

# FOREWORD TO SOCIAL STATEMENTS OF THE UCLA, 1918-1962

A Social Document of the  
ULCA



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

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From the time of the early Christians until now there has been discussion about the proper role of the church in the social order. In the modern period interest in the problem has heightened and the debate has taken on new urgency. It poses a number of fundamental and thorny questions.

Are Christians, in the strength of the faith that forms them into the Body of Christ, moved by social concern? Is social responsibility implicit in their churchmanship? Or is it merely coincidental and perhaps quite irrelevant to their fellowship in the Gospel? How should the church relate itself to contemporary social issues? Should it work primarily through individuals, and possibly through informal associations of members? Under what circumstances, if at all, should the church act as an official body? What is the proper form and limit of such action?

To be sure, it would be presumptuous to try to answer all these questions here. Suffice it to say that while these and similar queries have been debated Christians have not been without a sense of social mission. In many ways and in varied situations their faith has informed their function in public affairs with responsible social concern. On the official level of the church, too, there have been expressions of social responsibility. In The United Lutheran church in America the Board of Social Missions is the official agency charged with the task of providing leadership in stimulating and guiding the church's ministry in this area.

The Board of Social Missions came into being in 1938 by action of the Eleventh Biennial Convention of the ULCA (Minutes, pp. 78-81, 108.) It brought together work that had previously been carried forward by three separate agencies: the Inner Mission Board, the Committee on Evangelism, and the Committee on Moral and Social Welfare. The inherent responsibility of these units was now structured in corresponding departments of the Board: Inner Missions, Evangelism, and Social Action. They were seen as constituting three dimensions of what is essentially a unified ministry.

The social action aspect of this ministry experienced a slow but sound evolution. Its preliminary official expressions came through the work of the short-lived Committee on Temperance. In 1920, two years after the formation of the ULCA, the second convention, recognizing that emphasis on such a narrow scope was insufficient, changed the name to Committee on Moral and Social Welfare, and expanded the range to include "all the larger problems and issues which affect the moral and social welfare of our people." The justification for this action was given in words that have a

contemporary ring and that reveal a sound evangelical conception of the role and mission of the Christian community in the social order:

The Church is set by divine appointment in the midst of society. The positive diffusion of Christian influence throughout the community life is an essential part of Christian endeavor. The church's treasure, its defense, its weapon, is the Christ and the Everlasting Gospel. These it must bring to human souls in every age under constantly changing conditions of thought and life.

The Church of today must know its own age, the conditions which confront humanity not only as individuals but in community, national and world groups, the currents of thought sweeping through the world and influencing its conduct. In order successfully to meet the problems which confront it in particular congregations and localities it must study these problems in the large. It is not sufficient to preach sin and grace in the abstract. It must be prepared to meet evil in its concrete, definitely organized forms. It dare not be ignorant of the great moral, social and industrial movements which from time to time develop into issues of national and worldwide significance. The church must have information and direction on these subjects in order that the full weight of moral and spiritual strength in its membership may be given to the forces that are striving for righteousness.

This broad conception of the Church's social responsibility-its Social Mission-is particularly important for the American Lutheran Church ... as it realizes more and more clearly its responsibility and opportunity, not only for its own membership, but for the community and the entire people.

(Minutes, 2nd Biennial Convention, ULCA, 1920, pp. 478-79.)

The Committee on Moral and Social Welfare had an eighteen-year history. As it was never provided with a staff its work was naturally limited. It undertook some studies and issued reports that were presented to ULCA conventions. These stimulated discussion on several social issues and sometimes led to official policy declarations and resolutions calling for appropriate action. The work of the Committee was related primarily to the conventions. It was not able to undertake general education or action programs, nor to develop its emphasis through synodical and other channels of the church.

Following the organization of the Board of Social Missions some staff leadership for social action became available. This was very limited at first since the executive secretary, being the only staff person, had to divide his time among the three departments. However, with the calling of special secretaries for evangelism and inner missions he was able to give more leadership in social action. Schools of social missions and the dissemination of information and study materials were undertaken as some first steps in the development of a program of social education. Also, several important position statements were prepared for adoption by the church.

In 1947 the Board called its first secretary for social action. In the decade that followed, the work expanded to such a degree that an associate was called, and soon thereafter provision was made for a total of three staff persons in the Department of Social Action.

During the last fifteen years social action in the ULCA has been characterized by different but related operations. One of these is the program of research and study. Projects undertaken in recent years include studies on mixed marriages, old age and survivors insurance, exemption of theological students from military training and service, marriage and divorce, seal of confession, capital punishment, and politics and armaments in a nuclear age. Two studies currently in process deal with ethics of medical practice, and church and state relations in a pluralistic society. These and similar studies have been designed to help Christians, as individuals and in groups, in light of the evangelical ethic to think through and reach decisions on some of the more urgent moral and social issues of our time.

The most basic and notable study was made in fulfillment of a 1948 convention assignment calling for "a scholarly study ... of the Lutheran approach to Christian social responsibility ... to school Lutherans in the Scriptural and confessional grounds of social action." (Minutes, 16th Biennial Convention, ULCA. p.302.) It resulted in a three-volume symposium entitled Christian Social Responsibility, published in 1957, and a book in a more popular vein, *The Courage to Care*, two years later.

This study project became the basis for a thorough and widespread program in social education, which represents another aspect of the total work in social action. Since 1958 more than fifty conferences on Christian social responsibility have been held across the church in synods having approximately 80 percent of ULCA membership. These seminar-type meetings, each averaging two to three days in length, were structured for various levels and groups in the church, and involved more than 1,300 pastors and 1,700 laymen.

Social education programs have also been conducted in particular problem areas including world order, industrial relations, marriage and family life, and race relations. Launched in each case by a ULCA leadership training school, these programs were carried through as much as possible on synodical and local levels by means of specially planned workshops, schools, or study courses, and in cooperation with the auxiliaries of the church. Along with corresponding units of the member denominations in the National Council of Churches, the Board of Social Missions also participates in promoting certain annual social education emphases in select areas. Quite naturally all this requires the preparation, assembling and distribution of pertinent information and study materials.

In recent years a new program known as Faith and Life Institutes has been undertaken by the Board. Inspired in part by the Evangelical Academy movement in Europe, it is an effort to articulate the ethical relevance of the Christian faith to the daily life situations and responsibilities of special groups. Some institutes are designed

for persons from a particular occupation or profession. Others focus on a significant social issue and bring together people with a mutual concern and responsibility in some critical area. In all cases the purpose is to help the participants explore together the questions they face in common, to reflect on the ethical dimensions of these questions, and to see them in light of the Christian view of man and society.

The orientation here is toward the layman as he sees and experiences himself in the social and economic forms of today's world. It is an effort on the part of the church to establish effective dialogue with life in the secular orders, identifying more closely with the problems and concerns of people in their daily stations. In one sense the church is present as a listening partner, deeply sensitive to the real needs of the world. On the other hand, as the issues of everyday life are opened up the church bids men pause long enough to consider these issues in the light of the Christian message. By providing for this kind of confrontation the Faith and Life Institutes may be helpful in leading men to commit their practical relations to the Lord of all life and to become his agents for correcting and reforming the structures of society in which they live and work.

It has been noted that the program of research and study is designed to provide guidance to Christians in their individual and group decisions on social issues by viewing both their responsibility and the issues in light of the Christian faith. The program of social education, through conferences, workshops and institutes, is related to this research and study at the same time that it operates in the more practical context of the Christian's tasks in the daily affairs of the world. Another responsibility of the Department of Social Action is the formulation of statements on social issues for consideration by conventions or by the Executive Board of the Church. Generally these statements reflect the findings of research and the positions outlined in the basic studies. The United Lutheran Church does not issue official statements as freely as some other Protestant groups. But it has spoken out, and at times notably, on a broad range of matters. It is with the express purpose of making the record of this official witness more evident that the Board of Social Missions publishes this collection of statements issued by the ULCA during its forty-four year history.

What constitutes an official social statement? By the test of what definition or set of rules does the present collection qualify? Unhappily there is no official definition or set of rules that holds for the entire life-span of the ULCA. However, there are at least two basic criteria which can be used with veracity, and these have been applied in selecting the statements included here. Accordingly, an official social statement must (1) be an expression of conviction or concern, or a statement of position or policy, or a resolution calling for corresponding action on one or more social issues, and (2) be adopted by a general convention or one or more duly authorized boards of the church.

A large majority of the statements have been adopted by ULCA conventions. Some were made official by the Executive Board, or by concurring Executive Board and

Board of Social Missions actions. A few statements adopted only by the Board of Social Missions are also included here. Apparently this Board had the authority to issue statements on its own until that right was negated by the 1954 convention of the church. (Minutes, 19th Biennial Convention, ULCA, pp. 621, 1042.)

What is the authority of an official statement? For whom does it speak? Do "pronouncements which state the official position of the church" commit all congregations and their members to that position? The action of a convention expresses the preponderant opinion of an officially delegated body of distinguished leaders of the several synods. It speaks officially for the whole church, but not with the authority of canon law. It represents a substantial consensus of conviction that should be taken seriously on all levels of the church, but not in the sense that individual Christians or even congregations are denied the right to hold opinions that may differ with official social policy statements. The same holds true with respect to pronouncements issued by the Executive Board between conventions. (Ibid.,p.621.)

The contents of this booklet have been drawn from the official records of The United Lutheran Church in America. They have been classified under twelve general headings and then arranged in chronological order under sub-topics. Special acknowledgment is due Mrs. William Scott Ellis, assistant in research and promotion for the Board, who performed the task of going through the voluminous minutes of ULCA conventions and sorting out the proper materials, as well as the careful reading and correcting of the manuscript against official documents. The Board of Social Missions is pleased to publish this collection of statements in the hope that it may highlight the record of the official social witness of the ULCA.