

# United Lutheran Seminary

GETTYSBURG + PHILADELPHIA

## Response to the Draft "Trustworthy Servants of the People of God"

We, the undersigned faculty and staff of United Lutheran Seminary, are rostered and lay leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and full-communion and ecumenical partners. Many of us serve as biblical scholars, theologians and historians of the ELCA. We all serve a defined role in the candidacy process of the ELCA which the draft "Trustworthy Servants of the People of God" would impact.

For the sake of the students with whom we are in relationship, including those seeking ordained and consecrated positions of rostered ministry in the ELCA, as well as our public role witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Church and the world, we write this open letter.

We have grave concerns about the process through which "Trustworthy Servants" was initiated, developed, and distributed, especially considering the oppressive history of its predecessor documents.

The ELCA recognized the need for a revision of a document "intended as a guide, both for pastors and deacons, and for candidates seeking entry onto those rosters" (lines 8-9). Beginning in 1990, the predecessor document "Vision and Expectations" limited "expected" expressions of human sexuality to marriage between one man and one woman, and rostered leaders who were "homosexual in their self-understanding" were to "abstain from homosexual relationships." The 2010 Revision of "Vision and Expectations" following the 2009 Churchwide Assembly which passed "Human Sexuality: Gift & Trust," which recognized same-sex marriages and the ordination of LGBTQIA+ persons, continued to define marriage as being between one man and one woman. Considering this history, "Vision and Expectations" has been used as a bludgeon and "gatekeeping" document especially against LGBTQIA+ persons who have sought to become rostered ministers in the ELCA.

A motion passed at the October 2018 Conference of Bishops states "that special attention be given to inclusive language and descriptions of life situations and relationships by inviting voices from diverse perspectives." We commend the Conference of Bishops for recognizing the need to revise this document and engage in a consultative process in its revision. However, according to an ELCA press release, "The Domestic Mission unit initiated the review process and presented a proposed revised document to the Conference of Bishops. At its spring 2019 meeting, the conference reviewed and offered advice and counsel, in accordance with the *Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA*." That "Trustworthy Servants" has not received input in its development process from any church constituencies aside from the Domestic Mission unit and the Conference of Bishops is not consistent with ecclesial practice in the ELCA. Even for the predecessor "Vision and Expectations" document the Division for Ministry conducted in 1991 "a broad consultation process that extended for one year--involving the division board, the Conference of Bishops, synods, seminaries, and synodical candidacy committees."

To date there has been no meaningful consultation with relevant stakeholders outside of Churchwide staff and the Conference of Bishops. Most significantly none with those who have been historically marginalized and excluded by predecessor documents, especially LGBTQIA+

persons and other groups that have experienced marginalization at the hands of the Church because of their race, identity, ability or status.

The draft "Trustworthy Servants" twice refers to the church in the cherished Pauline language of "the body of Christ." Paul uses this language to talk about a differentiated unity: one body with many members, each of whom has a unique and irreplaceable role (1 Cor. 12:14-21). More specifically, Paul recognizes the church only properly lives as the body of Christ when it works against forces, habits, and assumptions that would relegate some members to an inferior or marginal status as "weaker," "less honorable," or "lacking" (1 Cor. 12:22-25).

This Pauline perspective suggests that the ELCA should give special attention to members who have been treated as "less honorable" or "lacking" by the use of *Vision and Expectations* in the past, and who continue to be liable to such treatment today. This Pauline preferential attentiveness to the marginalized finds pointed expression in the admonition to bishops in the third century CE *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum*:

If a destitute man or woman, either a local person or a traveler, arrives unexpectedly, especially one of older years, and there is no place, you, bishop, make such a place with all your heart, even if you yourself should sit on the ground, that you may not show favoritism before human beings, but that your ministry may be pleasing before God.

In developing a vision for "Trustworthy Servants," we urge the Conference of Bishops and the ELCA Church Council to make place so that there be seats at the table for "those who have been historically marginalized or excluded from leadership in the church because of their gender, sexuality, race, identity, ability or status.

This draft document "Trustworthy Servants" was only made publicly available with an accompanying press release and pastoral message from the Conference of Bishops on Friday, March 8, 2019 with a public comment period of 10 days collected by individual synod bishops. With public comments due on March 18, 2019, there are only 17 days between the close of public comment and the beginning of the ELCA Church Council April 4-7, 2019 meeting at which this document would presumably be voted on and approved.

It is not possible to engage in a meaningful process of collating feedback from 65 synods or revising the document in this time frame, nor engage in a meaningful consultative process, which raises serious questions about the transparency, public accountability, and yes, trustworthiness, of this process. The draft "Trustworthy Servants" itself states that, "We seek full participation of all in life and work of this church and will strenuously avoid and repent when the culture of any one group becomes the norm for all in the ELCA" (lines 16-18). However, this process has largely happened behind closed doors only by those who hold bureaucratic and episcopal authority in the church, which is not representative of the ecclesial practices of the ELCA. Echoing Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, "Documents that promote and call for 'holy living and faithful witness' cannot be created only by those who hold power within our institution."

The guiding theme of "Trustworthy Servants" is trustworthiness. The drafters write that "In a broken world and among imperfect people, trust is both precious and fragile" (line 77). The lack of a transparent, publicly accountable process continues to wound and create distrust among the very marginalized communities the revision of this document sought to address. The draft itself states "when that trust is broken, the wounds are that much deeper and wider, impacting

more than just the parties involved, but the whole sphere of ministry influence in the community. Since the possibility of harm is great, the need to hold that trust is all the more imperative" (lines 106-109). It is difficult to trust the weight and authority of an ELCA document that does not reflect, in its own creation, the values and standards to which it plans to hold its rostered ministers accountable.

In addition to the process through which this document was drafted, we also have particular theological, pastoral, and social objections to specific passages, that may perpetuate and promote the very mistrust, pain, and suffering experienced by marginalized groups. These concerns also reflect the need for a broader, more collaborative and consultative process that draws on the many gifts the diversity of the Church has to offer this process.

Issues of human sexuality and gender are the focus on this document, and are addressed more substantially than any other issue through which rostered leaders are to demonstrate "trustworthiness." Beginning with the section "Leadership Rooted in Faith," this draft outlines practices and behaviors rostered leaders are to model in a variety of areas. In addition to nurturing one's own faith life, rostered leaders are to demonstrate trustworthiness in the areas of "Health and Self-Care," "All Dimensions of Life," "Relationships and Friendships," "Family Life," "Finances and Use of Intellectual Property of Others," "Communications," "Human Sexuality and Gender," "Sexual Conduct and Speech," "Marriage," and "Creation." Within this section, *fully one-third of the content (34%) focuses on issues pertaining to human sexuality and gender.* This continued focus on humanity sexuality and gender in singleness and marriage suggests that this document does not address the painful historical legacy of "Vision and Expectations," which has been used especially to exclude LGBTQIA+ persons who seek to share their gifts of ministry with the Church through rostered leadership.

In the same way that a continued focus on human sexuality and gender does not reflect the input and concerns of relevant stakeholders, what is omitted is also notable. While there is a passing reference to the "blessing" that is rostered leaders advocating against "racism, sexism and classism" as forms of "prejudice and injustice" that "limit participation," "harm individuals, communities and the whole body of Christ" (lines 19-20), there is no substantial attention given to dismantling white supremacy or poverty. Should not a willingness to demonstrate anti-racist attitudes and practices, especially in the whitest Protestant denomination in the United States, be just as important to trustworthiness in rostered ministry as ethical expressions of one's own sexuality? Likewise care for creation beyond the narrowly human, one of the defining issues of our time in light of climate change, is mentioned in only a few sentences.

There is too much at stake in this process for it to be rushed. We therefore call for a representative and deliberative process that includes all stakeholders in a grassroots, bottom-up rather than top-down process in consultation with multiple expressions of the ELCA including, but not limited to LGBTQIA+ rostered ministers, rostered ministers that represent other marginalized communities, Churchwide staff, the Conference of Bishops, synods, seminaries and synodical candidacy committees.

The Conference of Bishops must likewise hold itself and its colleagues accountable to the commitments it has made in resolutions by genuinely, transparently and accountably "inviting voices from diverse perspectives." We therefore ask for a hiatus in the proposed timeline to move this document forward and for a new process that is collaborative, publicly accountable and transparent.

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