



## A Radical Middle Option for the **Sexuality Task Force** of the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

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Dear Task Force,

As a scientist who dabbles in philosophy, theology, and psychology, I wanted to offer a few thoughts about the church's response to homosexuality, in support of my father Dr. John Prabhakar's work on the Sexuality Task Force. I have earlier written on the [political aspects](#) of gay marriage, but wanted to share my thoughts on the particular issues under consideration by the Lutheran church.

### **I. Introduction**

With only slight oversimplification, the debate over homosexuality can be characterized as between conservatives who view it as sinful on theological grounds, and liberals who see it as normal on psychological grounds. The fact that these two groups base their positions on totally different authorities (or at least different hermeneutics for interpreting them) makes it seem that no reconciliation between them is possible: either one group must win, or there will be a muddled compromise which nobody is happy with.

I represent an alternate viewpoint, sometimes called the radical middle. I believe that both camps are built around important truths, yet they have also accreted incorrect assumptions and positions over time. I believe that it is possible through dialogue -- and the Holy Spirit -- to articulate a principled position that honors both groups sense of truth, while correcting their respective errors.

### **II. Assumptions**

To start with, I think it is important to acknowledge two central facts which exist in tension:

- Homosexuality is not, in general, chosen
- Homosexuality is not, in general, ideal

Accepting these two foundational truths provides important constraints on possible interpretations and policies. Typically, groups espouse a stronger version of one of these truths and deny the other, resulting in unbalanced approaches that distort the possible solution space. However, I would assert that these positions -- when appropriately phrased -- are consistent with the available scientific and biblical standards of evidence. If the church can reach consensus on these two points, that would provide a common frame of reference for exploring and evaluating further activity.

However, I think there is a third area around which it is necessary to reach consensus: the role and rationale of church policy (which, surprisingly, did not seem to be directly addressed in *Journeying Together*

Faithfully). As fallen human beings, I don't think it is reasonable to expect us to come up with the one true 'right' answer (much less agree upon it). However, we should aspire to come up with a faithful answer, based on the responsibilities, authority, and information God has provided for us.

Based on this, I would argue that the third core truth is that:

- The purpose of church policy is to cultivate the experience of God's grace.

This embodies - rather than denies - the tension between acceptance of sinners and the call to refrain from sin. Perhaps more importantly, it implies a fiduciary responsibility for the church to measure the impact of policies in terms of their practical effect on people's experience of grace. Policy exists to restrain harmful behavior and encourage constructive behavior - all the while pointing to the historical work of Jesus on the cross, and the present work of the Spirit in the worshipping community. While truth doesn't change, policy continually evolves as we learn more about God and humanity.

### **III. Recommendations**

If one accepts these premises, then I believe they encourage -- even demand -- a multifaceted approach to the issue of sexuality within the Lutheran Church. In contrast to the usual dichotomy between 'no change' and 'full acceptance', this nuanced approach is likely to be uncomfortable for everyone. However, the goal is in fact for it to be constructively uncomfortable, to force all of us to continue grappling with the paradox of grace, and the universal mandate to love our neighbor as ourselves.

I believe the church should adopt a strong, unified position on these issues, while still leaving room for learning and development, perhaps with an explicit call for these policies to be reevaluated in five years, and granting exceptions for congregations or synods who would like to explore alternate mechanisms for implementing these core principles. More as an illustration than a recommendation, here is one possible set of policies for holistically working out the three core truths outlined above.

#### **A. Affirm marriage**

One of the problems I've always had with the conservative concerns about homosexuality is the sense that we are straining gnats while swallowing camels. I believe the biblical ideal of marriage as one man, one woman for a lifetime of love and fidelity is a valid one. However, the hard truth is that heterosexual couples often experience sexuality in ways that fall far short of what God intended. Divorce, infidelity, cohabitation, promiscuity - all these are problems that exact a far greater toll on marriage than homosexuality. Worse still are the issues of incest, pedophilia, and child abuse that statistics imply lurk within even our most straight-laced congregation.

In order to credibly address the issue of gay marriage, I believe the church first needs to forthrightly tackle the problem of straight marriage. For a variety of reasons, people appear to lack the understanding, commitment, or simple psychological wholeness to live out God's ideal. The Lutheran Church, with its history of social action and strong communities, could take the lead in wresting the marriage debate away from reactionary conservatives to focus on constructive alternatives. The church could focus attention, resources, and public policy on social problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, pornography, and debt that often strangle couples and families. It could research and institute procedures such as a mandatory pre-marital counseling, to promote healthy marriage and constructive dialogue.

I believe such a focus would lead to both a healthier and a more credible church. And by grappling openly with the core issues of heterosexuality, the church would be better equipped to tackle the challenges of homosexuality.

## **B. Affirm homosexuals, if not homosexuality**

Under the circumstances, it is probably impossible to reach consensus on the question "is homosexuality intrinsically sinful?" However, that should not prevent the church from articulating a welcoming attitude towards homosexuals. Is not the church supposed to be the ultimate refuge for sinners? Has abstinence from sin -- even agreement about what sin is -- ever been a precondition for belonging to the community of faith?

The sad truth is that the church in general -- despite notable exceptions -- is usually viewed in terms of what it denies homosexuals rather than what it provides them. While the Lutheran church has perhaps done better than most, I believe it is possible -- even necessary -- for the church to agree on a strong positive response to homosexuals, in light of the larger mandate of the gospel, despite the disagreements that remain.

I would envision something like a fourfold response:

1. We welcome homosexuals to participate as full members of the Lutheran Church, to share in the sacraments of grace and fellowship.
2. We believe that at least some homosexuals would benefit from reparative therapy, and are committed to researching and providing the best possible options. However, we also acknowledge that therapy is not always successful, and can even be harmful, and thus we affirm that it is up to each individual to decide whether to pursue this course.
3. We believe that celibacy is God's ideal for all unmarried persons. At the same time, we are mindful of placing on homosexuals a burden that "neither we nor our fathers were able to bear."
4. We affirm that faithful, affectionate monogamy is vastly preferable to promiscuity for spiritual, psychological and social reasons. We also acknowledge our own limitations in our understanding of sexuality and marriage, as well as our inability to help people reliably experience God's best.

Therefore, I believe the church needs to encourage and recognize monogamy for homosexuals who for whatever reason are unable to enjoy celibacy or heterosexual marriage. While not taking a position on either the political or spiritual definition of marriage, some form of church-recognized monogamy is necessary to avoid driving homosexuals away from the church, or implicitly condoning promiscuity.

## **C. Rethink the relation of laity and ministry**

The final issue of gay ordination is a difficult one, especially since there is strong biblical precedent for holding leaders to higher standards than laity; after all, polygamy was implicitly forbidden elders, even though it was in some cases mandated by Levitical law. It is further complicated by what I see as two deeper issues. One is that the current position implies a sort of official hypocrisy, by pretending that gay ministers do not actually exist, or in effect encouraging homosexuals seeking the priesthood to hide their orientation (thus defeating the actual purpose of the ruling). The second is that there seems to be a growing chasm between a relatively conservative laity and a somewhat more progressive leadership, leading to a fear (warranted or not) that unpopular decisions may be enforced from above.

Whatever policy is chosen, I believe the most important factor is that it lead to a greater level of honesty, trust, and consistency in the relationship between ministers and laity. To that end, the optimal approach might involve a short-term 'amnesty' (such as a non-geographical synod allowing homosexual ordination) along with a long-term investigation into the roots of the theological disconnect between different communities. In particular, an open and involved discussion of how theological education actually occurs in both churches and seminaries, as well as within different sub-communities of the ELCA, might prove not only useful but invigorating.

## IV. Conclusions

In short, I believe that the most important question is not so much how the church relates to homosexuality, but how we relate to each other, Jesus Christ, and the world. Rather than focus on winners and losers, I encourage the church to commit to a policy that provokes all Christians - gay and straight, clergy and laity, inside and outside the church - to reexamine what it means to love one another and be faithful to the gospel calling. I believe that such a process, regardless of whether people feel hurt or leave the church, will turn a potentially divisive issue into one that ultimately strengthens the ELCA and enables it to better glorify God here on earth.

Sincerely, Ernest Prabhakar, Ph.D.

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