

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



A Social Statement:

### **THE CHURCH IN SOCIETY: A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE**

*This social teaching statement was adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote at the second biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in Orlando, Florida, August 28-September 4, 1991.*

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is called to be a part of the ecumenical Church of Jesus Christ in the context in which God has placed it—a diverse, divided, and threatened global society on a beautiful, fragile planet. In faithfulness to its calling, this church is committed to defend human dignity, to stand with poor and powerless people, to advocate justice, to work for peace, and to care for the earth in the processes and structures of contemporary society.

This statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, sets forth affirmations and commitments to guide this church's participation in society. It seeks to be true to this church's mandate to confess and teach both Law and Gospel as the whole Word of the triune God. This church witnesses to the living God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who in love creates, judges, and preserves the world and redeems, sanctifies, and brings it to fulfillment in God's reign.

#### **AFFIRMATIONS**

##### **The Gospel and the Church**

The Church, the baptized people of God, is created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel to proclaim and to follow God's crucified Messiah. As the gathering of children, youth, men, and women who hear, believe, and receive the living Christ in Word and Sacrament, the Church witnesses in word and deed to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The proclamation of the Gospel as the good news of God's salvation given in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus distinguishes the Church from all other communities. The Gospel liberates from sin, death, and evil and motivates the Church to care for neighbor and the earth.

The witness of this church in society flows from its identity as a community that lives from and for the Gospel. Faith is active in love; love calls for justice in the relationships and structures of society. It is in grateful response to God's grace in

Jesus Christ that this church carries out its responsibility for the well-being of society and the environment.

Word and Sacrament are the originating center for this church's mission in the world through its baptized members, congregations, synods, churchwide organization, social ministry organizations, and educational institutions. Through preaching, teaching, the sacraments, Scripture, and "mutual conversation and consolation,"<sup>1</sup> the Church is gathered and shaped by the Holy Spirit to be a serving and liberating presence in the world. In praying for the peace of the whole world and in interceding for those who suffer and for those in authority, the Church serves the world. The Church gives thanks to God for the blessings of creation and prays to be empowered to do God's will in society.

### **The Church Universal**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is part of the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" Church. Its witness in society is informed by the history and the various theological traditions of the one Church of Jesus Christ. The suffering and hope of churches in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas strengthen its life and calling.

As a member of the worldwide Lutheran communion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is united with churches around the globe in a common tradition and mission. This church builds upon a legacy of more than three-hundred years of Lutheran presence in the United States and the Caribbean and affirms its cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity as vital to its identity.

### **The Church 'In' But Not 'From' the World**

Through faith in the Gospel the Church already takes part in the reign of God announced by and embodied in Jesus. Yet, it still awaits the resurrection of the dead and the fulfillment of the whole creation in God's promised future. In this time of "now ... not yet," the Church lives in two ages—the present age and the age to come. The Church is 'in' the world but not 'from' the world.

The Gospel does not take the Church out of the world but instead calls it to affirm and to enter more deeply into the world. Although in bondage to sin and death, the world is God's good creation, where, because of love, God in Jesus Christ became flesh. The Church and the world have a common destiny in the reign of God. The Church acts for the sake of the world in hope and prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven."

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1. Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. IV. Citations from *The Book of Concord* are taken from the edition by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

The Gospel does not allow the Church to accommodate to the ways of the world. The presence and promise of God's reign makes the church restless and discontented with the world's brokenness and violence. Acting for the sake of God's world requires resisting and struggling against the evils of the world.

The Church is "a new creation ... from God" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18), but it is still part of a fallen humanity, sharing fully the brokenness of the world. It is a community of saints, a people righteous before God on account of Jesus' self-giving love, and at the same time a community of sinners. Repentance, forgiveness, and renewal characterize the Church that lives under the cross with the hope of the coming in fullness of God's reign.

### **The Church's Responsibility in Society**

In witnessing to Jesus Christ, the Church announces that the God who justifies expects all people to do justice. God's good and just demands address people in the obligations of their relationships and the challenges of the world. Through the divine activity of the Law, God preserves creation, orders society, and promotes justice in a broken world.

God works through the family, education, the economy, the state, and other structures necessary for life in the present age. God institutes governing authorities, for example, to serve the good of society.<sup>2</sup> This church respects the God-given integrity and tasks of governing authorities and other worldly structures, while holding them accountable to God.

This church must participate in social structures critically, for sin also is at work in the world. Social structures and processes combine life-giving and life-destroying dynamics in complex mixtures and in varying degrees. This church, therefore, must unite realism and vision, wisdom and courage, in its social responsibility. It needs constantly to discern when to support and when to confront society's cultural patterns, values, and powers.

As a reconciling and healing presence, this church is called to minister to human need with compassion and imagination. It strives to pioneer new ways of addressing emerging social problems and environmental degradation. This church has a responsibility to mediate conflict and to advocate just and peaceful resolutions to the world's divisions. It should support institutions and policies that serve the

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2.The constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, ELCA 4.03.n., states that "this church shall ... [w]ork with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interation." The meaning of "institutional separation and functional interaction" is developed in the statement, "The Nature of the Church in its Relationship with Government," Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., 1979.

common good and work with and learn from others in caring for and changing global society.

As a prophetic presence, this church has the obligation to name and denounce the idols before which people bow, to identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate in hope with poor and powerless people. When religious or secular structures, ideologies, or authorities claim to be absolute, this church says, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29).<sup>3</sup> With Martin Luther, this church understands that “to rebuke” those in authority “through God’s Word spoken publicly, boldly and honestly” is “not seditious” but “a praiseworthy, noble, and ... particularly great service to God.”<sup>4</sup>

Because the Church is human as well as divine, sinful as well as holy, it too lives under the Law as well as the Gospel. Like all communities, the Church has an institutional dimension. This church must ensure that its own corporate life, its relationships with other institutions, and its efforts to influence society are governed by God’s law, express its identity, and serve its mission.

### **The Baptismal Vocation of Christians**

One of the ways the Church participates in society is through its members. In dying to sin and rising with Christ in Baptism, Christians are called to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:1-11). They fulfill their baptismal vocation in ordinary life as family members, friends, citizens, workers, and participants in voluntary associations. Since “daily life [is] the primary setting for the exercise of [the] Christian calling,”<sup>5</sup> it is in that setting that Christians are to serve God and neighbor.

This church sustains its baptized members through the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The gifts of the Spirit form and transform the people of God for discipleship in daily life. In the body of Christ, the character, outlook, and moral convictions of Christians are shaped in distinctive ways. Jesus frees Christians to serve others and to walk with people who are hungry, forgotten, oppressed, and despised. The example of Jesus invites Christians to see people near and far away, people of all races, classes and cultures, friends and strangers, allies and enemies as their “neighbor.”

Christians value the covenantal communities of family and marriage, and they view their work as a means by which they can express their baptismal vocation.

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3. Cf., Augsburg Confession, Art. XVI.

4. Commentary on Psalm 82. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works, Vol. 13: Selected Psalms II*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956).

5. Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, ELCA 4.01.e.

In these settings they experience both joy and brokenness and discover the sustaining power of faith. That power enables them to heal relationships, to challenge what dehumanizes, to confront the structural obstacles to justice, and to seek more humane arrangements in their places of responsibility.

Christians also exercise their calling by being wise and active citizens. For some, this may include service in public office. Along with all citizens, Christians have the responsibility to defend human rights and to work for freedom, justice, peace, environmental well-being, and good order in public life. They are to recognize the vital role of law in protecting life and liberty and in upholding the common good. Christians need to be concerned for the methods and the content of public deliberation. They should be critical when groups of people are inadequately represented in political processes and decisions that affect their lives.

An important way that Christians carry out their citizenship is through participation in voluntary associations and movements, both religious and secular. At times, these groups may serve a prophetic function as they protest particular evils, question unexamined assumptions, challenge unjust or immoral practices, and organize for structural changes in the work place, local community, and wider world.

### **A Community of Moral Deliberation**

Christians fulfill their vocation diversely and are rich in the variety of the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, they often disagree passionately on the kind of responses they make to social questions. United with Christ and all believers in baptism, Christians welcome and celebrate their diversity. Because they share common convictions of faith, they are free, indeed obligated, to deliberate together on the challenges they face in the world.

Deliberation in this church gives attention both to God's Word and God's world, as well as to the relationship between them. This church sees the world in light of God's Word, and it grasps God's Word from its context in the world. This church must rely upon God's revelation, God's gift of reason, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture is the normative source in this church's deliberation. Through the study of Scripture, Christians seek to know what God requires in the Church and the world. Because of the diversity in Scripture, and because of the contemporary world's distance from the biblical world, it is necessary to scrutinize the texts carefully in their own setting and to interpret them faithfully in the context of today. In their witness to God's Word, the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions guide this church's approach to Scripture, and the Church's history and traditions instruct it in its deliberation.

Transformed by faith, this church in its deliberation draws upon the God-given abilities of human beings to will, to reason, and to feel. This church is open to learn from the experience, knowledge, and imagination of all people, in order to have the best possible information and understanding of today's world. To act justly and effectively, this church needs to analyze social and environmental issues critically and to probe the reasons why the situation is as it is.

Deliberation in this church should include people—either in person or through their writing or other expressions—with different life-experiences, perspectives, and interests. As far as possible, people such as the following should deliberate together and with others:

- those who feel and suffer with the issue;
- those whose interests or security are at stake;
- pastors, bishops, theologians, ethicists, and other teachers in this church;
- advocates;
- experts in the social and natural sciences, the arts, and the humanities.

As a community of moral deliberation, the Church seeks to “discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Christians struggle together on social questions in order to know better how to live faithfully and responsibly in their callings. Processes of deliberation need to inform and guide this church's corporate witness in society. In dealing openly and creatively with disagreement and controversy, this church hopes to contribute to the search for the individual as well as for the common good in public life.

## **COMMITMENTS**

In light of these affirmations, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America makes the following commitments:

### **Sustaining Vocation**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commits itself to sustain and support its members in their baptismal vocation to serve God and neighbor in daily life. Through its congregations, synods, and churchwide organization, and affiliated institutions and ecumenical relationships, this church shall:

- foster in its members a faith that is active in love, a love that seeks justice, and an insight that strives to discern what is right, good, and fitting;
- support its members in their callings to love their neighbor, to mend the creation, to advocate justice and mercy in situations of brokenness, and to seek peace where there is conflict;

- join with others to remove obstacles of discrimination and indifference that prevent people from living out their callings;
- promote sound, critical, and creative citizenship and public service among its members;
- work to further democratic processes throughout the territory of this church and the world, and to redress the persisting social and economic inequalities that prevent many from participating effectively in those processes;
- encourage its citizen-members to join in the public deliberations at all levels, particularly through organizations that mediate between personal and public life, and to engage in prophetic actions.

### **Witnessing as an Institution**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commits itself to serve God and neighbor in its life and work as an institution. Through its congregations, synods, and churchwide organization, and affiliated institutions and ecumenical relationships, this church shall:

- adopt institutional policies and practices that model its beliefs and values and enhance its mission;
- support its educational and social ministry organizations in their response to human need;
- encourage congregations and affiliated institutions to engage in ministries that promote the well-being of the human community and the environment and that empower people to gain access to and influence in the systems that govern their lives;
- develop social statements through participatory processes of study and theological reflection that will guide the life of this church as an institution and inform the conscience of its members in the spirit of Christian liberty;
- speak out on timely, urgent issues on which the voice of this church should be heard;
- expect its pastors, bishops, and lay church leaders to pray for and to exhort those in positions of authority on the basis of God's prophetic Word;
- work with and on behalf of the poor, the powerless, and those who suffer, using its power and influence with political and economic decision-making bodies to develop and advocate policies that seek to advance justice, peace, and the care of creation;
- mediate to achieve just and peaceful solutions to social conflicts;
- participate in local, national, and international ecumenical organizations, and interfaith and ecumenical partnerships in the service of common goals.

### **Deliberating on Social Questions**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commits itself to foster moral delib-

eration on social questions. Through its congregations, synods, and churchwide organization, and affiliated institutions and ecumenical relationships, this church shall seek to:

- be a community where open, passionate, and respectful deliberation on challenging and controversial issues of contemporary society is expected and encouraged;
- engage those of diverse perspectives, classes, genders, ages, races, and cultures in the deliberation process so that each of our limited horizons might be expanded and the witness of the body of Christ in the world enhanced;
- draw upon the resources of faith and reason—on Scripture, Church history, knowledge, and personal experience—to learn and to discern how to respond to contemporary challenges in light of God’s Word;
- address through deliberative processes the issues faced by the people of God, in order to equip them in their discipleship and citizenship in the world;
- arrive at positions to guide its corporate witness through participatory processes of moral deliberation;
- contribute toward the upbuilding of the common good and the revitalizing of public life through open and inclusive processes of deliberation.

### **GOD’S FAITHFUL LOVE**

The Church has the “treasure” of the Gospel “in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). We in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America set forth these affirmations and commitments with the prayer that our words and deeds may be earthen vessels that witness to the power of the cross. We care for the earth and serve the neighbor in society with the joyful confidence that God’s faithfulness alone sustains the Church and renews our faith, hope, and love.

Our witness is a response to God’s faithful love received in Word and Sacraments. The bread and the wine, the body and blood of Christ, are

a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Martin Luther. “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods.” Edited by E. Theodore Bachmann, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960).

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