

1 Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality

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3 Introduction and Background

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5 The Evangelical Covenant Church seeks to engage in mission and ministry in ways that are biblically  
6 derived, pastorally sensitive, and consistent with our denominational polity. These guidelines provide a  
7 navigational tool for ECC clergy and their congregations on this sensitive topic.

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9 By overview, the ECC has had sustained engagement on this matter since 1996 as noted in the following:

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11 1996 Resolution on Human Sexuality  
12 1997 Occasional Paper, "A Biblical Perspective on Sexuality"  
13 2000 Board of Ordered Ministry Consultation  
14 2004 Establishment by Covenant Annual Meeting of 1996 resolution as the basis for policy,  
15 practices, and guidelines;  
16 Guidelines provided for ECC pastors and congregations  
17 2006 Additional resource paper, "Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic"  
18 2010 Updated guidelines provided for pastors and churches  
19 2012+ Case study materials, "Pastoral Issues for the 21st Century"  
20 2015+ Guidelines update and multiple regional training and resourcing events

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22 This represents the third elaboration of guidelines for pastors and churches. We respect the seriousness  
23 and sensitivity of this topic for the whole Church. We recognize that these are not abstractions, but are  
24 matters that impact not only ourselves but sons, daughters, relatives, friends, neighbors, and fellow  
25 congregants, all of whom are loved by Jesus.

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28 Values that Undergird

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30 ECC guidelines adopted through the years have been undergirded by certain foundational perspectives  
31 which may be summarized this way:

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33 God's Love Is Our Motivation

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35 Each and every person is created and loved by God. God stands ready to embrace anyone through the  
36 redeeming work of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's love meets us without pre-  
37 conditions, God's grace leads us into newness of life, and God's on-going work in our lives empowers us  
38 for costly discipleship towards holiness and service. Because of this we offer pastoral care to anyone  
39 regardless of race, gender, creed, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.

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41 The Bible is Our Lens

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43 The ECC Confession of Faith states, "We believe in the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as  
44 the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." We derive our positions on  
45 any matter through the serious and discerning searching of Scripture. We then humbly do our best to  
46 align with what we have discerned, even when counter to prevailing cultural norms.

49 Comprehensive Holiness Is Our Call

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51 Sexual practice is a notably important area of discipleship, but it is only one. The hard choices in following  
52 God extend to every area of life. The Church at times minimizes other aspects of costly discipleship in  
53 areas such as greed, racial righteousness, and pride. Conversation about any dimension of following Jesus  
54 ought to challenge us to look circumspectly at the demands of Jesus in all areas. Our identity as followers  
55 of Jesus is first and foremost “in Christ.” Over time the fruit of a life yielded to Jesus is evidenced by  
56 comprehensively living out the truth of Scripture.

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58 Covenant Polity is our Framework

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60 We adopted the name “Covenant” to do more than denote our relationship with God; we use it to  
61 describe our relationship to each other. Covenant means partnership. That partnership is entered into  
62 with mutual responsibilities and accountabilities. Pastors and congregations alike make commitments and  
63 take vows of working in harmony with the ECC and its policy, practices, and beliefs. The ECC in turn places  
64 trust in pastors and congregations to live out that harmony in their ministry context.

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66 Bettering Practices is Our Posture

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68 Being grounded in our position allows us confidence to continue to grow around practices in becoming  
69 more effective in matters of pastoral care and mission. Congregations continue to learn practices that can  
70 benefit other congregations. The ECC is committed to pointing to and providing resources and effective  
71 practices for pastors and congregations to engage and minister fruitfully within the ECC position.

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74 The ECC Position on Human Sexuality and the Marriage Ethic

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76 We affirm that God’s boundaries, whatever the dimension of life, are meant for our flourishing.

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78 The core of the Covenant position is this:

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80 Faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, celibacy in singleness—these constitute the Christian  
81 standard. When we fall short, we are invited to repent, receive the forgiveness of God, and amend  
82 our lives.

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84 There is no intent to single out select behavior. It is a high challenge to every one of us: single, married,  
85 young, old, both genders, all orientations. Each of us is inclined, in one way or another, to go beyond that  
86 boundary in different ways. The recognition about our own proneness to wander ought to create humility  
87 within each of us, and greater patience with one another, avoiding selective indignation around matters  
88 of sexual practice. In the graciousness of God we are offered forgiveness and the promise of God’s mercy  
89 and strength as we seek to walk a long obedience one step at a time.

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91 The ECC position serves as 1) our guiding statement on human sexuality and the marriage ethic, and 2)  
92 the basis for ECC policy, practices, and guidelines on these matters.

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97 Guidelines for Clergy and Congregations

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99 With those foundational perspectives and the position itself, we offer these guidelines. Not every  
100 circumstance can be anticipated, but these represent common considerations. We acknowledge the  
101 struggle these guidelines could represent in some circumstances. It is wise pastoral practice to consult  
102 about these matters with your conference and denominational personnel.

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104 Pertaining to Personal Standards for Covenant Credentialing

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106 The ECC holds celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage to be the  
107 behavioral standard for all Covenant clergy. The ECC does not credential people who are in  
108 violation of this standard.

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110 Pertaining to Officiating

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112 1. Clergy credentialed by the ECC are not permitted to officiate at same-sex unions, blessings or  
113 marriages, nor at male-female unions or blessings outside of permanent, lifelong vows (for  
114 example, the request of a couple to avoid the loss of benefits or pension rights by not legally  
115 marrying).

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117 2. Clergy credentialed by the ECC may attend the wedding or blessing of a same-sex couple or male-  
118 female union or blessing but may not participate in the service other than as a participant with the  
119 congregation.

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121 Pertaining to the Ministry of the Pastoral Office

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123 In all pastoral activities the credentialed minister leads, teaches, and represents the affirmations,  
124 policies, practices, and guidelines of the ECC. Representing is more than the dissemination of  
125 correct information; it upholds and lives within, not undermines. A pastor's dissent must never  
126 supersede the ECC position. For exploration concerning freedom and responsibilities around  
127 dissent, please refer to the document Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy  
128 available at [covchurch.org](http://covchurch.org).

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130 Pertaining to Non-Covenant Ministry Staff

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132 For a congregation with ministry staff who are not credentialed by the ECC, we respectfully expect  
133 that the same standards throughout these guidelines for ECC clergy also apply to all ministry staff  
134 of the congregation.

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136 Pertaining to Use of Facilities

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138 Congregations should have a facilities use policy in keeping with ECC guidelines. We respectfully  
139 expect that the policy include church facilities not being used for same-sex marriage ceremonies,  
140 unions, blessings, and all related events.

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142 Pertaining to Membership and Leadership

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144 1. In the context of the intersection of ECC policy and congregational polity, it is the local church that

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administers standards of membership and discipline. It is normative for ECC congregations to apply the ECC position to these considerations, among other expectations. Membership does not purport to be spiritual maturity, but rather the indication of having given oneself unreservedly to Christ while recognizing the importance of community for that journey going forward.

2. In the context of the intersection of ECC policy and congregational polity, it is the local church that administers standards for leadership qualifications. It is normative for ECC congregations to apply the ECC position to these considerations, among other expectations. Local church by-laws typically show an escalated level of demonstrated character, discipleship, and giftedness for leadership. In valuing all leadership, there is an increased expectation for convergence between clergy and lay leadership behavioral standards.

### In Conclusion

We believe the ECC position is biblically derived, in agreement with the historic beliefs of Christian wisdom through the ages, and consistent with our polity. We believe it creates context for pastoral and missional engagement rooted in gracious conviction. The ECC position is motivated by God's desire for the flourishing of all. And so we call the ECC again to grace: first, a forgiving grace that holds our witness to the gospel as central to all we do; second an engaging grace, a grace that gives constant encouragement and connection to those 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.