

# VIRGINIA SYNOD ELCA

## MINISTRY WITH YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

January 2010

To: Small Group Leaders

From: Dave Delaney

The decisions made at the August 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly regarding matters of sexuality have generated intense discussion as well as an unusual amount of anxiety in the Virginia Synod and throughout the church. In our synodical ministry with youth, we will want to be faithful to the Assembly's call for mutual respect regarding the variety of perspectives represented among the church's members and at the same time remember our accountability to parents and congregations. Discussions of sexuality come up from time to time in Winter Celebration small groups, and we may find that this year we hear more stories of congregational conflict and debate along with some curiosity about what is behind it or what it all means. The purpose of this memo is to reiterate the expectations we have of our small group leaders at Virginia Synod youth events and how those apply to these new realities we currently face.

1. We start by recalling the primary purpose and mission of our youth events: to be Ambassadors for Christ to each other and to the youth and to build caring, supportive, and faith-sharing relationships with them. We do not avoid discussion of lifestyle matters, including sexuality, if they come up, but if our youth do not experience an awareness of the lordship of the living Jesus Christ in their lives, then we have no context for considering these other matters, so that remains the focus of our weekend events.
2. Any discussion that the youth may initiate regarding the current controversy or sexuality in general should be treated with care. A few Lutheran teenagers have been quite vocal and resolute about the topic of homosexuality in particular, but in general the youth of our church have been less interested than adults in making this a central or church-dividing matter.
3. If we are called upon to represent either the biblical tradition or the Assembly actions, we will want our group leaders to do so as accurately as possible and also to hold in check as much as possible our personal opinions that may color our descriptions, realizing that there is as yet no consensus on some matters. On matters pertaining to most youth, nothing has changed: sexual intercourse between heterosexuals is strictly reserved for one man and one woman within marriage; anything else is condemned as either fornication or adultery and is intrinsically sinful. The church calls to repentance those who are engaged in such practices. As regards homosexuality, the church continues to condemn homosexual behavior that grows out of thrill-seeking, exploitation, predation, or simple curious experimentation. Homosexual orientation has never been condemned, but only its expression.

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Some in the church now disagree with the long-standing tradition and consensus that condemns all homosexual activity as sinful and believe instead that the church should allow committed, monogamous homosexual relationships between adults whose orientation is clearly homosexual.

Furthermore, many (but by no means all) of those who feel called to make provision for the acceptance of such homosexual relationships in the church also believe that those in such relationships should be allowed to serve as rostered leaders (pastors, AIMS, diaconal ministers) in the ELCA; this latter position has been approved by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly but will not be forced on any entity of the church. The decision to deviate from the traditional position must be acknowledged as a novelty in the history of the church, although all sides of the debate point to a serious engagement with the scriptures as the source of their conclusions. In our discussions, we remain committed to receiving the views of all without disrespecting or demeaning them. Please refer to Bishop Mauney's pastoral statement regarding the Churchwide Assembly actions. Go to [www.vasynod.org](http://www.vasynod.org) and click on "Message from Bishop Mauney."

4. The reason our account of the current debate should not extend much beyond the above summary in our event small groups is, first, this is not our primary purpose for gathering (see point 1 above). Second, as much as we make allowances for the content of the group discussion to come from the participants, we must keep in mind the limits of what can be accomplished in the course of a weekend regarding this complex and emotionally-charged topic. Participants who are troubled or undecided on their own views (and especially if someone is wrestling with his/her own sexual identity) should be encouraged to explore the resources of their own local contexts - pastors and youth leaders, parents and family, counselors and trusted mentors.

5. Confidentiality in small groups is essential to the health and integrity of our events. As always, however, whenever stories of sexual abuse or abuse of any kind are disclosed by someone in the small group, that story should be reported as soon as possible to the event directors so that the appropriate and careful protocols we have in place can be implemented as soon as possible. Do not agree to discuss or disclose details of small group conversations on these matters until you have consulted the event directors.

The full text of the August 2009 ELCA Social Statement on Sexuality (as amended), the implementing resolutions, and the Ministry Policies (as amended) can be found at <http://www.elca.org/sexuality>.