularity.

360 The way in which we express our sexuality is a matter of communal concern because
361 of its impacts upon the individual, the family, and the community at large. The
362 restored relationship God has with us in Jesus is a model for our relationship with
363 each other. The healthy expression of our sexuality enhances our relationships with
364 other human beings and helps us better understand the fullness of the relationship that
365 exists between God and human beings. Portions of Scripture in the New Testament
366 make clear that it is in a loving, monogamous nuclear family that human beings are
367 best able to engage in relationships marked by deep intimacy, trust, love, mutual
368 support and fidelity – the ideal human relationship. A strong marital unit is
369 considered essential for societal well-being. Sexual intercourse cements the marriage
370 bond. Sexual fidelity makes certain that families remain intact and ensures clear
371 paternity / maternity and property rights. Finding sexual satisfaction within marriage
372 ensures order is maintained.

373 Our sexual behaviour is shaped by powerful physical needs, biological drives and
374 psychological needs for intimacy. Failure to properly nurture these needs and drives
375 can lead to sexual irresponsibility. We need to be cautious of the influence which
376 societal forces bring to bear on sexual behaviour. What is acceptable in society has
377 changed through time and place. As has been stated earlier, while the Church must be
378 aware of the social forces influencing the understanding of sexuality and sexual
379 behaviours, it must primarily be attuned to God's will as revealed in Scripture, which
380 we confess to be the norm and authority for all matters of faith and life.

381 The early church was influenced by the existing understandings within Jewish
382 society. As Christianity spread, the concern for purity of the body came to dominate
383 the understanding of human sexuality. Monogamous male-female unions, modelled
384 after the relationship of Christ with the church, were upheld as the choice of those
385 who were unable to be celibate. From the second century until the Reformation the
386 celibate life was considered more virtuous than marriage. The reformers lifted up the
387 physical expression of one's sexuality within marriage as acceptable and even holy.

388 God has given human beings the choice of whether or not to act upon their sexual
389 urges. Expressing love for one's partner by engaging in mutually satisfying sexual
390 relations is one choice God gives to human beings. Jesus' reiteration of the
391 Commandments and his own teaching on marriage in the New Testament Scripture
392 makes clear that the choice to engage in sexual relations is limited to the marital
393 relationship. It is within the marital relationship that couples have the freedom to
394 develop their individual selves to their fullest. The church needs to encourage and
395 support couples so that the marital relationship can grow and deepen as the couple
396 passes through the various stages of their life together.

397 A second choice God gives to human beings regarding their sexuality is celibacy.
398 Persons may be celibate for a lifetime or for a certain length of time because of
399 circumstances within their lives. Persons who are celibate need to be supported by
400 the church in developing relationships which fulfil our human need for
401 companionship at the same time as they are enabled to abstain from sexual intimacy
402 in their relationships. Celibacy can be a spiritual gift given by God to some human
403 beings as a means of fulfilling their role within God's kingdom.

404 Our sexuality can be used in ways which are life affirming or in ways which cause
405 shame and guilt. Our society has made sex and human sexuality into a commodity
406 which can be used to further the interests of particular groups such as advertisers and
407 the media. Human relationships have been damaged because society has made the
408 expression of human sexuality in sexual relations the way human beings relate to
409 each other. Non-sexual intimate relationships between people of the opposite or same
410 sexes are questioned because society has trouble understanding that there are many
411 ways of being intimate with people. Engaging in sexual intimacy with multiple
412 partners has led to a variety of social problems, including broken relationships, the
413 rise in Sexually Transmitted Infections⁸ including HIV/AIDS⁹ and unwanted

⁸ Chlamydia is the most commonly reported Sexually Transmitted Infection in Canada. Close to 63,000 cases were reported in 2004, the highest number of cases since the disease became reportable in 1990. Gonorrhoea rates have nearly doubled from 14.9 per 100,000 in 1997 to 28.9 per 100,000 in 2004. More than 60% of cases are attributed to males. Syphilis is escalating in both males and females, but more so in males. 2004 rates for men were 15 times higher than in 1997. 82% of male cases and 72% of overall cases are

414 pregnancies.¹⁰ Teenagers are engaging in sexual activity before they are emotionally
415 and mentally mature enough to deal with the consequences.

416 On the matters of same sex orientation and behaviour, same gender unions and
417 marriages, and the issues attendant to orientations other than heterosexual, there is no
418 consensus in our Church at this time. But we are of one mind in stating that the
419 inclusive call of Christ means we have a ministry to and with all persons and their
420 families regardless of their sexual orientation, as our bound consciences and
421 confessions of faith enable us.

422 In conclusion, it is in our marital and family relationships and in the expressions of
423 our sexuality that we have the most intimate and powerful opportunities to love our

attributed to men aged 30-59. (The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, *Sex Facts in Canada 2006.*)

⁹ At the end of 2005 there were an estimated 58,000 people in Canada living with HIV - up from 50,000 in 2002. Of these, around 30% were unaware of their infection. It is estimated that between 2,300 and 4,500 new HIV infections occur in Canada each year. In the period 1985-2001, men having sex with men (MSM) category accounted for 62% of adult HIV diagnoses for which exposure category was reported. The equivalent proportion was 39% in 2006. In recent years around a quarter of new adult HIV diagnoses have been among women. Nearly two thirds of the women diagnosed in 2006 were probably infected through heterosexual contact. By the end of 2006, there were 20,669 AIDS diagnoses in Canada. At least 15,556 people with AIDS have died. Among adult AIDS cases reported, the proportion accounted for by MSM fell from about 75% in the years prior to 1994, to 35% in 2005. The heterosexual exposure category increased from 10% to 35% in the same period. Women have accounted for around 25% of adult HIV diagnoses in each year since 2000. This proportion has more than doubled from 12% in the period 1985-97. From 1988 to 2005 there has been steep increases in AIDS infections among aboriginal and black people. These two groups are now highly over represented. The provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec account for 85% of the population of Canada and for 95% of the nation=s AIDS diagnoses. (*Canada HIV & AIDS Statistics Summary* found at www.avert.org/canstatg.htm)

¹⁰ Among 15-19 year old Canadian females, the pregnancy rate declined from 41.7 per 1,000 in 1998 to 40.2 in 1999 and 38.2 in 2000. The number of teenaged women who give birth has also declined, from 16.8 live births in 1997 to 12.1 in 2003. (The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, *Sex Facts in Canada 2006.*) In the past more teenage pregnancies ended in a live birth than in an abortion. However, in 1997, with the decline in live births to teens, abortion became the most common outcome of teenage pregnancy. This had been the case for younger teens in most years since 1993. (Statistics Canada, *Teenage pregnancy.*)

424 closest neighbours – our loved ones. And in loving them as we love ourselves, we are
425 responding to the God who loved us first with an everlasting and unconditional love.
426 We commend these pastoral statements to our Synod and its members for their
427 guidance, reflection and discussion. May this document speak to us and our world
428 with a faithful and compassionate voice.

429

WELCOMING STATEMENT

430 We call our church to respect the rights and preserve the dignity of all people. We
431 condemn any form of violence or discrimination based upon age, gender, sexual
432 orientation or any other factor. We encourage continued dialogue with and pastoral
433 care for Christians whose orientation is other than heterosexual. We pledge ourselves
434 to be the compassionate presence of Jesus to all.

435 **A Christian Model for Study and Dialogue in Resolving the Issues**
436 **Challenging the Church**

437 **1. Faith Grounded in Truth**

438 We begin with God's actions: God grants grace and salvation; God brings people into
439 relationship and community; God engages people in conversation; God alone gives
440 life to all. As Christians we are first and foremost a people grounded in Christ alone.
441 We cannot intelligently or with integrity proceed in any discussion without
442 committing ourselves firstly to Christ alone in prayer and Scripture. In prayer we
443 humble ourselves before God's sovereignty, acknowledging that without the
444 indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we cannot discern rightly. God's Word encounters us
445 in the Bible, and that Word transforms us – it conforms us into Christ.

446 **2. Commitment to the Process (Listening)**

447 Each of us as individuals is unique and purposely created by God. Life has provided
448 each of us with a different road to follow. This has given us our own unique
449 experiences and understanding of God, faith, and life. It is important that we honour
450 and uphold one another as we share our experiences, backgrounds, and
451 understandings of life and the challenge of Christian faith. All persons have the right
452 to share their story openly and without interruption. Each of us has the duty to listen
453 without criticism, without judgment, with sympathy, compassion, and understanding,
454 for none have walked the road of life without stumbling, or taking the wrong path.

455 **3. One in Faith, one in Christ**

456 In sharing our stories we recognize our shared humanity and the value of our
457 diversity. We share a common faith, a common hope, and are motivated by the same
458 love. Despite our differences, we identify common goals and find our unity in the
459 love of Christ and his Church.

460 **4. Dialogue and Understanding**

461 In Christ we find our common identity, vocation and destiny. The advancement of
462 our unity of purpose is achieved by sharing of perceptions not opinion, in the
463 exchange of information and the challenging of assumptions, and in the sharing of
464 recognized resources that add to the body of knowledge and the increased
465 understanding of the topic under discussion.

466 **5. Unity of Purpose**

467 Together we seek the common good in harmony with the word of God. Our open
468 discussions naturally lead us to conclusions and formulations that seem to be a
469 reasoned estimate of a good that will be of benefit to all. (...It has seemed good to
470 the Holy Spirit and to us... Acts 15:28 NRSV).

471 **6. Thanksgiving, Prayer and Dedication**

472 Through these discussions we have come to understand and love others and ourselves
473 a little better. Sometimes these events take place in spite of our humanity. Always
474 we recognize and value the direction and inspiration God has provided throughout the
475 process. This is a time to praise God for God's goodness and leading us to value and
476 appreciate one another more. It is a time when we can commend ourselves in prayer
477 and invite God's participation and blessing in the working out of what the agreement
478 will mean for each individual and the Church. We can dedicate ourselves to working
479 through the formulation for the good of all. We can now better, with unity of
480 purpose, dedicate our time, strength, and resources to the advancement of the
481 Kingdom.

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Endnote

483 *Life has a way of moving us from familiar and comfortable places to new places where we may*
 484 *experience ourselves suddenly as strangers and aliens. From happy homes to broken homes, from*
 485 *finding the perfect mate or friend to the trauma of estrangement or divorce, from the safety and*
 486 *security of belonging to an “in” group to finding ourselves outsiders, because of some disagreement or*
 487 *change in direction.*

488 *Of all the forms of separation just mentioned, the saddest and most painful in our contemporary world*
 489 *are the separations that can take place within religious groups, and in particular, among Christian*
 490 *communities. In the secular and political realm we expect division and even deviousness. In religious*
 491 *communities that preach love, acceptance, equality and forgiveness, we expect more. It’s the wounds*
 492 *we suffer from religious people and religious institutions that hurt the most. It is within this arena that*
 493 *our struggle toward spiritual maturity can be put to the severest of tests. Nowhere can*
 494 *“homelessness” be felt more deeply than when we feel estranged from the Christian community.*
 495 *(p. 78, 79)*

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*Robert Durback, editor**Henry*

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Nouwen: In My Own Words, Liguori Publications, Liguori, Missouri, 2001

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Members of The Task Force on Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality

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In the Alberta Context:

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Appendix A

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Guiding Principles from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions

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(as articulated by the Task Force)

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WORD ALONE

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We begin with the Living Word (John 1), the *vox vivendi* which is primarily Christ – this Living Christ who has the words of eternal life. There is a canon within the canon of Scripture from the Lutheran perspective, and we agree with Luther that ‘whatever bears Christ’ is key in determining this.

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CHRIST ALONE

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Christ is the incarnation of God in our world. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (see John 1 NRSV). In Christ’s sacrificial life and death he revealed God’s love for humanity and atoned for our rebellion from God. In Christ’s resurrection he ushers in a new creation. In faith we enter this new creation.

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We are not justified before God by our own merit or good works, but are brought into a right relationship through the sacrifice of Christ. We enter this relationship through God’s gift of faith, trusting that Christ’s death has made satisfaction for our sin and we are free to live a life of service for others. (Philippians 3:8b-11 NRSV)

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This good news of Christ is the centre of the Scripture. Our reading of the Scripture is through the lens of Christ’s life. While Scripture contains both law and gospel, as Christians we interpret the law in the light of Christ’s redemptive life.

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The gospel breaks into our human experience, addressing all of life’s ambiguities. The gospel bears human despair and brings hope for new life. It assures us of God’s free, unconditional, and unmerited acceptance of us in Christ, despite our sin and alienation from God, from others, and from ourselves. Sensing God’s Word as gospel evokes faith and trust in God’s gracious act of restoration, engendering a loving response lived out in obedience to God and in service to others.

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Living the good news of the gospel challenges and threatens the evil within us and around us. The gospel frees us from ideologies that prevent us from acknowledging and repenting of the injustice and inhumanity that we and our society promote. It increases opportunities for Christ-like service. Such service is costly, and may include suffering for the sake of the gospel.

541 **SCRIPTURE ALONE**

542 The principle – “Scripture alone” – was established when the reformers saw the
 543 Church could and did make mistakes concerning doctrine. “Scripture alone” affirms
 544 Scripture has the highest authority in the life of the church, as summarized in the
 545 Formula of Concord (see Kolb & Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, Formula of
 546 Concord, Epitome, p.486). Scripture, therefore, is the norm for our faith, followed by
 547 the Lutheran Confessions and the traditional formulations of the Church (the Creeds).

548 The phrase “Scripture interprets Scripture” acknowledges the danger of using non-
 549 scripture to interpret Scripture. Without the Holy Spirit we work against the message
 550 of the divinely inspired Scripture. (see Kolb & Wengert, *The Book of Concord*,
 551 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, Freewill)

552 It is also in the spirit of “Scripture alone” that our constitution reads; “This church
 553 confesses the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God,
 554 through which God still speaks, and as the only source of the church’s doctrine and
 555 the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the church” (Article 2, Section 3).
 556 The principle of “Scripture alone” gives focus to our lives as we struggle to
 557 understand God’s grace and work out God’s will (see 2 Tim 3:16-17 NRSV).

558 **GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE**

559 The one great theme of the Lutheran faith is justification by faith alone through grace
 560 alone, apart from the works of the law. *The Formula of Concord* emphasizes that
 561 “faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God-pleasing a virtue but
 562 because it lays hold on and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy
 563 gospel.”¹¹ Romans 5:18 NRSV states that “just as one person’s trespass led to
 564 condemnation for all, so one person’s act of righteousness leads to justification and
 565 life for all.” Grace is thus God’s love for every human being which is so strong that
 566 God willingly sent Jesus to make us right with God. There is a great cost to grace, the
 567 life of Jesus. The church can cheapen grace by offering forgiveness for sin without
 568 repentance and the demand for discipleship.

569 Faith is the trusting hope that the God of the Law is also the God of the Gospel. It is
 570 the recognition that human effort does not engender God’s forgiveness. Only Jesus’
 571 loving sacrifice on the cross does this on our behalf.

572 It is God’s Word which creates faith in human hearts and minds. This faith in turn

¹¹ The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III Righteousness, 13 in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) p. 541.

573 creates the Church, the living being embodying God's grace and forgiveness to the
574 world. The Church is the place where the Gospel is preached and taught in its truth
575 and purity.

576 **Sin**

577 The stories of creation and the fall tell us that while human beings were created in the
578 image of God and there is the potential for good within human existence, the actual
579 human condition is one of profound brokenness. This brokenness means that the
580 preference, the default mode for sin is within each person even before they are born.

581 Sin is fundamentally rebellion against God and opposition to God's grace. It is
582 humanity's inability to fear, love and trust in God, its pursuit of the desires of the
583 body, and its faith in human wisdom and righteousness rather than God's. Sin
584 disrupts our relationship with God by our refusal to live thankfully and gladly by the
585 grace of God. We deny our dependence upon God and reject our need for our fellow
586 creatures, particularly those who are different from us. While sin is a universal
587 condition, it is also a self-chosen act for which we are responsible. It insinuates itself
588 into all human activities. Sin can be most seductively at work under the guise of
589 doing good. Modern society tends to privatize sin and restrict it to the behaviour of
590 individuals.

591 **Discipleship**

592 Faith creates a new, clean heart within the believer. What good works we do in this
593 life follow from this faith. Christian life is grounded in the grace of God. It is based
594 on our union with Christ and directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. By the
595 power of the Holy Spirit believers grow more and more like Christ. This means that
596 Christian life is patterned after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is
597 thus a continuous dying to the old way of life and a rising to a new way of life. Our
598 service to God and others often includes making choices that run contrary to society's
599 ways. Such choices are made out of a love for God and our fellow human beings.

600 **Simultaneously Justified, and Sinner**

601 As Christians, we live as both sinner and saint; we need to bathe daily in the
602 baptismal promise of forgiveness in Christ. Christ's sacrifice of love makes all
603 followers of the Way one body with Christ and, therefore, with one another. We
604 become a "communion of saints" even though sin remains active in the lives of all.
605 Each individual's strengths or weaknesses, peace or blessing, is shared by all
606 members of the body; in Christ we are drawn together like family. The church is "a

607 community and a gracious exchange of our sin and suffering with the righteousness
 608 of Christ and the saints.”¹² As a communion of saints, we are each and all sinner and
 609 saint, and also “a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses”¹³. In this
 610 community we live in the hope of God’s grace and mercy, while at the same time
 611 praying for the strength to fulfil our vocation as Christians in a broken, suffering
 612 world.

613 **THE TWO REALMS OF GOD’S RULE**

614 God exercises his authority in two realms; the realm of creation and the realm of
 615 redemption. The realm of creation is finite and fleeting, while the realm of
 616 redemption is eternal and everlasting. The realm of creation requires order and
 617 responsibility to limit the effect of sin and to create a just world. The realm of
 618 creation is ruled through force and regulation. In the realm of redemption, God’s rule
 619 is invitational through the provision of Word and Sacrament, as conscience and the
 620 response of the heart cannot be compelled; it is a world of faith.

621 God reigns through the gospel, as expressed in Word and Sacrament, in the
 622 redemptive realm. Here God’s promises of grace, forgiveness, and acceptance are
 623 persuasive. God’s grace enables believers to “love God with all our heart, soul, and
 624 mind” and to serve God freely and solely out of this love. In this realm faith
 625 appropriates the promise of God in Christ and gratitude is expressed in adoration of
 626 God and service to humankind. We live in a new creation within the Body of Christ –
 627 a redemptive community subject to no one, yet subject to all in service.

628 Civil authority is exercised in the realm of creation by and on behalf of Christian and
 629 non-Christian alike; both being equally subject to authority. The civil law is thus a
 630 good gift of God in that it serves to limit and correct human behaviour, and promotes
 631 the common good. In the realm of creation the authorities are agents of God’s rule in
 632 God’s world in order to maintain the order of creation. The various activities,
 633 agreements and commitments that govern human relationships in this realm, are
 634 subject to reason that prevails in maintaining order and justice.

635 However, civil authority is not absolute. Christians must therefore be alert and
 636 prepared to protest when civil authorities mandate values and/or behaviours that make
 637 us betray our Christian faith.

¹² Luther’s Works, Volume 35, p. 60.

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¹³ Book of Concord, p417

639 *Marriage, Family and Sexuality*

640 **Response Sheet**

641 It is our hope that the foregoing statements are read, discussed, reflected upon and
642 critiqued. Your comments and suggestions are welcomed. Please use this response
643 sheet (or one of your devising) to share suggestions and comments with the ABT
644 Synod office (10014 – 81 Ave., Edmonton, AB. T6E 1W8 or fax (780) 433-6623 or
645 E-mail kbudgell@elcic.ca).

646 **Comments Concerning the Preamble**

647 **Comments Concerning the Theological Foundations**

648 **Comments Concerning the Model for Study and Dialogue**

649 **Comments Concerning the Statement on Marriage**

650 **Comments Concerning the Statement on Family**

651 **Comments Concerning the Statement on Human Sexuality**

652 **Comments on the Welcoming Statement**

653 **Comments on Appendix A – Guiding Principles**