Discussion Document on Homosexuality - with particular emphasis on the question of employment of clergy

Compiled by the Theological Study Commission of ELCSA (N-T) expanded to include UELCSA
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1 Introduction

1.1 The reason for this study

During the past decades many Churches have been discussing human sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Opinions on the latter vary from total rejection to total acceptance.

1.2 Five positions on this topic

Various Churches and commissions have done research on the topic, and the findings can be summed up under five positions, as listed below:

1.2.1 Total rejection

The first position is the total rejection of Homosexuality as sin. This position takes biblical texts condemning homosexual practice as literal word of God for us today and sees no space for compromise or interpretation. Homosexually orientated people need to seek forgiveness for their sinful desires and thoughts and find healing in the Christian community. This position holds that through faith and prayer people can be changed to lead fulfilled, heterosexually married lives.

1.2.2 Person accepted but practice condemned

The second position accepts that many homosexuals cannot change their orientation and live fulfilled heterosexual lives. However it maintains that while the orientation cannot change, the practice is condemned in the Bible and therefore homosexuals need to accept that they are called to a celibate life if they want to be committed Christians. This may not be an easy calling, but it is one they can learn to accept for the sake of Christ. It is similar to the call to all Christians to abstain from overtly sinful behaviour however hard this may sometimes be. The church should “love the sinner but not the sin”, and should be accepting of homosexuals as long as they remain celibate.

1.2.3 Practice rejected but tolerated

The third position still sees homosexuality as a sin, but accepts that many homosexuals do not manage to live a celibate life. Living in a homosexual partnership may be a sin, but as we are all sinners, Christians should be tolerant and accepting of the couple, even though not approving of this life-style. This attitude is similar to the growing acceptance of people living together before marriage, or of the remarriage of divorcees, even if it is seen as “sinful”.

1.2.4 Practice is acceptable and should be respected

The fourth position questions whether homosexuality should be seen as a sin. It looks at the reasons for the rejection of homosexuality in biblical times and questions whether those are still valid for us. It takes seriously our human capacity for reason and the most recent scientific insights about homosexuality. It prefers to look at the quality of the relationship, the commitment, trust and care for one another. It recognises that many gay couples are committed Christians and live out their relationship in responsibility before God. It takes as its ethical base the commandment of love and Christian freedom. Christians have freedom to rethink old customs and laws from their faith in Christ, just as the apostolic council did in Acts 15. It advocates acceptance of homosexual relationships, but usually still stops short of advocating that they be regarded as equal to marriage and celebrated as such.

1.2.5 Same status before God as heterosexuality

The fifth position sees the differences in sexual orientation as a gift of God and as part of the wonderful diversity of creation, which should be celebrated rather than treated as a problem. It points to the fact that sexual ethics has shifted through the ages, from polygamous to monogamous, from male dominated to more egalitarian, and believes it should shift again. Many gays and lesbians believe that God has created them as they are and that they enrich the society by living out who they are, finding fulfilment and support in their relationship. They advocate that homosexual partnerships should be blessed and celebrated, just as heterosexual relationships are.

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1 The terminology in this paper is using the words that most people are familiar with. The gay and lesbian community usually does not use the term “homosexuality” but often speaks of the LGBTI community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersexed) or of Transgender people. We have decided not to use these terms which are unfamiliar to most of our congregants.
1.3 The international Lutheran community

Although quite a few Churches have produced statements on the issue, many have chosen to deal with it “silently”. The clear positions range from total acceptance, including the blessing of same sex unions, to total rejection. In some churches there are gay and lesbian clergy. Many statements are open to different opinions on the matter. A good example in this regard is the statement by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) which explains and gives five possible positions and allows for all of them within the ELCA. Despite this openness to all positions the Church split after the acceptance of the document.

1.4 The discussion amongst African Lutheran Churches.

The doctrinal commission of the Lutheran Council of Africa issued its statement on “Marriage, Family and Human sexuality” in May 2012. The short statement states that “the majority of African member churches say “NO” to homosexual acts and regard them to be sinful”. Although it recognises the existence of people with homosexual tendencies, it “regards same sex relations as contrary to shared Christian and African values.” The document does not go into any theological or hermeneutical debate on the issue. However also within the African churches there are voices urging further discussion on the topic, and people who question the definition of “Christian” and “African”.

1.5 Goal of this paper and the discussion in our church

1.5.1 Existing UELCSA position

In 1996 ELCSA (N-T) published a study paper on the topic which situated itself somewhere between the positions three and four above. It gives an overview of the different positions on the topic and discusses biblical texts dealing with the issue. It pleads for caring and careful accompaniment of gay and lesbian people. However the document leaves many ambiguities. In some places it seems to adopt position four, asking for openness towards people living in gay or lesbian relationships and giving them a home in the congregation, in other places, particularly when it comes to pastors, it makes it clear that such relationships are not acceptable. In some places it seems to allow congregations to take decisions on accepting homosexual clergy, in other points in the document it makes the rule applicable to all, that homosexual pastors need to be celibate.

This paper was never adopted as position paper of our church. It has become clear also, in the process of investigations, that legally within UELCSA there have never been grounds for specific exclusion of people of homosexual orientation from the ministry, just as there was never a prohibition on the ordination of women. However, many people understood the above paper to have been the position of the church. Because of the controversial nature of the issue, it has become important to investigate whether there are indeed grounds to exclude practising homosexuals from the ministry. The ELCSA (NT) Synod in 2011, and UELCSA Synod 2012 tasked the Study Commission to investigate this issue specifically and to come up with recommendations based on a thorough theological and biblical reflection. For this reason the paper focusses on homosexuality and the employment of pastors.

1.5.2 The goal of this paper

The goal of this paper is to investigate thoroughly the issue of homosexuality as it relates to the employment of gay and lesbian clergy. This is part of an ongoing dialogue within the church, within the ecumenical movement and the Lutheran family. It acknowledges that there has been a shift in the awareness and understanding of this issue. The fact that there was no law excluding homosexuals did not change the fact

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2The Lutheran World Federation deals with this topic in its “Emmaus conversations” available at https://www.lutheranworld.org/family-marriage-and-sexuality


4Available at http://www.elcsant.org.za/publications.html. The statements follows closely a similar document published by the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Germany of 1980
that they were de facto excluded and that any movement towards inclusion has been controversial and contested.

Any position taken by the church needs to be based on a thorough study of the biblical texts, guided by the principles of our Lutheran theology and way of understanding scriptures, and in dialogue with the scientific insights about homosexuality.

This paper is part of a process that leads into informed discussion and finding a way together. This dialogue has to happen on the basis of humility. No-one in this debate has the full and the only truth, and therefore no one can afford to simply cut off others who come to a different conclusion.

Throughout the generations the church has struggled with matters of faith and ethics and has regularly shifted its position on issues. Sometimes this has led the church to be more faithful to its calling, other times it has led the church astray, and courageous people needed to call her back. We recognise that we can err in our decisions, but that we do need to come to positions on matters which so deeply affect our people.

1.6 A Lutheran approach to controversial topics

When Luther appeared before the emperor in Worms, he was challenged to rescind his writings. After a day’s time to consider he responded that he cannot simply withdraw everything. His conscience is bound by scripture and reason. Therefore he is willing to be challenged on any of his writings based on scripture and reason.

This is a helpful approach in dealing with controversial issues - a conscience bound by scripture and reason. Very often it is conscience that first makes us aware of problematic convictions. This approach drives us to look at scripture and reason to reconsider our standpoint.

Although some people claim that it should be scripture only, it is impossible to interpret scripture at the exclusion of reason. As soon as we start to explain scripture, we are already employing reason. Thus it is helpful to conscientiously apply this twofold criterion of scripture and reason rather than claiming to be guided purely by scripture.

2. Guided by scripture

There are different ways of reading the Bible and consequently fundamental differences in its interpretation. UELCSA is in its foundational confessional documents is committed to a Lutheran approach to interpreting scripture. A document detailing this approach has been formulated. Entitled “Understanding Scripture”, it was adopted at the 2009 ELCSA (NT) Synod. The following is based on this position.

2.1 The Lutheran understanding and interpretation of Scripture

2.1.1 Luther’s position on understanding Scripture

John’s Gospel refers to Jesus Christ as the Word of God: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14) 1 Peter 1:25 “That word is the good news which was preached to you.” Luther treasured the Bible for this very reason – because it had unlocked the gospel of Christ for him. That was the core of the matter and still is for us today. Of course, this was nothing new. Luther simply rediscovered what was already there, but got lost over the course of church history.

It is the gospel of Christ that is the Word of God. It means that to rely on the Word of God is to rely on Jesus Christ. Faith in the Word is therefore not about accepting a certain idea or theory about the Bible. More importantly, it is about a personal relationship with Christ. Saying that Jesus Christ himself is the primary Word of God means that his life, teachings, suffering, death and resurrection are the central message that God want to communicate to us humans. The biblical text is binding in as far as it witnesses to the redeeming and transforming love of God in Christ. That is what Luther meant when he said that Christ is the ultimate criterion for the relevance of particular texts. He called it “was Christum treibt”, meaning, “That which promotes Christ”. This criterion determines whether a biblical text is binding or not.

The Word of God in the Bible comes to us as both law and gospel. Christians still need the law of God. It is useful for maintaining order in society but has as its main function to make us aware of our sin and our need

for salvation. The law shows us our sinful nature and keeps evil at bay. The gospel creates faith, grants forgiveness and leads to a renewal of life in Christ. It therefore declares the grace and truth of God’s mercy in Jesus Christ. So we see that the Word of God consists of both law and gospel each having its unique purpose.

Luther also emphasized the importance of common sense when reading the Bible. It helps us to distinguish between the historical context into which a text is written, and the message that it has for us today, in our context. This distinction helps that our faith is not shaken by the diversities of detail within the biblical texts. When we search the scriptures for answers to contemporary questions we do not look for proof texts which will give us definite instructions as to how to live. We will search the scriptures from our Christological understanding of scripture, and carefully examine individual texts for their meaning and message in the context of the questions and concerns during the time they were written. The message of a text then needs to be translated from its meaning at the time in question to its meaning for us today. This is not a direct one-to-one process but one which involves discernment, theological reflection and the prayerful seeking of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Most Christians engage in this process in some or other way. For example, many do not literally follow the command “sell all you have and give to the poor” or the Old Testament prohibition on pork.

2.1.2 Application of the Lutheran Understanding of Scripture

Jesus never spoke about homosexuality; nowhere does he confront or relate to homosexuals, nor to homosexuality. Consequently we can only speak about Jesus and homosexuality indirectly, i.e. by applying his teachings, his life and how he related to people.

From the gospels we see that Jesus never rejected anybody, nor did he marginalise anybody. He accepted, loved and forgave. In fact, he focussed his love and attention on the weak, sick and helpless, the suffering and the rejected of society. We need to keep this attitude of Jesus in mind when dealing with this subject.

The fact that it has become fashionable (part of the “spirit of the times” or Zeitgeist) to fight for human rights and so also for the rights of homosexuals is not decisive in our argumentation but only the question whether it does correlate to or contradict the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Not our emotions, nor our upbringing nor our tradition should ultimately determine our position, but Jesus’ teaching and life. Further guidance from the NT about how we should relate to one another, can be found in Matthew 22:37-40: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: `Love your neighbour as yourself.’”

The very practical consequence of this understanding of love is found in Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 7:12: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

In Romans 13:10 Paul states: “Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

It is clear that Love and Christ are at the centre of our interpretation of scripture, but what serves love best in a particular situation is not always clearly defined. Here our Lutheran understanding gives us the freedom to interpret, to discuss and debate different ethical standpoints, always remembering that decisions need to serve love and the good of the other, and not merely ourselves. In many issues the church and Christians throughout the ages have come to different conclusions, based on their reading of scripture and understanding of the message of Christ. Sometimes there have been shifts. Starting from the trust in God’s grace, people may interpret and reinterpret scripture, knowing that they may be wrong and needing correction, but also not shying away from their responsibility to act on issues of their time.

2.2 Shifts in biblical teaching through theological reflection within the Bible and in Church History

Time and again the Church has been and still is severely challenged and has to take decisions on matters. Throughout history, guided by scripture and the interpretation thereof, this has led to shifts in positions and doctrines of the Church.

In all of the cases listed below there was compelling scriptural evidence that called for staying with the culturally accepted practice. However, based on Christ, his teachings, and the commandment of love, decisions were taken that led to the reinterpretation of particular biblical passages, and no longer accepting them as literally normative.
2.2.1 Food Laws (Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14, Acts 10-11, 1 Corinthians 8-10)

Throughout the Old Testament laws there are prohibitions on certain types of food and regulations on ways animals should be slaughtered and food prepared. There were “clean” and “unclean” animals, clearly specified. Unclean were amongst others pigs and any sea creatures without fins or scales (Dt 14:8-9). Because the purity laws involved strict separations, anything that came out of a gentile kitchen would have been unclean, even if it did not involve forbidden food. The food was also unclean if the right washing rituals had not been followed. Jesus gave quite a clear answer to this: “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean’ ” (Mk 7:14). The apostolic council ruled in the spirit of these words of Jesus when it gave only a minimalist set of instructions to the Gentiles, to enable them to share in fellowship with the Jewish Christians. Today most Christians do not have a problem eating pork or many types of seafood. We generally do not even follow the food laws of Acts 15, as the reason for their suggestion is no longer relevant today. “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim 4:4).

2.2.2 Fellowship with the Gentiles (3 Maccabees, Jub 22,16, Acts 10,11)

For law-abiding Jews, any kind of table fellowship with Gentiles was impossible as they were ritually unclean and would not prepare the food in the right way. Peter was rebuked by the church leadership in Jerusalem for sharing a meal with Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile (Acts 11:2-3). He had done so after receiving a vision from God, who showed him a whole lot of "unclean" animals and told him to eat: "Do not declare unclean what God has declared clean " (Acts 10). This vision is not ultimately about food, but about fellowship with Cornelius, the "unclean" gentile. This marked a permanent shift in early Christianity. Fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians became possible.

2.2.3 Circumcision (Genesis 17,10; Leviticus 12, 2&3, Acts 15, Galatians 5)

This was one of the first major challenges threatening to split the early Church. In addition to the keeping of kosher laws and feast days, circumcision was a main marker for Jewish exclusivity. While this was non-negotiable in Judea, Jews (and Jewish Christians) in the Diaspora who lived as minority among Gentiles practised circumcision to a much lesser degree, if at all. Among some communities, particularly in Galatia, "Judaizer" groups emerged who promoted and even demanded compliance with Jewish basic practices, such as circumcision.

Paul opposed the insistence on certain aspects of the Jewish Law in his letter to the churches in Galatia: "I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." (Galatians 5:3) People cannot claim salvation in Christ and combine it with a choice of laws that also have to be followed in order to be justified. Either you follow the whole law and reject Christ, or you follow Christ and his law of love, meaning a faith expressing itself in love (5:6, 6:15).

The dispute around circumcision required the leadership of the early church to meet as council at Jerusalem. The account in the Acts of the Apostles (15:1-21) reflects a much more reconciliatory tone than the one rendered in Galatians (2:1-10). Rather than the long discussions on the matter, it was the personal witness of Peter (Acts 15:7-11), Barnabas and Paul (15:12) that led James, who was the strongest proponent of circumcision, to the judgment "not to make it difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God" (15:19). Based on these witnesses, with a stroke of a penned letter to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, circumcision ceased to be obligatory for diaspora members of the early Church.

2.2.4 Slavery (Exodus 21,2&7, Leviticus 25, 44, Ephesians 6, 5-6; Colossians 3, 22-23, 1 Corinthians 7:20-22 and Philemon).

The phenomenon of slavery was not only taken for granted, but its morality was never questioned during the whole of Antiquity, the Middle Ages as well as the better part of the Modern Era. The abolition of slavery itself was a lengthy political process which took more than 30 years in Britain before the Slave Trade Act of 1807 was passed. While some Christians, like William Wilberforce, made this their life project, there were other Christians who advocated the continuation of legal slavery until the mid 19th century, claiming the "God of the Bible" to be on their side. Quoting texts such as Paul sending Philemon back to his master or "Slaves, be obedient to your masters," (Ephesians 6,5), they argued that slavery was part of the God-given order of nature.

By the 20th century, however, Christians had by and large distanced themselves from a biblical justification of slavery. Again, the decisive motivation to do away with slavery from a Christian point of view was Christ -
his life, death and the essence of his teachings.

2.2.5 Ordination of women (Genesis 3,16, 1 Corinthians 14,34, 1 Timothy 2,11-15)

In most societies where Christianity existed and expanded, women had a subdued role. Biblical justifications of the subservience of women included blaming Eve for the fall, and quoting “Wives submit to your husbands” (Ephesians 5) and “I permit no woman to teach, she is to keep silent” (1Timothy 2:12). It was only when Christians took seriously the many other references in Old and New Testament which show women in leading and leadership roles, that they challenged this. Subsequently many Churches revised their position and allowed women into leadership positions, even challenging social society in the process.Already in 1750 Count Nicolas von Zinzendorf, leader of the Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde (today known as the Moravian church), ordained women, and appointed a woman as his successor to lead the movement.

2.3 Biblical passages on the subject of Homosexuality

2.3.1 Old Testament

2.3.1.1 Genesis 1 and 2

So God created the human in his own image... male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number...” Gen 1: 27-28

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. Gen 2: 24

One of the main reasons people reject homosexuality is that they say it is against the order of creation. In the creation story in Genesis 1 God creates man and woman, both in his image and gives them the commandment to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. This account is the foundation for human dignity of all people, created by God. The blessing of God rests on the union of man and woman, which also results in procreation.

In Genesis 2 God creates adam (adam means: the human being), and then looks for an appropriate helper and companion. The reason is that it is not good for adam to be alone. Amongst the animals no suitable companion is found. This results in the dividing of the human being into male and female. Thus human community, sexuality and companionship are created. A man will leave his father and mother, commit/cling to his wife and become "one flesh" with his wife. This shows that sexuality is a good creation of God, intended for more than just procreation. The images here are of mutual support, commitment and belonging together.

In these stories sexuality is described as good and God-given and carrying the blessing of God. The depiction here is of a monogamous heterosexual relationship. Other forms of sexuality, such as polygamy (Jacob) and celibacy (Samuel) were accepted or in some cases even recommended in biblical times, but are not referred to in Genesis 1 and 2 at all.

These texts can therefore not be used to judge or reject other forms of sexuality, because they do not refer to them. It would be wrong to imply from Genesis 1 and 2 that single people are not blessed, nor couples who cannot have children. It would be just as wrong to conclude from these texts that homosexuality is condemned.

Undoubtedly sexuality is a powerful force in society without which there would not be life. This carries God’s blessing. Human beings have been created by God as sexual beings in need of a committed relationship and companionship. However Genesis 1 and 2 do not make normative statements about how human sexuality is to be lived out.

2.3.1.2 Genesis 19 and Judges 19

They shouted to the old man who owned the house, ‘ Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.” The owner of the house went outside and said to them, “ Not, my friends, don’t be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don’t do this disgraceful thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine....” Judg 19:22-23
A story that is often quoted in the debate around homosexuality, is Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Some believe that these cities were destroyed because of homosexual practice (Sodom is the root of the word "sodomy"). In this instance however the issue is not one of a different sexual orientation, but of violent rape and the attempted violation of someone who was a guest in the city. Lot sacrifices his daughters to protect his guest, because hospitality was the highest duty. The text refers to a society that has lost all regard for basic principles and care for fellow human beings.

A very similar story is told in Judges 19. Here too the issue is rape. The high duty to protect guests did not extend to concubines. In a patriarchal society, violating a man was a much greater evil than violating a woman. Today we condemn violence against women and men in equally strong terms. These texts thus cannot guide us in our discussion on same sex relationships.

2.3.1.3 Leviticus 18 and 20

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. Lev 18:22

If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. Lev 20:13

To understand the laws in Leviticus, and to assess their relevance for Christians, it is important to understand them in their context. The laws were formulated at a time when the Israelites had lost the centre of their religion and faith, the temple in Jerusalem. A new way of relating to God had to be developed. In Jerusalem there were a whole set of rituals and laws as to how to enter God’s presence. Only the priest could enter the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. Other people could only enter the outer circles of the Holy places. In Exile people realised that they could encounter God anywhere, anytime. But now it became important to be worthy of this encounter, by living a holy and pure life, separated from people who did not live such a holy life, so as not to become defiled. To maintain their faith and culture in the foreign land, they developed ways to set themselves apart with strong marks of identity and practice. In this context, the then existing laws, such as the Code of Covenant, were augmented and reformulated for this new time. The Holiness Code in Leviticus formulated exactly what constituted a holy lifestyle and acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour. Leviticus 19.2 states: "Be holy because I, the LORD, your God, am holy!"

The laws in Leviticus 18 and 20 define what is unacceptable sexual behaviour. Many of these practices are condemned because they are practised in “Egypt and Canaan”, seen as sexually impure and oppressive nations. In the context, these were also code words for Babylon, the culture which was threatening to obliterate their faith and identity. The Israelites are to distance themselves from them and be set apart. They are laws which as a whole define the sphere of purity and holiness. In Leviticus 18 no punishment is threatened, in Leviticus 20 it is declared that transgressors will be “cut off” or “put to death”.

The list includes on the one hand practices which are still considered unacceptable by most societies today, for example incest (18:6ff) and sacrificing children (20:1), and on the other hand practices which are considered part of personal choice, or reason for counselling but not the death penalty, such as intercourse during the monthly period of a woman (18:19), or broken relationships with parents (20:9). The rest of the Levitical holiness code also contains laws against practices which are either still unacceptable for example, spreading slander (19:16) or defrauding or robbing the neighbour (19:13) or which are today completely normal for example planting the field with two kinds of seed, or wearing clothing woven of two kinds of material (19:19) or clipping one’s beard (19:27).

Taking them in context of the Holiness code, people needed to keep all these laws meticulously, to be set apart as people of God and to be holy and worthy enough to meet God. We need to ask whether the whole system of purity and holiness is still relevant for Christians. If one begins differentiating, one needs to ask individually what was the purpose and context of each law, and whether that purpose is still applicable today.

What was the purpose of the prohibition on homosexual acts? Was it regarded as “wasting seed” in a time when producing offspring and continuing the family line was an all-important duty? (See the story of Onan Gen 38:8-10 and Deut 25: 5-10) Or was it abhorrent because it confused the clearly hierarchical gender relations? We will never know for sure.

When dealing with these passages it is important not to single out the laws on homosexual acts as binding
while ignoring all others, but to treat all of them in the same way: either as binding as a whole, or as worth considering as to their individual purpose and meaning today.

2.3.2 New Testament passages

2.3.2.1 Corinthians 6

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders... will inherit the kingdom of God.  

1 Cor 6:9-10

In none of his letters does Paul respond to a direct question about homosexual relationships. He does however discuss matters of marriage and prostitution. (1Corinthians 6.12-20, 7).

He addresses issues that endanger the Christian witness, such as quarrels and legal battles (6, 1-8), and the sanctity of our bodies, belonging to Christ.

In this passage he also mentions practices that are regarded as unclean or unholy and being in contradiction with Christian life. These include idolatry, immorality, adultery, greed, stinginess, drunkenness, swindling, slandering as well as sexual practices commonly found in societies of the time, particularly referring to anal and oral sex. As they became Christians, they should not continue with these, since they have been washed and cleansed by Christ, and these are incompatible with Christian living. Paul takes as a given the Jewish abhorrence of the libertine lifestyle of the Greeks, which included homosexual relationships which were often exploitive, and does not argue about the question whether such relationships may be justifiable for Christians. His intention is to challenge Christians to glorify Christ with their lifestyle, habits and actions, including their sexual behaviour.

2.3.2.2 Romans 1

Because of this God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.  

Rom 1: 26-17

In Romans 1:18-32 Paul is speaking in general terms about the sinful state of humanity without the gospel, and not about homosexuality in particular. Homosexual acts are mentioned as part of a long list of abominations and vices committed by a sinful humanity. Again he takes the Jewish condemnation of this practice as a given. The overall effect is to characterize human unrighteousness in desperate need of God's righteousness. The purpose of the whole passage is not to single out homosexual people as particularly sinful, but to build a carefully constructed argument about the sinful nature of all of human life, and that we are all in need of the grace and forgiveness offered in Christ. Within this argument, Paul uses an example as illustration that most of his Jewish Christian critics would have agreed with as an example of immoral behaviour. Just as in the Corinthians passage, he takes the common Jewish condemnation of the practice as a given. But this agreement then leads to the place where the table is turned to the realisation: But you who condemn others, are no better (Rom 2:1). Using Paul here as an excuse to particularly condemn a certain group of people misses the whole purpose of his argument, which is that “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (Rom 3:9).

What is Paul speaking of, when he uses his illustration? It is clear when looking carefully at this passage, that Paul is not dealing with the issue of sexual orientation, but of what he sees as immoral practices, common in the Roman empire. These involved self-gratification, the glorification of the body and pleasure, and often sexual abuse of slaves. Paul would have had the agreement of those he is addressing in his letter in referring to these practices as “unnatural lust” (Romans 1:21-27). It is important to note, that this same word is used in 1 Corinthians when arguing that women should cover their hair during worship, and that long hair is a disgrace to a man, but the glory of a woman. (1 Cor 11:14-15) This shows that “unnatural” in this context refers more to accepted cultural norms than to laws of nature. What is natural and unnatural in the context of sexual orientation is something that needs to be investigated with the tools of science. (See later section).
2.3.2.3 1 Timothy 1

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. 1 Tim 1:9-10

Here the argument is about false teachings and the purpose of the law, not about homosexuality as such.

As in the previous passages, the condemnation of homosexual practice is taken as a given and used as an illustration to make a different theological point. This was also written in the context of permissive Greek society where many practices were abhorrent for those from the Jewish culture. Again one can question whether people who have committed same sex relationships belong in the category of “lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and the sinful”.

2.4 Conclusion - guided by scripture

2.4.1 Conclusion from Old Testament texts:
Most of the passages in the Old Testament are not applicable to the issue at hand. In the case of Leviticus, it needs to be decided if Christians still need to adhere to the entire holiness code. From our understanding of the centre of scripture we need to state, that Christians do not need to keep a set of moral codes in order to be pure and holy enough to stand before God. We have been justified through Jesus Christ. The system of purity and holiness in Leviticus has been rendered obsolete by Christ. However the law may still be useful to keep order. We can differentiate where this is the case. The apostles’ council declared the bulk of the Old Testament dietary, holiness and cultic laws as not applicable to gentile Christians (Acts 15:28-29). The laws they kept were those they perceived as useful in facilitating communion between Jews and Gentiles. This already shows a precedent in differentiating between laws still applicable and those no longer applicable. We need to take each Levitical Law individually and determine whether it serves the common good.

2.4.2 Conclusion from New Testament texts:
There are no New Testament texts which deal with the issue of homosexuality directly, all take the Old Testament rejection of it for granted. There is no new discussion on this issue itself in the light of the Christ event and Christian life. The Pauline texts take the rejection of it as given and thus use it to argue a different point, that is the sinfulness of all humanity, and everyone’s need of redemption in Christ. There is also the challenge to Christians to live a life to the glory of Christ, also in the way they order their sexual relationships. When asking the question whether homosexuality should still be included in the general category of "immorality" these texts as they stand cannot give guidance as no biblical text addresses a committed homosexual relationship.

An important question to ask here would be whether Paul would oppose a caring adult relationship of mutuality between two people who are believers and want to be part of a Christian faith community. From the text in Romans 1 it is clear that Paul was not dealing with the question of monogamous, life-long, faithful same-sex relationships within the faith community.

3 Informed by reason

3.1 The Lutheran understanding on the role of reason and science

From a Lutheran understanding, Scripture needs to be understood from its centre. It leads us to faith and shapes our basic ethical position, which is that our actions should serve the commandment of love given to us by the Lord himself. We have been liberated by faith so that our actions are not directed by a concern for our own salvation, but by a concern for the world, our neighbour and the earth as a whole. While our general approach is guided by scripture, the details of our actions are never dictated to by specific biblical texts, but informed by reason, discussion, thoughtful reflection about what Jesus Christ may have done in a specific situation.
Scripture gives us contextual answers to how people in their time saw it best to serve God and their neighbour. These are only normative for us in as far as they still serve love and the neighbour best. Paul writes, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others." (1 Corinthians 10:23-24) What is beneficial needs to be carefully considered, knowing the situation. In some places Paul states that he can be critiqued for his arguments, but he needs to give guidance anyway (eg 1 Corinthians 7,12). Arguing by reason of course always needs to be motivated by love, so as not to become simply self-serving. Here scripture needs to sharpen our consciences continually, so we do not abuse the freedom we have been given in Christ for our own selfish ends. Our freedom is a gift which we need to use in the service of others. We have freedom from the law, but we have no freedom to override the law because it does not suit us. The law is not to be used as a literal normative guide. Instead we have the freedom to work towards new applications of God’s will to care for and order society and relationships. Such new applications need to make sure that all people are free to be who they are and are protected from discrimination, abuse and exploitation.

“A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none. A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.” (Luther's "Freedom of the Christian") For this reason, ethical decisions need to be carefully considered, with rational argument, as to what effect they are likely to have,, and whether they will really serve the neighbour. They need to be discussed within the context of a broader Christian community. But it may happen after such careful consideration, that Christians come to different conclusions.

Specific ethical decisions are shaped by reasonable argument as to what best serves the neighbour or the community in a particular situation. In the time of Luther, science was not yet the force or authority it is today, but Lutherans recognise today in scientific argument a major way of using reason. This is not to say that scientific argument cannot be critiqued. It too can become self-serving if used without conscience. However best science should be considered in any ethical decision making. The fact that there may be broad consensus of the scientific community in a question does not make this mandatory for Christians, but it is a voice that Christians need to take seriously. Lutherans are not threatened by the discoveries of science and actively participate in the scientific endeavour, believing it is God who gave us the tools to discover the workings of His creation and to improve our own lives. Where science becomes self-serving or destructive, this should be critiqued, from the whole witness of scripture, which testifies to a God of life and love.

## 3.2 Positions shaped by reason and science in the history of the Church

In the course of the history of the Church there were various occasions where scientific findings intially caused an uproar, even excommunication and execution, but were slowly accepted within the church. On many issues, science has caused a shift in understanding and praxis, also within the church.

### 3.2.1 Cosmology

This is one such example. The discovery by Copernicus which said that the sun was the centre of the solar system and the earth was a revolving planet, contradicted the biblical world view that the earth was created firm on its foundations, and the heavenly bodies moved across the firmament of heaven. Galileo was made to retract his findings supporting this view by the Inquisition on pain of death. However today the Church does not dispute this scientific view of the universe any longer or find it a threat to faith.

### 3.2.2 Epilepsy and other medical conditions

In biblical times, Epilepsy was believed to be caused by evil spirits and was cured by performing an exorcism. While no one can exclude this today, science has determined the causes of normal epileptic seizures and can treat these. Most Christians accept this understanding of Epilepsy and do not perform exorcisms on epileptics or other people diagnosed with a scientifically known illness because this is done in the Bible.

## 3.3 The scientific understanding of homosexuality

The contemporary scientific consensus is that homosexuality is a normal part of the range of human sexual behaviours. Studies have shown that there have always been a certain percentage of homosexuals in the
human population. Even in the animal kingdom homosexual behaviour has been recorded, so it is no longer
seen as "unnatural". The general consensus amongst health professionals is that basic sexual orientation
cannot be changed. In 1974 homosexuality was removed from the register of mental illnesses or pathological
conditions by the American Psychiatric Association. This was a long process, controversial and resisted.
Crucial in the change as recounted by Drescher and Merlino was the witness (initially anonymously) of gay
psychiatrists, that they were perfectly capable of functioning as normal members of society. A homosexual
orientation is no longer regarded as a problem to be rectified by most professional counsellors, but as a
normal expression of human sexuality which ranges on a continuum from exclusively heterosexual to
exclusively homosexual. The question of what causes this difference in sexual orientation is as yet not
clarified.

Some claim that homosexuality can be cured. These claims are very difficult to verify. Firstly it is clear that
throughout the ages, homosexuals have managed to suppress their natural inclination and refrain from
homosexual behaviour. Many have married and have had children, others stayed celibate. If someone claims
to have been cured, it may just be a change of behaviour, that is a suppression of homosexual desire and a
choice to live a heterosexual, even if less satisfying relationship. Secondly, people who claim to be cured
may be those who may have had homosexual experiences but who are not on the extreme of the spectrum,
thus are able to live in a satisfied heterosexual relationship.

Professionals argue and experience shows that asking homosexuals to suppress their inclination and try to
live something that they are not and can never fully be, may result in damage to psychological stability and
emotional well-being, ultimately also in the health of all their relationships. This can sometimes lead to
personality disorders, depression or even suicide. Keeping one’s orientation well hidden in the closet can
be an immense drain on human energy and creativity and a cause of intense suffering. It is argued that to
allow gays and lesbians to live in committed relationships, which are under similar social protection as
heterosexual marriage enables them to be positive and productive members of their community. Many
Christians argue that allowing same-sex relationships threatens traditional marriage. However there have
been no studies to substantiate this contention. The marriages that break down because a partner is gay or
lesbian, show the problem rather than being a proof of the threat of same-sex unions to marriage.9

3.4 Conclusion on issues of reason

The Christian Church has often been slow to accept scientific findings and has not always allowed these to
inform its decisions. However it is clear that the Church’s position on many issues has shifted through the
centuries as scientific discoveries have progressed. In determining its stand on homosexuality, the Church
should take seriously the finding that science sees this as a normal expression of human sexuality and that
committed gay or lesbian relationships do not harm but rather benefit society.

Findings based on applying the criterion of scripture and reason

4.1 The gift of Sexuality

Scripture shows that human sexuality was created by God for relationship, not only for procreation. It is a
good gift from God and should be lived in loyalty, commitment, respect, honour and love (Genesis 2:24).

6 For example Whitam, F., 1983, “Culturally invariable properties of male homosexuality. Tentative conclusions from
cross-cultural research” in *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* Vol 12, No.3

London.

8 Garnets, L. & Kimmel D. (ed), 2003, *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Experiences* p191 ff,

9 For the effect on parenting: Meezan, W. & Rauch, J., 2005, “Gay Marriage, Same-Sex Parenting, and America’s
Children” in *The Future of Children* Vol 15, No 2 pp 97-113

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We accept the scientific finding that homosexuality is not a deviation, but a normal expression of human sexuality. Therefore such relationships, lived in responsibility, commitment and love are part of God’s good creation.

4.2 Laws to curtail immorality

People still need laws to regulate behaviour and particularly to protect the vulnerable. The biblical laws against immorality can still be used where these are appropriate, but the context and purpose needs to be clear. The church needs to keep debating its definitions of sexually responsible and irresponsible behaviour in an age where sexual behaviour is shifting constantly. Some people today would see all forms of sexual behaviour between consenting adults as acceptable. Others would dispute this. This needs ongoing debate and discussion. However from the findings above there seems to be no reason for making sexual orientation a factor in defining immorality. Much more important is the question of mutuality and commitment. Christians should reject all forms of sexual interaction that damage relationships, or are coercive, abusive and exploitative, regardless of orientation.

5 Implications of these findings for the Church

5.1 Dealing with disagreements

This is a highly divisive topic and the whole range of positions discussed in point 1 are found in our church. There is a conflict between the commitment to church unity, that is, the interest to take all members of a church along in the search for a new path, and the need to end the rejection and discrimination against a whole category of congregants, as well as clergy who want to serve Christ, but also want companionship and support.

How does one balance the responsibility to the church as a whole and the responsibility to act in accordance with what conscience and theological reflection seems to indicate is the right thing to do? This is not an easy choice to make and will involve conflict, pain and disappointment on one side or the other. It is important to realise that ultimately each one, regardless of their standpoint, remains accountable to the Lord of the Church. Accepting one another (Romans 15, 7) and bearing with each other (Colossians 3, 13) can be painful, and needs to be practised. Even if people feel they cannot accept certain practises of the church, it is hoped that they will accept that these are based on Christian conviction.

In John 17 Jesus prays “that they may be one”. It is clear from biblical witness that the Church experienced tension and disunity right from its inception. Even the disciples of Jesus had regular disagreements. Differences of opinions are unavoidable, but our common aim, purpose and goal as reflected in the prayer of Jesus should be clear: that the world may hear the gospel of Christ and get to know the Father. In all our heated deliberations on this topic we shall/ may not forget our calling and ultimate purpose.

6 Implications for the employment of Pastors

Ongoing discussion and deliberation on this topic is encouraged.

The following is put forward by this commission for discussion. These findings would require no change in the church law on ordination of pastors:

Based on the findings of this document sexual orientation shall not play a role in the decision on the ordination or employment of pastors.

The same academic and psychological criteria of eligibility shall apply to all candidates for the ministry.

It remains UELCSA’s principle that no candidate can be guaranteed a placement in the church.

It remains the prerogative of the congregation to elect or not elect the pastor based on the constitution and rules of the Church.

We hope and pray that this document will help with discussions and a responsible, respectful dealing with this topic in our Churches.

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