



“Abortion” Social Statement Summary

The social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on the topic of abortion faces the challenging task of speaking for a church body as divided as the American public on the topic. The statement begins with a claim about the unity of the church as a whole. United in Christ and believing that the Bible is the authoritative source and norm for Christian faith and life, Christians are free, and even obligated, to engage in moral deliberation over our disagreements.

In setting parameters for discussion, the statement questions the use of “rights” language so common in the public abortion debate:

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 (“Abortion,” p. 2).

After setting the stage for 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:

- Human beings are endowed with dignity, created in God’s image, and they bear the responsibility of stewardship;
- 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” (p. 3);
- 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” (p.3).

The social statement describes how this church, as a community supportive of life, responds to the reality of abortion. Its fundamental judgment about abortion is that: “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” (p.4). We “live out our support for life in all its dimensions” (p.4) through hospitality, keeping sexual intercourse in its proper setting and using contraception, action and education. By contrast, attitudes such as irresponsible sexual activity, individualism and materialism are life-degrading.

The statement reminds this church of its call to be a compassionate community that recognizes the moral complexity of individual situations. In most circumstances, the church encourages women with unintended pregnancies to continue the pregnancy while assessing the situation realistically and considering adoption as a positive option.

When considering ending a pregnancy, a woman or couple should 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” (p. 7).

The statement also speaks of public policy issues related to abortion. The ELCA participates in public debate about abortion while seeking justice for all. It 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 this church disagree widely. The statement declares that the government has a legitimate role in regulating abortion. It 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” (pp. 9-10).

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 calls ELCA members to engage in “public debate on abortion in a spirit of respect for those with whom they differ” (p. 10).

The statement ends with a final paragraph calling ELCA members to participate in shaping society. The church:

...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 (p. 11).