



Abortion *By Kaari Reiersen*

OUTLINE

OUR UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN CHRIST

- ☞ The Basis of Our Unity
- ☞ The Gift of Our Diversity
- ☞ Talking about Our Differences

CONVICTIONS OF OUR FAITH

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY SUPPORTIVE OF LIFE

GUIDANCE IN MAKING DECISIONS REGARDING UNINTENDED PREGNANCIES

- ☞ Continuing the Pregnancy
- ☞ Ending a Pregnancy

PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES RELATED TO ABORTION

- ☞ Prevention of Unintended Pregnancies
- ☞ Support for Life After Birth
- ☞ The Regulation of Abortion
- ☞ Some Issues Requiring Further Deliberation

The ELCA social statement on abortion is available for free download at www.elca.org/socialstatements. You can order a free printed copy online at that address or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2996.

The churchwide assembly in 1991 was a fruitful one for social statements. Three were adopted as the newly formed ELCA began to shape its social teachings. The one on abortion was certainly the most controversial. The topic is still a matter of much conflict, but in 1991 it was foremost on everyone's mind. Supreme Court rulings in 1989 and

in 1991 had re-ignited debate on *Roe v. Wade*, and an abortion-rights march in 1989 and a right-to-life march in 1990 drew thousands—and received significant coverage from the media.

In the midst of a polarized public debate that included people of faith on all sides, the abortion statement had the challenging task of speaking for a church similarly divided.

The first question the statement dealt with was whether we as Christians were allowed to disagree. The first section, “Our Unity and Diversity in Christ,” states that our unity comes because we are a) part of God's creation, b) members in the Church, and c) share in one confession that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Lutherans also share a belief that the Bible is the authoritative source and norm (“authoritative source and norm” being a quote from the ELCA's constitution).

The social statement notes that we are free, and even obligated, to engage in moral deliberation as we disagree about issues such as freedom and sexual morality out of different experiences and interpretations of Christian faith and life.

The social statement makes a significant move at the beginning by questioning the way that abortion is discussed in our culture using “rights” language. Both the reproductive-rights movement and the right-to-life movement use “rights” language to make their cases.

The ELCA abortion social statement questions that, stating: “Nor is it helpful to use the language of ‘rights’ in absolute ways that imply that no other significant moral claims intrude. A developing life in the womb does not have an absolute right to be born, nor does a pregnant woman have an absolute right to terminate a pregnancy.”

After setting the stage for the possibility of moral deliberation over abortion and acknowledging the controversial, potentially divisive character of the issue, the statement explains the convictions of our faith, on which we base judgments on abortion:

- The dignity of human beings, created in God’s image, and the responsibility of stewardship we have;
- The gift of human life comes from God, has intrinsic value, worth, and dignity in all phases of development, and is guided by God’s law;

- Sin has corrupted God’s creation, leaving us “caught up in a web of sin in which we both sin and are sinned against”;
- God calls us to lives of repentance and renewal, seeking to manifest the fruit of the Spirit; and
- As a community of forgiven sinners, “our love for neighbor embraces especially those who are most vulnerable, including both the pregnant woman and the life in her womb.”

Section III of the social statement, “The Church as a Community Supportive of Life,” describes how the church, as a community supportive of life, responds to the reality of abortion. Its fundamental judgment about abortion is this: “Abortion ought to be an option only of last resort. Therefore, as a church we seek to reduce the need to turn to abortion as the answer to unintended pregnancies.”

In this section we confess our sin and move to “live out our support for life in all its dimensions” through hospitality, keeping sexual intercourse in its proper setting and using contraception, action, and education. Lastly, the section addresses life-degrading attitudes such as irresponsible sexual activ-

ity, individualism, and materialism. The statement then reminds the church of its call to be a compassionate community that gives care, offers competent counsel, and recognizes the moral complexity of individual situations.

The pastoral response focuses on respecting the integrity of those involved in making the decision. In most circumstances, the statement says, this church encourages women with unintended pregnancies to continue the pregnancy, assessing the situation realistically, and considering adoption as a positive option.

When considering ending a pregnancy, a woman or couple may consider factors such as unwilling participation in the sexual act leading to conception, threat to the life of the mother, and severe fetal abnormalities. However, “This church opposes ending intrauterine life when a fetus is developed enough to live outside a uterus with the aid of reasonable and necessary technology.” Whatever the decision made, “we must ultimately rely on the grace of God.”

The next section speaks of public policy issues related to abortion. The church participates in public

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debate about abortion while seeking justice for all. It first advocates aid in preventing unwanted pregnancies, through education and contraception. Next, it supports a better life for the child and parents through improved social services and initiatives such as parental leave.

Regulation of abortion, the statement recognizes, is where members of the church disagree widely, ranging from those who believe “all abortions should be prohibited by law, except to save the life of the mother, to those who oppose any law seeking to regulate abortion, except to protect the health and safety of the woman.”

The statement declares that the government has a legitimate role in regulating abortion, and states, “Because of our conviction that both the life of the woman and the life in her womb must be respected by law, this church opposes:

- the total lack of regulation of abortion;
- legislation that would outlaw abortion in all circumstances;
- laws that prevent access to information about all options available to women faced with unintended pregnancies;
- laws that deny access to safe and affordable services for morally justifiable abortions;
- mandatory or coerced abortion or sterilization;
- laws that prevent couples from practicing contraception;
- laws that are primarily intended to harass those contemplating or deciding for an abortion.”

Lastly, the statement addresses issues that require further deliberation, such as gaining spousal and parental consent for abortions and using public funding to pay for the procedure. It elaborates on the complexity of those issues, then

calls Lutherans to engage in “public debate on abortion in a spirit of respect for those with whom they differ.”

The statement ends with this final paragraph, seeking to call ELCA members to full participation in shaping the society into which mothers ponder bearing their children: “In conclusion, the church’s role in society begins long before and extends far beyond legislative regulation. It seeks to shape attitudes and values that affirm people in whatever circumstances they find themselves. Its pastoral care, compassionate outreach, and life-sustaining assistance are crucial in supporting those who bear children, as well as those who choose not to do so. Through these and other means the people of God seek to be truly supportive of life.” 🌿

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