



“Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor” Social Statement Summary

Like many social statements of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor” starts with a description of the social situation, explores biblical and theological themes, and then lays out implications. Section One acknowledges the crisis in health care in the U.S. and describes Christian responsibility. Section Two turns to the Bible and theology to establish basic principles and define terms such as “healing,” “cure” and “illness.” The vision of health as a shared endeavor in Section Three rests in a biblical view that wholeness is a blessing that God intends for all (1Thessalonians 5:23). In this vision, “A ministry of healing is integral to the life and mission of the Church” (p. 9). Guided by this vision, the statement addresses the health care system and its primary parts, from congregations to medical research. Sections Four and Five are dedicated to specific recommendations about equitable access to health care for all, and provide ethical guidance for individuals and families.

The title captures the theme of the statement: caring for health is a shared endeavor, an endeavor that requires sustained and determined effort from all of us. Each of us bears some responsibility for his or her own health, but health and health care also depend upon other people and conditions in the wider society. Such interdependence is at odds with the common message of this individualistic society, but it flows from the biblical vision of wholeness.

The biblical vision challenges the belief that illness equals disease and health equals cure. There are deeper dimensions to healing, such as restoration to God, and life within a community of meaningful relationships. “‘Being well’ for Christians does not mean we are untouched by pain and suffering. Human beings are finite and vulnerable, and so we recognize limits on what health and health care can mean” (p. 6). Being well for Christians means that we are able to participate in Christ's love by giving ourselves for others. We share their suffering in response to Christ, who bore the suffering of all.

The statement’s vision means that health care should not be organized primarily for profitability: “Although health care goods and services may be bought and sold, health care is above all an activity of caring that grows out of relationships of mutual responsibility, concern and trust — and that cannot be reduced to a commodity” (p. 6). Rather, the statement concludes, “...health care is the kind of good most appropriately given on the basis of need” (p. 18). It specifies, “At a minimum, each person should have ready access to basic health care services that include preventive, acute, and chronic physical and mental health care at an affordable cost” (p. 13). Rather than encouraging privatization, the belief that health is a shared endeavor “makes public health services... the foundation for any health care system” (p. 13).

Since the vision encompasses the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of people’s lives, this church believes health care involves more than doctors, nurses and hospitals. Each of us has responsibility “to be a good steward of his or her own health out of thankfulness for the gift of life and in order to serve God and the neighbor.” (p. 7) This requires a number of activities: keeping healthy habits, seeking preventive health care, attention to spiritual exercises and action in our callings as citizens.

The statement asserts that congregations are in the health care “business” because they are centered in word and sacrament ministry, which offers “salvation” (“salvation” is from the Latin word for healing or wholeness). Congregations are to encourage healing through vibrant prayer, services of healing, pastoral care and congregational health ministries. The statement also recognizes and celebrates the many contributions that ELCA social ministry organizations make through “respectful and equitable attention to the physical, mental and spiritual needs of those persons served” (p. 11).

The vision of the shared endeavor means that the church is called to be an active participant in fashioning a just and effective health care system. The primary concern of the statement is achieving equitable access to basic health care for all, and so the statement calls the whole ELCA to commit itself to this goal (p. 18). The ethical principles of agape, love and justice are to guide that participation.

In 2003 the statement called for reform of the U.S. health care system: “The United States does not currently have a health care system that is capable of care for all people. Significant changes in financing and structure are therefore required” (p. 13). The statement did not name a particular system for achieving that reform but rather concluded: “Our obligation could be met through any one of several combinations of personal, market and governmental means, although none of these means alone can provide equitable access to health care” (p. 19).