

## **Lakeview Lutheran Church-Madison, WI**

### **Resolution for the Affirmation of Household Covenants**

#### **Background**

On January 13, 2005 the Task Force for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Studies on Sexuality made the recommendation *“that with respect to the matter of blessing same-sex couples who have entered into long-term monogamous covenants of love and care, the ELCA currently has no legislated policy and the task force declines to recommend any change. In this time of conflict and uncertainty, the Conference of Bishops pointed the way to treating such decisions as matters of pastoral care and the task force believes that pastors and congregations can and should be trusted by this church to exercise the wisdom of discretion in their ministry to same-sex couples and their natural and congregational families.”*

As a result of this recommendation and its support by the voting assembly of the ELCA in August 2005, Lakeview Lutheran Church established a Human Sexuality Committee which includes Rene Puzach, Mary Cragin, Karen Hoffman, Kathy Knudtson, Shirley Storkson, Linda Selmer, Terry Warnke, David Smith, Kevin Danz, Luther Torgerson and Pastor Dean Kirst. It should be noted that in January 2004, prior to the establishment of this committee, forty-eight members of this congregation engaged in a two month study of the ELCA Study Document entitled; **Journey Together Faithfully; The Church and Homosexuality, Study Guide, Part Two.**

After meeting for one year, the Lakeview Human Sexuality Committee established two listening sessions for the entire congregation in October, 2006. At those sessions, the committee learned of particular areas that attendees desired further information. Between January 7, 2007 and March 4, 2007, the Human Sexuality Committee provided a Bible study and series of presentations for members of the congregation. The first presentation was given by representatives from Advent Lutheran Church-ELCA, a Reconciled in Christ Congregation. The second presentation was from an ELCA seminary professor. The third presentation was from a man who is gay and a woman who is trans-gendered. These events were well attended.

#### **The Bible and This Issue**

In committee and congregational discussion, we considered the scriptures, which sometimes call us to welcome others, while at the same time, in some passages, seem to prohibit homosexual relationships. Through the discussion, we noted that all of scripture is important for us because it is instructive and provides us with wisdom and insight. We also recognized that as new information is made available in our world through science and technology, it influences the way we look at scripture. An example would be the scientific evidence that the world is round, not flat, as was once the belief. We also recognized that we do not use all of scripture to provide order and structure for our lives. An example of this may be found in Matthew, where Jesus indicates that if your hand causes you to sin, you should cut it off. We do not literally advocate this, but we do use the passage to remind us of the grave nature of the sin around us and the importance of challenging sin in our lives. Although the mortgage of one's home is prohibited in Deuteronomy, we do not consider a mortgage to be a sin. We are opposed to slavery and

the oppression of women, but we can still find many passages in the Bible that both accept and uplift slavery and female oppression. These texts remind us of the importance of treating all people justly and of our call as disciples to work for fair and equitable racial and gender relationships in the world. Passages of the Bible referring to human sexuality are similar. Although we refrain from condemning homosexuality as a sin, we find wisdom in these passages reminding us that in matters of human sexuality, we are to be honorable, faithful, respectful and honest.

In our discussions, we recognized and reviewed many biblical texts that assist us with our moral and ethical decision-making. Specifically they included John 13:31-35, John 13:3-20, Matthew 5, 6, and 7, Mark 12:28-31, Genesis 1:27-31, Genesis 2:7-8 and 18-25, Psalm 8:4-8, Mark 2:23-28, Matthew 18:12-22, Mathew 25:31-46, Luke 10:25-37, John 8:1-11 Romans 8:1-2 and Romans 12:1-8. We also recognized that the inclusive, accepting and hospitable example given to us in the life and ministry of Christ could be the foundation and the core for all of our moral, ethical and social decisions. We recalled Christ's acceptance of people with leprosy, of Gentiles, of Samaritan women, of Roman soldiers, of widows, orphans, and young children and of those possessed by demons. We understand that the Christian community has always been invited to love as God loves the world and we find great guidance in 1 John 4:11-12, ***"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us."*** As we struggle with life's differences, we also acknowledge that we find direction and grace in the words used by Christ in John 13:34, ***"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*** Finally, the biblical call to refrain from judgment and hypocrisy as found in Matthew 7:1 ***"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged,"*** has been valuable in guiding our deliberations.

### **Tradition and The Issue of Blessing**

A blessing is an "act of prayer that includes a ritual sign of God's grace." Jesus blessed little children, the poor, the meek, those who mourn, those who strive for peace and those who are hungry. The Lutheran Church has a long and rich history of blessing. The Occasional Services Book includes 29 different occasions for offering a blessing including, but not limited to, candles, bedrooms, homes, dining rooms, kitchens, libraries, those who labor, those who leave congregations, etc. At Lakeview Lutheran Church, we have offered times to bless bikes and their riders, pets and animals, Sunday school teachers, the congregation council and young people who have gone to participate in mission work. A blessing uplifts the commitment that people are making. It acknowledges the presence of God's gracious love in our lives as the community of believers gathers to witness and celebrate. When done in a public setting, a blessing also acknowledges the community that exists to offer support and care. Although marriages could happen exclusively in the courts and within the secular community, many Lutherans have historically chosen to have their marriage commitments blessed within the congregation. We find great joy in blessing and celebrating the commitment that people make in a marriage and we ask God to continue to give the parties the strength to uphold the promises that they make in a commitment ceremony.

## **The Formation and Affirmation of Household Covenants**

The Lakeview Human Sexuality Committee explored a variety of responses that other congregations have made regarding the possible blessing of unions. The committee understands that the blessing of a union in the State of Wisconsin is not a legal contract. The committee fully understands that the primary importance of a relationship is the commitment that the participants make to each other, not the legal document. We recognize that some legal marriages do not necessarily include a high level of commitment. People can choose to marry for many reasons. The Lakeview Human Sexuality Committee also recognizes that there are heterosexual relationships that include a very high level of commitment, but for a variety of reasons, are not appropriate for the legal institution of marriage. Age and disability may be such factors. The committee considered all relationships and commitments. The committee liked the terminology adopted by St. John's Lutheran Church, **Affirmation of Household Covenants**. A covenant is "a formal binding agreement." The formation and affirmation of household covenants would involve families and/or couples, both heterosexual and homosexual, who desire to covenant with one another to offer stability in their lives together. Examples of these covenants would include;

- Senior couples who have developed friendships and special relationships, but for financial, health and/or family reasons they do not wish to marry, but their companionship is something they desire to honor, respect, and more publicly acknowledge.
- Couples who may be contemplating marriage in the future, but are looking for an alternative to marriage or a period of betrothal, and may wish to share property and/or raise children.
- Couples who may not be able to choose legal marriage because disability funding or other public financial sources would be affected and would prevent their relationship from surviving.
- Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or trans-gendered couples who wish for the stability that comes with committed relationships.

These covenants would use the tradition of covenant formation and affirmation found in scripture, perhaps most clearly in Joshua 24 and in the frequent covenants that God makes with the people in the Hebrew texts. All services of affirmation would be in line with Lutheran Liturgy as found in ELCA publications. All covenant affirmations would involve recalling the history of the relationship, a call to commitment, a vow or a renewal of a vow, the affirmation of the community gathered, a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to assist in living up to the responsibilities made this day, the comfort and challenge of scripture, and a concrete and visible sign that reminds everyone that the covenant has been made. The sacrament of Holy Communion could be celebrated.

The participants in these covenants would be affiliated with our congregation in some direct way. The pastor of the congregation would work with couples in the development of a covenant. The covenants would be recorded in the official records of the congregation.

As in a marriage covenant that takes place at Lakeview, there would be costs associated with any other covenant. Fees would be considered based on the Lakeview Wedding Planning Policy.

After months of study and prayerful discussion, a desire for the Lakeview congregation to be safe and inclusive for all people to come and receive God's love and an understanding that not everyone can be in agreement with these positions, the Lakeview Human Sexuality Committee moves that the following resolution be adopted and implemented by the Lakeview Congregation Council and then by the voting members of the congregation at a special congregational meeting.

**Be it resolved that:**

The Congregation of Lakeview Lutheran Church, Madison, Wisconsin affirms the formation and affirmation of household covenants with these understandings:

The formation and affirmation of household covenants would involve couples, either heterosexual or homosexual, who desire to covenant with one another to offer stability to their life together and who wish to have the faith community at Lakeview recognize their commitment and support them in their relationship. Examples of such covenants would include;

- Senior couples who have developed friendships and special relationships, but for financial, health and/or family reasons they do not wish to marry, but their companionship is something they desire to honor, respect, and more publicly acknowledge.
- Couples who may be contemplating marriage in the future, but are looking for an alternative to marriage or a period of betrothal, and may wish to share property and/or raise children.
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This resolution is in keeping with the value of hospitality and outreach, which shapes the community of Lakeview Lutheran Church. We are open to all and affirm all who come with the desire to live as people who are faithful to their baptismal call to study scripture, pray, live the Ten Commandments, faithfully attend worship, participate in the community and work for peace and justice in the world as found in the ELCA order for Holy Baptism.