



Social Statements

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

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"Religious liberty" is to be distinguished from "Christian freedom." "Christian freedom" is a theological term describing the gift of God which is received by faith and which cannot be destroyed by any earthly authority. It refers to the freedom of the believer from bondage to law, death and the demonic principalities which enslave everyone but are overcome by God's deed in Jesus Christ. "Christian freedom" may be experienced by prisoners or the oppressed and be unknown to persons in places of power.

"Religious liberty," on the other hand, is used in this document as a political term describing one major aspect of civil liberty in the United States. "Civil liberty" includes also such freedoms as those of speech, press and assembly, and is implemented by legislative enactments, which require for their effectiveness an organized civil community which is willing and able to enforce them impartially.

Christian faith asserts that religious liberty is rooted in our creation in the image of God and in God's continuing activity in the created world. Its validity in general society is based on the moral knowledge of all persons, which enables them to perform good deeds and pursue truth and justice. But we are creatures to whom God speaks and from whom God expects a response. This is essential to our humanity. To deny religious liberty and other civil liberties, therefore, threatens to dehumanize us all.

Christian faith asserts that God will not force anyone into communion with God. If, then, God refuses to impose divine will on humanity, then persons exceed their prerogatives if they try to use coercion of any kind on one another to obtain religious conformity. Religious liberty for all is thus not only a demand of civil justice but also an aid to our response to the Christian gospel.

Underlying all the issues of religious liberty are the divergent beliefs, feelings and attitudes of persons and groups toward each other. Strains develop from tensions at this level as well as from the conflicts which are in full view. Indeed, the constitutional guarantees which protect persons from overt

acts of religious discrimination rest on and find their strength in a broad-based appreciation of the need for mutual respect among divergent persons and groups.

The record of the Christian Church and of individual Christians in fostering a climate of interreligious understanding has not always been exemplary. Far too often professions of loyalty to the principle of religious liberty have been betrayed by actions or attitudes grounded in prejudice. There have been times when the story has been one of vicious intolerance, suffering and death. Certainly some of the feelings which have contributed to these periods of tragedy are present in one form or another in church members today. They are aroused and perpetuated, not only by actual differences of belief or practice, but also by stereotyped impressions which people tend to have of those who differ from them.

AFFIRMATIONS

1. Religious liberty includes the right of a person, whether a believer in God or a nonbeliever,
 - a. to be immune from coercion to participate in religious acts or affirmations;
 - b. to worship in accordance with the faith and ritual of one's group, even in ways which appear curious or offensive to others, so long as the methods used are not legally defined as dangerous to the individual or the community; or not to worship if that is the choice;
 - c. to witness to one's faith by the spoken and written word and by deeds of service; and to seek to win others to that faith in full recognition of their freedom to accept or reject;
 - d. to worship or not worship in the home and to provide or not provide religious instruction to one's children.
2. Religious liberty includes the right of a church or religious organization as a corporate body,
 - a. to conduct its internal affairs without interference by government or any other person or group, except where government is performing its legitimate functions of promoting such public interests as health, safety and justice;
 - b. to organize for such purposes as conducting public worship, preaching and administering the sacraments, and engaging in social ministry, missions, evangelism and education;
 - c. to give voice to its conscience on matters of public concern, whether from the pulpit, through formal resolutions or through other forms of communication;
 - d. to hold and manage property and to engage in institutional enterprises which are deemed appropriate for the fulfillment of these purposes.

3. Religious liberty is not an absolute right; in every situation it must be weighed against other values before a decision is made. The religious liberty of a person or group may be limited by government only on the basis of an important and compelling public interest. Nothing less than a serious and immediately threatened violation of other basic human rights should warrant restrictions on religious liberty.
4. The exercise of religious liberty depends on specific legislative enactments and their administration. This means that the way in which the civil community and its laws operate is of crucial importance to the actualization of religious and other liberties. Christians should strengthen and uphold government when it maintains in fact the freedom and welfare of all people in a just and equitable manner. The weakening of civil authority in a democratic society is more likely to undermine liberties than to produce them. Christians ought also insist on the active affirmation of the rights of all citizens as a check against the ever-present tendency to abuse of authority by the state or other structures of power.
5. Religious liberty is constitutionally guaranteed in the United States. Nevertheless, the prejudicial feelings and attitudes of individuals and groups may not only threaten the exercise of religious liberty but subvert its constitutional guarantees. The maintenance of religious diversity requires a general public recognition, not that all religions are equally valid, but that all enjoy equal status before the law. Such general public recognition, however, is possible only when persons and groups, without compromising their own convictions, respect the integrity of the convictions of others and avoid hostility when their efforts to win others to their positions are rejected. The church, admitting its failures in the past, should do all in its power to develop understanding among those with divergent points of view, to oppose prejudice and intolerance wherever they may be found, and to deal creatively with the real tensions which exist.

A CALL

In accordance with this statement the Lutheran Church in America

- A. Lays upon the consciences of its members, as they witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the need to understand their own beliefs and convictions, to be sensitive to the beliefs and convictions of those who differ from them, to seek to win others to their position only by persuasion and example, and to resist the temptation to respond to rebuffs with hostility.
- B. Affirms the right of everyone to free expression of his or her faith, especially in public worship and witness to others; and asserts its concern for every violation of religious liberty, wherever it occurs.

- C. Acknowledges the crucial importance of the state in the realization of religious and other liberties and declares its support of the proper exercise of governmental power to that end.
- D. Urges its congregations and their members to meet religious intolerance and hostility with understanding, and to provide concrete opportunities for communication among opposing points of view.
- E. Commends agencies of the church which have developed programs and publications to help its people understand other religious groups; encourages them to continue and expand such efforts; and calls on all agencies carefully and continually to scrutinize their educational and promotional materials for references which tend to foster intolerance by disparaging other religious groups.
- F. Declares its right and duty to address government and the general community, both through its members and through its corporate forms, not only in its own interest but especially in the interest of the welfare of all people.
- G. Calls upon its members and congregations to speak and act specifically in application of these principles.