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It seems to me that these past months and the months to come, have and will present some of the most challenging times for our synod and congregations that we have ever encountered. Now is not the time to turn inward on ourselves and depend on our own abilities or limitations. I do not intend to talk to you about the financial crisis that engages our congregations but rather the forthcoming Social Statement for Human Sexuality.

We all acknowledge the fact that this statement divides many of our people and congregations and places many of our pastors in difficult situations as we try to reflect on this statement in that spirit of love that passes all understanding. The issue that is raised can be simply placed in this question....can persons with homosexual orientations who are in publically committed relationships serve in the rostered leadership of our church?

I am indebted to Bishop Craig Johnson of the Minneapolis Synod for the following concise procedure that our voting members will be asked to consider this August in Minneapolis.

The assembly will vote on the following four steps as separate, one-by-one resolutions; if step one passes, step two would be considered, and so on.

STEP ONE asks the assembly whether, in principle, it is committed to finding ways to allow congregations and synods that choose to do so, to recognize, support, and hold publically accountable lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships.

STEP TWO asks the assembly whether, in principle, it is committed to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.

STEP THREE asks this church whether, in the future implementations of these commitments, it will make decisions so that all in this church bear the burdens of the other, and respect the bound consciences of all. This means that any solution that serves only the conscience-bound positions of one or another part of this church will not be acceptable.

STEP FOUR proposes how this church can move toward change in a way that respects the bound consciences of all. It recognizes that such respect will lead to diversity of practice. However, the majority of the task force believes that the conscience-bound lack of consensus will be respected most faithfully by providing some structural flexibility in decision-making so that congregations and synods may choose whether or not to approve or call people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve on ELCA rosters.

The folks who served on this Task Force have given us their best effort and they need to be thanked for reaching a conclusion that the Assembly will hopefully debate in a spirit of love for this church and for one another.

Let us seek a common understanding that allows different points of view on this subject to live side by side in this church without rancor or anger.

Peace and Joy,

Rev. Kenneth R. Olsen, Interim Bishop