



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

*A social message on...*

# Human Rights

*As adopted unanimously by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on November 12, 2017.*

## **I. WHY IS A SOCIAL MESSAGE ON HUMAN RIGHTS NECESSARY?**

---

The movement for human rights has made significant progress over the last century. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup> and the means to monitor those rights did not exist prior to 1948. Genocides have been named and condemned for what they are. Slave labor has been outlawed in much of the world. Women in many societies have achieved greater degrees of autonomy, education and public influence than anyone could have imagined even 100 years ago.

Yet staggering numbers of God's children have not experienced this advancement. Governmental oppression, war and famine send historic numbers of people streaming via dangerous routes into nearby countries that are overwhelmed and often reluctant to accept them.<sup>2</sup> People are treated as "suspicious" or are brutalized simply because of their gender, race, ethnicity or religious beliefs. Impoverished citizens have no access to clean water and live in environmental degradation. Many multinational corporations invest heavily in and benefit from the conditions in countries with egregious human rights violations.

---

1 Accepted by the U.N. General Assembly on Dec. 10, 1948

2 The U.N. has announced that there were more displaced people in 2016 than in any other year of recordkeeping. See [nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/middleeast/displaced-people-united-nations-global-trends.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/middleeast/displaced-people-united-nations-global-trends.html?_r=0).

Bad news from around the globe brings deep discouragement about prospects for human society.<sup>3</sup> Our church, however, lives in abiding hope because of God's promises and has resources for bold witness. This message draws together commitments from the Lutheran tradition and the Scriptures and a strong foundation of social teaching developed by the ELCA and its predecessor church bodies.<sup>4</sup> This message summons God's people to courage, confession and engagement to promote and protect human rights.

### **Called by God**

Concern for the well-being of others lies at the very heart of Christian faith (Matthew 22:36-40).<sup>5</sup> Christians have a variety of social identifications through their nation of origin, race, ethnicity or political affiliation, but all Christians have a common identity as children of a loving creator who became vulnerable as Emmanuel, God with us. The One in whom there is no Jew or Greek (Galatians 3:28) teaches that we should treat all people in need as we would treat Christ among us (Matthew 25).

In the name of the God who creates every human being out of love, this church teaches human dignity is God's gift to every person and that the commitment to universal rights protects that dignity. In adopting this social message, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Church Council gives renewed

---

3 The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, speaking at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., in February 2017, expressed his alarm: "To many of us it appears the international system could become dangerously unstable ... [raging conflicts] are accompanied by an intensifying breakdown in the basic consensus, embedded in key international and regional institutions, a consensus which has for decades maintained, supported and regulated the relations between states and their behavior."

4 This message does not initiate new teaching but articulates in one place themes and commitments from the disparate sources in which the ELCA has affirmed or mentioned human rights; it makes explicit what is implicit and addresses contemporary questions.

5 The "double love commandment" found in Matthew 22:36f represents this core commitment. It orients how all Christians are to live: We express our thanks and trust in God in loving our neighbor.

attention to addressing human rights as a church.<sup>6</sup> It also believes the time is right for more Christians to enter public conversation and take action to safeguard the dignity due to all children of God. ELCA social teaching is clear: “The God who justifies expects all people to do justice.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. WHAT ARE THE ELCA'S BASIC CONVICTIONS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS?

---

### God's creative action as the basis for dignity

In the Scriptures, God surveys creation and deems it good.<sup>8</sup> This good creation is a rich, varied and bountiful one in which all of God's creatures have integrity and value.<sup>9</sup> The ELCA teaches that this gracious God grants humankind the gifts of agency, reason and spirit, directing it to help order and shape creation so that all may continue to flourish.<sup>10</sup> The God-given purpose for humankind (the *imago Dei*) imbues each human being with a shared dignity.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to establishing this dignity, the biblical teaching about *imago Dei* illustrates that relationship is an essential aspect of personhood. Just as the Scriptures reveal that the Holy Trinity is a God always in relationship, so are humans always meant to be in life-giving relationship – with God and with each other.

---

6 The need for renewed attention is clear. ELCA leadership continually receives requests for advocacy that will benefit from judicious criteria. As an example, the 2016 Churchwide Assembly adopted a social policy resolution calling for an investment screen related to human rights, whose writing this message will support and inform.

7 ELCA “Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective,” p. 3. All official ELCA teaching and policy documents referenced in these footnotes can be found at [ELCA.org/socialstatements](http://ELCA.org/socialstatements).

8 Genesis, Chapter 1.

9 See ELCA “Genetics, Faith and Responsibility,” p. 9: “God’s creative action brings forth a dynamic, varied, evolving, interdependent community of abundance and life. In this creation, each participant has a relationship to God and has a God-given integrity and value.”

10 “Genetics,” p. 2.

11 ELCA “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All,” p. 9: “Human beings are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) as social beings whose dignity, worth, and value are conferred by God.”

As Christ on the cross did not lose his dignity, but in fact revealed himself fully in vulnerability, every human who is being mistreated retains the image of God that confers dignity. A society should not deny a person's dignity for any reason. This is true even if that person has acted maliciously and treated others inhumanely.<sup>12</sup> God's gift of dignity is immutable, indivisible and inseparable from our being.

Through Jesus, our relational God took on the vulnerable and finite human form of a Jewish man, a group oppressed by the Roman Empire. The Word's embodiment in concrete, finite form teaches that recognizing the multidimensional needs of human bodies is one means of honoring God's creation. Working to uphold rights is a concrete way to respond to the neighbor's need.

### **Sin breaks in**

While God's continuing intention for creation is that it should flourish, individual and systemic sin breaks in. This is evident to Christians from the Scriptures and from human experience itself. The very cry for rights and justice signals that sin abounds because dignity and value are not being honored.

### **God orders society through justice**

In the presence of sin, God preserves creation, orders society and promotes justice through the law.<sup>13</sup> When the laws of a society do not order society for the good of all or promote justice, the members of this church are compelled in their faith to address those shortcomings. Conversely, God's people participate in God's will for society when they seek just laws that safeguard human dignity and promote the common good.

This church teaches: "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."<sup>14</sup> All people of good will, not just Christians, contribute to the

---

12 ELCA "The Death Penalty," footnote 9: An important strand of ethical thought insists that each human being should be treated as an "end," not a "means," because of human dignity. Punishing an offender solely as a means to greater social safety (e.g., "making an example" of someone) can violate this principle.

13 "Church in Society," p. 3.

14 Ibid., p. 5.

common good in seeking to promote and protect human rights.

### **Key convictions about rights**

Human beings are a dynamic oneness of body, mind and spirit.<sup>15</sup> Human rights, therefore, address more than just physical or biological needs. “Human rights are there to identify, address and change conditions under which God’s will for humans is violated.”<sup>16</sup> No person inherently has more rights or fewer rights than another.

As Lutherans, we do not believe that God’s intention for abundance and flourishing is fully described by human rights. The biblical picture of God’s intention is much richer, relational, inclusive and communal. The recognition of fundamental human rights, however, serves as a safety net of critical, baseline commitments. The ELCA affirms the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as “a common universal standard of justice for living with our differences, and they give moral and legal standing to the individual in the international community.”<sup>17</sup>

A right is what justice requires in response to a particular human need.<sup>18</sup> Adapted from this church’s historical body of social teaching, the ELCA affirms the following broad categories of human rights:<sup>19</sup>

1. Humans have been created for divine relationship and have the right to engage in that relationship through such means as worship and devotional practices.

---

15 ELCA, “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor,” p. 3.

16 *Faith and Human Rights, Voices from the Lutheran Communion*, Copyright 2006 Lutheran University Press and The Lutheran World Federation, Geneva. p. 79. ([lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Documentation%2051-EN.pdf](http://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Documentation%2051-EN.pdf))

17 See “For Peace in God’s World,” p. 14 for the primary discussion. Other social documents mention human rights or presume them.

18 From “Human Rights: Doing Justice in God’s World,” Lutheran Church in America (1978), p. 3.

19 While adapted significantly, similar categories are found in statements by ELCA predecessor churches, the Lutheran Church in America’s “Human Rights: Doing Justice in God’s World” and the American Lutheran Church’s “Peace, Justice and Human Rights.” Many of these categories, likewise, are addressed through ELCA social statements.

2. Humans are creatures and creators of symbol and meaning and have the right to think and communicate freely and to be educated.
3. Humans are communal beings and have the right to the protection of foundational relationships, such as marriage and family. No one has the right to sunder or violate fundamental communal relationships or turn them into a commodity.
4. Humans are political and civic beings and have the right to equal access and participation in legal, civic and political decisions affecting them.
5. Humans are economic<sup>20</sup> beings and have the right to participate fully in an economy where resources are justly allocated with a view to sustainability. Humans may not be treated as commodities.
6. Humans are physical beings and have the right to sufficient and sustainable levels of physical goods such as water, food, shelter and health care. This includes treating creation sustainably so the next generation has sufficient physical goods.

### **III. GIVEN THESE CONVICTIONS, WHAT DO WE DO?**

---

The ELCA social statement “Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” calls upon our church to enter into the world because God is already there at work.<sup>21</sup> Individually, Christians bear the responsibility of working for human rights, justice and peace, and corporately the church is called to do the same.

---

20 “Economic” in this case is used in the sense of the Greek word “oikos,” which encompasses the concerns of everyone in a household.

21 “Church in Society,” p. 2: “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.’”

## Confession

This church acknowledges that God's people, too often, have failed to join God's work in society to protect rights and to work for the good of all. Most mainline churches in the United States were slow to support the civil rights movement and have been slow to address the ongoing rights violations experienced by people of color. It was not until 2016 that the ELCA repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, which has been used for centuries to justify the murder, enslavement, and colonization of indigenous native peoples.<sup>22</sup> Christian churches have rarely been in the forefront to gain civil rights for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer. As a public institution, the Church possesses a moral status and economic means in public sectors that often it has been reluctant to use in support of human rights.

Even now Christian people are slow to shoulder responsibility to address human rights abuses at home and abroad. Citizens of any country with a representative political system (such as the United States) bear some responsibility for consistent rights violations committed by their government. Many in the ELCA must confess we have benefited from what has been done in the name of the United States and its allies. This includes torture, mistreatment of civilians and combatants, repression of political rights, and support of unscrupulous regimes. We also are consumers who buy everyday items from computers to underwear that are produced in dangerous and inhumane conditions.

Given the availability of information today, most people know far more about human rights abuses than in the past. We cannot claim ignorance; we can only admit we chose not to see or saw and chose not to act when God's will for dignity was thwarted.

Living in one of the world's wealthiest and most powerful nations, we must acknowledge that the United States bears a special responsibility for world events. This church recognizes that, along

---

<sup>22</sup> A description of the effects of the Doctrine of Discovery may be found here: [oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/2012-02/statement-on-the-doctrine-of-discovery-and-its-enduring-impact-on-indigenous-peoples](http://oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/2012-02/statement-on-the-doctrine-of-discovery-and-its-enduring-impact-on-indigenous-peoples). The ELCA action of repudiation is found at [ELCA.org/en/Resources/Faith-and-Society](http://ELCA.org/en/Resources/Faith-and-Society) in the social policy resolution titled "Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery."

with important contributions to the movement for human rights, the United States has kept company with repressive governments by its failure to ratify rights instruments<sup>23</sup> of the international community.

We also are accountable for how our neighbors from other faiths are treated by wider society. People of faith should be allowed to practice their faith openly and without fear, and yet residents of the United States are accosted and abused simply for practicing distinctive expressions of faith.

In acknowledging these failures and the people harmed, this church repents to a gracious God and prays for courage and power to rise up anew.

### **Individual Christians engage in human rights work**

Perhaps the most important aspect of this social message is a call to engagement. Too often, we, as members of this society, are buried under the concerns of everyday life. The human rights abuses of people we don't know or understand are too remote to stir us to action.

Christians, having been freed from the anxiety that their salvation depends on obeying every law perfectly, find power to fulfill their responsibilities in the world through seeking justice for the neighbor.<sup>24</sup> The ELCA social statement "For Peace in God's World" illustrates some of the responsibilities of the Christian citizen when it comes to the international order. These include prayer for governments and efforts to hold them accountable, as well as supporting international cooperation and paying careful attention to the actions of the U.S. government.<sup>25</sup>

---

23 Rights "instruments" indicate documents relating to human rights that have authority in human rights law.

24 For example, the Large Catechism teaches in the Eighth Commandment that: "The first application of this commandment, [You should not bear false witness] then, is that all people should help their neighbors maintain their legal rights. One must not allow these rights to be thwarted or distorted but should promote and resolutely guard them, whether this person is judge or witness, no matter what the consequences may be." LC I.260; Kolb/Wengert, p. 421.

25 ELCA, "For Peace in God's World," pp. 9-10.

Every member of this church can find ways to pray for and stand in solidarity with the oppressed. Individuals can read the news, connect with organizations concerned with fostering awareness of human rights abuses and contact their elected officials to exert pressure. Following the principles of deliberation outlined later in this message, individuals also are encouraged to make space for all voices to be heard. Individuals are encouraged to examine their personal investments and spending habits in light of supporting human rights.

Christians cannot be satisfied simply with responding to injustice that has already occurred. We also are called to take actions that prevent rights abuses from happening in the first place, whether by personal intervention in injustice or publicly addressing rights abuses. Support for legal protections and means of enforcement is also our responsibility.

### **The ELCA's domestic corporate witness**

This church participates in society and teaches that social structures such as government, family and the economy are ways in which God's good intentions for the world can be realized. This church participates in social structures hopefully but critically as a public institution, as an advocate for the poor and vulnerable, and as a financial institution. As an institution, this church has a public voice at the state, federal and international level.

That advocacy holds the U.S. government accountable for rights violations at home and abroad. In particular, it is important to defend and promote the human rights and dignity of those most vulnerable to their curtailment or denial. This church also has a responsibility to exercise its financial power as an investor prudently and for the sake of our neighbor and all of creation. This power can be used to focus attention on egregious violations of human rights and to press corporate responsibility to respect human rights, whether through dialogue, advocacy or investment screens.

### **The ELCA's global corporate witness**

This church affirms the work of the international community in protecting and promoting human rights. This includes support

for international human rights institutions, non-governmental organizations, and for those engaged in defending human rights.

The United States occupies a pre-eminent position on the world stage, and its failure to accept instruments of international human rights law isolates the United States and undermines the work of the international community. The failure of the U.S. government to ratify many treaties and agreements of the United Nations calls for action on the part of U.S. citizens.<sup>26</sup>

In its pre-eminent role, the United States has the opportunity to provide economic and diplomatic leadership in the human rights work of the United Nations. All international agreements to which the U.S. becomes a party should be held accountable to internationally recognized human rights standards.

Without illusions about the shortcomings and failures of the work of the United Nations, this message expresses the ELCA's continued support for that body's mission. It also expresses the support of this church for ratification of important international human rights conventions and encourages peacemaking and peacekeeping. It urges members to lift their voices and prayers for effective monitoring and compliance.

The ELCA as a church also supports human rights around the globe in its work with global partners. In response to God's call to comfort God's people (Isaiah 40) and through the strategy of accompaniment, our church seeks to accompany those among our global partners who suffer human rights violations.<sup>27</sup> Along the way, we share their pain and fear and hear their cry for rights.

---

26 The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on Dec. 16, 1966. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court is a treaty adopted by the United Nations on July 17, 1998. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on Dec. 18, 1979. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on Nov. 20, 1989. The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance was adopted on Dec. 18, 1992, by the U.N. General Assembly. All documents can be found at [ohchr.org](http://ohchr.org).

27 The ELCA identifies five principles as guides to the strategy of accompaniment: mutual, inclusive, vulnerable, empowering and sustainable.

## **The need for deliberation and discernment**

As the concepts and vocabulary of human rights have evolved, citizens continually re-evaluate how human dignity is challenged or affirmed by a given political, cultural or economic system. History teaches that as societies change, understanding of the nature of rights belonging to groups and people can also change. Christians are called to participate in God's work in society, and we should expect to participate in history as rights are discerned, defined and defended.

Reason and human experience impart the capacity to appraise a situation, even if it is complex. Human rights are protected and promoted in the context of physical realities, such as availability of resources, and in the context of sociopolitical systems. A person's social position (i.e., male, female, White/Black male, Black/White female, heterosexual, gay, bisexual, transgender, living in wealth or in poverty) influences the resources available within a social and political structure.

There are many times when different groups of people make conflicting claims about rights. For example, one group's environmental rights may impinge on another group's chosen livelihood. One group may find its right to privacy sacrificed to a larger group's right to safety. The resolution of such claims requires the interaction of the principles below, with careful attention to the complexity of each group's position in the social and political structure. In such deliberation, this church's teaching holds that the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized must be represented and given particular and vigorous attention.<sup>28</sup>

Faith-based principles of evaluation can aid in discernment in a complex situation. The ELCA has consistently articulated the principles of sufficiency, sustainability, participation and solidarity as means to discerning the path of justice.<sup>29</sup> To summarize:

- The principle of *sufficiency* means meeting the basic needs of all humanity and all creation.

---

<sup>28</sup> This concern is evident in various social teaching documents of the ELCA, but see, for example, page 6 of "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All."

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, "Caring for Creation," "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" and "Genetics, Faith and Responsibility," pp. 6-7, 10-17, and 20-26 respectively.

- The principle of *sustainability* means providing an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.
- The principle of *participation* means all are entitled to be heard and to have their interests considered when decisions are made.
- The principle of *solidarity* means that we stand together with all of God's creation.

In a world that is marred by sin, not all rights are available to all people at all times. However, the expectation is that the most basic rights<sup>30</sup> will never be denied and the highest level of rights will be available to the greatest number of people, such as elaborated in the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

#### **IV. CONCRETE COMMITMENTS OF THIS CHURCH**

---

On the basis of ELCA teaching and in light of contemporary needs, the ELCA will:

- advocate for the U.S. government to protect and promote the equal rights of all people, as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights;
- uphold and foster human rights as described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- support international organizations such the United Nations, including its Security Council and Human Rights Council, and the International Labor Organization in working to develop and safeguard human rights;
- encourage the United States to fund the United Nations in proportion to its economic strength;

---

<sup>30</sup> By basic rights, this message means non-derogable rights. Non-derogable rights are those that cannot be revoked by a state. A listing of them may be found at [nhri.ohchr.org/EN/IHRS/TreatyBodies/Page%20Documents/Core%20Human%20Rights.pdf](http://nhri.ohchr.org/EN/IHRS/TreatyBodies/Page%20Documents/Core%20Human%20Rights.pdf).

- support the Responsibility to Protect<sup>31</sup> movement when it anticipates and protects against serious rights violations;
- support the aims of the Right to Development<sup>32</sup> as expressed in the U.N. General Assembly Resolution of December 1986;
- encourage governments and corporations to uphold the United Nation’s Protect, Respect and Remedy framework and guiding principles;
- advocate for the United States to ratify international treaties and agreements that protect human rights;
- be sensitive to the needs of indigenous peoples,<sup>33</sup> whose understandings of ownership, culture and community may be at odds with corporate notions of ownership – corporations and governments do not possess the absolute right to ignore those perspectives;
- practice accompaniment in its advocacy on human rights; and
- provide members, congregations and other ELCA entities the resources needed to deepen their understanding of and commitment to promoting human rights.

## V. CONCLUSION

---

Christians are realistic about rampant abuses of human rights, which are evidence of the reality of sin. Yet they remain convinced that God’s creative activity both bestows human dignity on every

---

31 Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is a global political commitment to end genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. It is described in paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 United Nations World Summit outcome. For more information visit [un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.html](http://un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.html).

32 The right to development declares development to be an inalienable human right and places humans at the center of development. The text of the resolution is available at [un.org/documents/ga/res/41/a41r128.htm](http://un.org/documents/ga/res/41/a41r128.htm).

33 The United States voted against the adoption of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007.

person and urges courage and action in times such as these.

Empowered by hope in the God who raised the crucified Jesus from the dead as a sign of God's ultimate victory, this church is freed to acknowledge failures and take up responsibility as individuals and in corporate witness. By means of this message, the ELCA recommits itself to the cause of human rights. The ELCA will support domestic and international human rights institutions, foster deliberation, and engage in sustained action that seek rights for any neighbors – especially the vulnerable – who are not being treated with the dignity that is God's gift.



*A social message on...*

## **Human Rights**

Copyright © 2017 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Permission is granted to reproduce this document as needed, providing each copy displays the copyright as printed above.

### **ORDERING INFORMATION**

---

Single complimentary copies of this social message may be obtained by calling: 800-638-3522, ext. 2996.

Multiple copies are available (sold in bundles of 5 at \$.50 per bundle and the cost of shipping) at [ELCA.org/resources](http://ELCA.org/resources).

A Spanish translation of this social message is available online at [ELCA.org/socialmessages](http://ELCA.org/socialmessages) or by calling 800-638-3822.

Una traducción española es accesible\*\* en línea [ELCA.org/socialstatements](http://ELCA.org/socialstatements) o llamando 800-638-3522.

Find this and all ELCA social statements and messages online at [ELCA.org/socialmessages](http://ELCA.org/socialmessages).



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.



PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

ELCAOB1022