

## Guidelines for Covenant Ministers regarding Human Sexuality

### Introduction

Issues of human sexuality – in all their messiness and complexity – present pastors and congregations with particularly difficult pastoral issues. Issues of sexuality delve deeply into sensitive and sometimes wounded areas of people’s lives, and thoughtfulness and compassion are always required. Because of the Covenant’s commitment to congregational polity, freedom in Christ, and the priesthood of all believers, the Covenant Church relies on its clergy and individual church members to discern together, communally and prayerfully, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, appropriate courses of action in various circumstances. The following is a report from the Board of the Ordered Ministry to the 119<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in 2004. It represents what we have discerned thus far.

*At various points the ECC is asked to clarify its position and practice on matters related to human sexuality and the marriage ethic. Given a delegate’s referred resolution at the 2003 Annual Meeting to the Board of the Ordered Ministry, and discussion in the larger society, it is timely to articulate cornerstone practices and positions of the ECC again. The Board of the Ordered Ministry, the Covenant Executive Board, the Council of Administrators, and the Council of Superintendents present the following by way of joint report with the expectation that these items will also serve as guiding values into the future.*

- *The Covenant Executive Board, the Board of the Ordered Ministry, the Council of Administrators, and the Council of Superintendents consider the 1996 resolution adopted by the Covenant Annual Meeting entitled “Resolution on Human Sexuality” to represent the on-going consensus position of the ECC. The resolution upholds celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage as the Christian standard.*
  - *The Board of the Ordered Ministry, consistent with the 1996 Resolution and reinforced by its own study of the matter in 2000, views celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage to be the standard for all Covenant clergy. The Board of the Ordered Ministry does not credential people who are in violation of this standard.*
  - *The Board of the Ordered Ministry does not permit credentialed Covenant clergy to officiate at same sex unions, blessings, or marriages.*
  - *The Board of the Ordered Ministry expects Covenant clergy to accurately represent the position of the ECC to their constituents on this and other matters of consensus in the ECC.*
  - *The ECC expects its churches to accurately represent the position of the ECC to its constituency on this and other matters of consensus in the ECC.*
  - *While the ECC and regional conferences administer standards of membership and discipline in regard to a local congregation’s relationship with its regional conference and the ECC, it is the local congregation that in turn administers its own constitutional and bylaw standards of membership and discipline in regard to its individual congregational members.*
- (Minutes of the 119<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, June 21-23, 2004: “Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic”)***

In addition to hearing the above report, the 119<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting passed the following motion: *“That the resolution on human sexuality adopted by the 1996 Annual Meeting serve the ECC as: 1) the guiding statement on human sexuality and the marriage ethic, and 2) the basis for ECC policy, practices, and guidelines on these matters.”* The motion was amended to include a task force to develop resources for pastors and congregations.

While there are certain actions credentialed Covenant ministers are obligated to take or to refrain from, there are other areas that fall more clearly under the domain of congregational decision-making. The following

document provides instructions to Covenant clergy on their responsibilities under above-stated current Covenant policy, as well as a set of guiding steps and questions for a number of related issues, insuring that we adhere to the Ethical Principles for Covenant Ministers which states as follows:

Principle 2: The Integrity of the Ministerial Relationship

In all matters pertaining to their ministerial relationships, members of the Covenant Ministerium faithfully act in the best interests of those they serve and empower them for ministry.

A) We offer pastoral care to anyone regardless of race, gender, creed, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.

Within the Covenant Church, there is a spectrum of beliefs and theological leanings, and sometimes people within a single church can hold a variety of stances. A great deal of fear and passion often surround these issues: Will we adhere firmly to biblical principles? Will we be able to maintain the unity of the church? Will our churches be safe places where all people can experience God's love and grace? For difficult pastoral and congregational decisions related to issues of human sexuality, therefore, the goals are twofold: to foster churches where healthy and respectful conversations may be held around these fraught issues; and to lead people into deeper discipleship and faithfulness.

Therefore, one of the questions always to keep before us is: What will nurture the health, growth, and missional vitality of a particular congregation?

## Marriage

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*The Board of the Ordered Ministry does not permit credentialed Covenant clergy to officiate at same sex unions, blessings, or marriages. (Minutes of the 119<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, June 21-23, 2004: "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic")*

Based on that action, the Board of the Ordered Ministry instructs its credentialed clergy in the following manner.

- Credentialed Covenant clergy are not to perform same-sex weddings, unions, or blessings.
- Credentialed Covenant clergy are not to perform male-female unions or blessings outside of permanent, lifelong marital vows (for example, the desire of some couples to avoid the loss of benefits and pension rights by not legally marrying according to the state or province).
- Credentialed Covenant clergy may attend the wedding or blessing ceremony of a same-sex couple (friend, family member, and congregant) but may not participate in any pastoral act (prayer, blessing, and greeting).

## The Use of Local Church Facilities

*The ECC expects its churches to accurately represent the position of the ECC to its constituency on this and other matters of consensus in the ECC. (Minutes of the 119<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, June 21-23, 2004: "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic")*

In keeping within the above-stated pastoral boundaries, and to maintain harmony with the ECC position, the Board of the Ordered Ministry and the Council of Superintendents asks and expects ECC congregations to refrain from allowing their church facilities to be used for same-sex marriage ceremonies, unions, and

blessings, and all related events. We encourage the development of policy statements and manuals for overall facility use.

### **The Pastoral Office and the Teaching Ministry of the Church**

*The Board of the Ordered Ministry expects Covenant clergy to accurately represent the position of the ECC to their constituents on this and other matters of consensus in the ECC. (Minutes of the 119<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, June 21-23, 2004: "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic")*

How is a credentialed Covenant minister to perform the duties of their call when their personal beliefs may differ from the beliefs and practices of the larger church? The right of dissent is extended to areas not pertaining to the essential core orthodoxy of the faith. In all pastoral activities and in particular the ministry of preaching and teaching, the pastor is expected to teach and to represent the teaching, policies and guidelines of the ECC. Where their personal belief may differ, they are expected to be honest and truthful, but to faithfully represent the belief and practice of the larger church. The pastor's personal beliefs must never overshadow the ECC position.

The late Wesley Nelson, pastor, teacher, administrator in the ECC, said, "When I stand in the pulpit to preach, I do not simply preach my own personal beliefs, I preach the faith of the Christian church and I pray earnestly that I too might believe it." This is a crucial issue. The prophetic freedom of the pulpit and the teaching office of the church are at stake. When conscience might require dissent, our dissent must be faithful, exercising great humility and caution, and never unnecessarily wounding the body.

In cases where a credentialed minister may be brought under discipline, the Board of the Ordered Ministry does not operate with specific sanctions for specific violations. With the Word of God as our standard, we operate on a case by case basis, with each matter decided within its own set of facts and circumstances. Action by the Board, if deemed appropriate, could range all the way from simple admonition, to instructions to refrain from the activity, to suspension of a credential, to the recommendation that a person's ministerial standing be revoked. Our intent is always to be restorative whenever possible, which is the biblical approach.

### **General guidelines for related congregational issues:**

*While the ECC and regional conferences administer standards of membership and discipline in regard to a local congregation's relationship with its regional conference and the ECC, it is the local congregation that in turn administers its own constitutional and bylaw standards of membership and discipline in regard to its individual congregational members. (Minutes of the 119<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, June 21-23, 2004: "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic")*

Other related issues might involve questions of baptism, communion, membership, and church leadership including teaching and other associated ministry roles.

In all decisions, *consult your church leadership*. To quote John Weborg, pastor, professor, theologian, "The root of all heresy is to act alone." The Covenant at its best is a communal discernment body. This is most true in areas of practice and ministry at the local church level. A pastor should never be saying "yes" or "no" to a given area of pastoral or congregational ministry without knowing and/or consulting the consensus work of the church.

Seek avenues to have humble and honest conversations in your church about the issues. Does the church have standards in general for determining the level of participation in the church for all people? For example, based on study of the scriptures, what level of participation in church life may/should you offer to people whose sexual practices and behaviors are contrary to the teaching of the ECC?

Conference and denominational leadership and scholars of the church are always available to join in discerning how the offering of sacraments, rites, and the privilege of leadership at the local church level are carried out. In general, the Covenant ethos is always to be biased towards grace and actions that will further the growth and development of individual Christians and what will edify and build up the entire body of Christ.

## **Conclusion**

Issues surrounding human sexuality can raise a great deal of fear and passion. In addition, many other denominations are facing painful fractures and divisions around this issue. Can we as pastors equip our congregations to speak and act with grace, hope and the good news of Jesus Christ into this debate?

It has been our desire to respond with clarity and compassion as we confront the sensitive issue of faithful witness in the area of human sexuality. In conclusion, we would call the church again to grace: first, a forgiving grace that holds our witness to the gospel as central to all that we say and do; second, a welcoming grace, a grace that gives constant encouragement to those that are seeking to live faithfully in the vocations of singleness and marriage, and the biblical requirements of each; third, a transforming grace that calls us to seek a greater and deeper healing in all areas of sin and brokenness. And finally, a costly grace that calls us to more fully embody the chaste and holy life Christ has for each of us.