

Lutheran Church Studies on Sexuality Considers Options, Reparative Therapy

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The task force coordinating studies in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) regarding issues of human sexuality met in Chicago on March 19-21 to consider the range of possible recommendations it could provide the church in 2005. It also heard a presentation on reparative therapy — a counseling approach to assist those who want to change their sexual orientation.

Dr. Warren E. Throckmorton, professor of psychology, Grove City College, Grove City, Pa., told the task force that reparative therapy is one method of reorientation counseling that hopes to repair a person's relationship with his or her same-sex parent. The therapy is based on a theory that homosexual relationships grow from needs for affirmation and emotional intimacy that are lacking in the parent-child relationship, he said.

Throckmorton said "personal choice is absolutely required" and reparative therapy is not confrontational. "I don't see the counseling hour as the place for coercion," he said. Instead, he described his counseling method as one of listening and of providing a safe place for a person to work toward reorientation.

"Sexuality is Fluid"

"Sexuality is a lot more fluid than many people give it credit to be," Throckmorton said. Homosexuality is not "genetically hard-wired" into a person, he said.

Noé Gutiérrez Jr. told the task force that spiritual growth and not therapy helped him deal with "conflicts" that convinced him he was a gay teen-ager. He attributes a stronger relationship with God for his change in orientation from homosexual to heterosexual at age 24.

In conversation with the task force, both Gutierrez and Throckmorton argued against the possibility of the ELCA blessing same-gender relationships from the position that it may discourage some who are struggling with their sexuality from seeking help.

The Church's "Accumulated Wisdom is Growing"

Reparative therapy is "a very wide and varied discipline," said the Rev. Margaret G. Payne, chair of the 14-member task force and bishop of the ELCA New England Synod, Worcester, Mass. "I learned a lot more about it," she said, "when it's done well and what are some of the problems around it and what are some of the myths."

"It takes time to process what we've learned," Payne said. "This is a cumulative process. I find our accumulated wisdom and trust is growing, so no one thing makes a difference but rather it all contributes to our 'faithful journey together,'" she said.

"Journey Together Faithfully" is the title the task force has given much of its work for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality. It compiled the 49-page study guide "Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality" to facilitate study in congregations across the United States and Caribbean.

The ELCA's chief legislative body is the churchwide assembly, which meets every other year; the next assembly will be Aug. 8-14, 2005, in Orlando, Fla. The 2001 assembly mandated a study in preparation for decisions the 2005 assembly is to make regarding the blessing of committed same-gender relationships and the ministries of people in such relationships. In addition, the study is to develop a proposed social statement on human sexuality for the assembly to consider in 2007.

Current ELCA policy expects ministers to refrain from all sexual relations outside marriage. The church has no official policy on blessing same-gender relationships. The ELCA Conference of Bishops, an advisory body of the church, stated it does not approve of such ceremonies.

Church Members Asked to Step Forward

Members of the task force will be involved in hearings across the church this year "to give opportunity for the people of the ELCA to hear one another and for representatives of the task force to hear what people are saying," Payne said. "This whole process is very much an interactive process with people throughout the ELCA. I cannot overestimate the importance of people being willing to step forward and contribute their opinion and know that it will be heard," she said.

The task force plans to hold its next meeting in Chicago on Oct. 1-3.

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Information about the Studies on Sexuality is at <http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/> on the ELCA Web site.