



“Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” Social Statement Summary

What is the appropriate way for Lutheran Christians and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as an institution to be active in society? Why and how should this church (members, congregations and other expressions) operate in the public arena? The very first social statement adopted by the ELCA, “Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective,” provides these answers.

Because the gospel of Jesus Christ liberates us from sin, death and evil, the church as the body of Christ is freed to “love the neighbor” (Matthew 22:36ff). The call of God motivates the church to address society. The church confesses and teaches both law and gospel as the living word of the triune God. God's activity in the world inevitably leads to participating in society, and caring for the earth with all its creatures. This participation involves a commitment to justice (Amos 5:24).

The statement highlights the Lutheran teaching that God is at work in the “kingdom” of the civil realm primarily through the activity of the law. Family, education, economy, government and other social structures are the ways God restrains evil, protects from harm and upholds the common good. Christians are to respect the God-given integrity and tasks of these structures. Yet, since sin permeates them, too, they fall short of God's intention for justice, peace and care of creation.

Lutherans understand that the church (the body of Christ) is “in,” but not “from,” the world. The church (all baptized people are the church!) through faith already takes part in the healing activity of God in Jesus. At the same time, it awaits the fulfillment of the whole creation and so lives in a tension between two ages — the present age and the age to come. Christians share a common destiny with the whole world in the coming reign of God and yet can never be fully at home in the world as it is. Christians must always be “restless.”

God's restless church is called to serve and advocate in response to such diverse social situations as disasters, poverty, discrimination, social policies and economic arrangements. The statement says the church should keep enough critical distance from society to act, when appropriate, like the prophets of Scripture. Prophets challenged the culture, exposed the power of sin and idolatry, and spoke out on behalf of the poor and powerless. Christians are committed to society for the sake of all, and this means they must be ready to speak for change.

As organizations that live in the present and in the age to come, congregations, synods, agencies, institutions and the churchwide organization all have particular roles in addressing society. The churchwide organization, for instance, brings together task forces to lead the participatory process of creating social statements. However, the statement is quite clear that the primary way that the church carries out its responsibility in the world is through the everyday life of ordinary Christians. Every Christian is called through baptism to participate in society by doing good in the places of responsibility — marriage, family, work, school, volunteer associations, community organizations and political parties. Baptismal vocation is the primary way that God works through the church in the public arena. Because of this, congregations and other places of ministry sustain the baptismal vocation of ELCA members.

Christians fulfill their vocations in many ways and have many gifts. They will often disagree passionately on social questions. As a way of wrestling with social questions, the statement proposes the ELCA act as a “community of moral deliberation” (p. 5). Such a community looks together to Scripture as the normative source of faith and life and to the best knowledge available in the secular realm as it deliberates toward good actions and policies. Deliberation occurs in the context of those who disagree, and the voices of those who have an interest at stake or will suffer consequences are an integral part of that deliberation. It is in a public process guided by the Holy Spirit that Christians come to discern what action they should take when dealing with complicated issues.