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## Lutheran sexuality report backs homosexual unions

By DAVID BRIGGS, Associated Press

Masturbation is healthy, the Bible supports homosexual unions and teaching teens how to use condoms to prevent disease is a moral imperative, says a task force leading the nation's largest Lutheran body into the sex wars.

Four years in the making, a draft statement going before the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declares that the core of human sexuality should be loving, committed relationships — and not limited to heterosexual marriages.

"It is the binding commitment, not the license or ceremony, that lies at the heart of biblical understandings of marriage," says the statement. "In those circumstances where a legal marriage is not

feasible, communities of faith may need to consider other ways of publicly affirming and communally supporting a loving, binding commitment between two people."

The report, a copy of which was released to The Associated Press, will be sent later this week to 19,000 pastors and other church leaders in the 5.2 million-member denomination. Local churches have until next June to respond.

The task force said it recognizes many Lutherans take literally the biblical condemnations of homosexuality, and oppose homosexual activity as contrary to God's law.

But the task force argued that "responsible biblical interpretation" strongly supports the acceptance and even the blessing of committed

same-sex unions and emphasizes what they say is the pre-eminent biblical command — to "love your neighbor as yourself."

In many places, the report upholds traditional church teachings. Marriage is affirmed as a divine and blessed estate, and teen-agers are encouraged to be chaste until they enter "a permanent commitment."

The report attacks adultery, promiscuity, sexual abuse, prostitution, anti-gay violence, pornography and the exploitation of sexuality in advertising and entertainment.

The Rev. Karen Bloomquist, director of the study, said the statement balances tradition with the contemporary realities of sexual relationships among unmarried people, heterosexual and homosexual.