



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Regarding the Question of Vaccination and of Individual Religious Objections to Required Vaccination

Summary:

*ELCA leaders have encouraged participation in vaccination programs as a primary means to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no specific ELCA policy resolution dedicated to vaccination, but in the Lutheran tradition and in ELCA teaching there is no evident basis for religious exemption. On the contrary both the Lutheran heritage and ELCA social teaching documents, such as *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor* (elca.org/socialstatements) urge participation in public health efforts because health is a shared endeavor. There can be medical exemptions, of course.*

Selections from ELCA social teaching

The primary source is [Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor](#) (CH:OSE)

1) This church supports “a comprehensive approach to health care as a shared endeavor among individuals, churches, government, and the wider society. The central theme in *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor* is evident in the title--health is a shared endeavor. Health implications go beyond the domain of “my” personal body and rights. This comes into play because the health of the whole community is connected to each person’s health. My health is related to yours; your health is related to mine.

2) “When we understand health in this larger context, we realize that we cannot be healthy by ourselves.” Rather, it is a moral responsibility, grounded in loving the neighbor, to encourage the good health of all through our ways of living together and through supporting those who provide all forms of health care services and healing. (4)

3) “Health as a shared endeavor makes public health services, which focus on the population as a whole, the foundation for any health care system.” This commitment urges moral and financial support for services undertaken “on behalf of the entire community to prevent epidemics, limit threats to health, promote healthy behavior, reduce injuries, assist in recovery from disasters, and ensure that people have access to needed services. Governments have an obligation to provide or organize many of these services, but all services depend on active collaboration with the entire community.” (13)

The statement [*Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility*](#) also touches on responding to global health issues.

“The ELCA calls upon individuals, agencies, organizations, corporations, and governments to pursue goals, set policies or establish practices that give priority to global health issues and needs, particularly those which may benefit by genetic research, even when the economic return is small...” (28)

About religious exemptions in general: The ELCA to date has not addressed the breadth of questions around religious exemption, except in support of conscientious objection to military service. The question of religious exemption, however, is under study as part of the development of a social statement on church, state, and civic participation. While one cannot anticipate what this church will conclude, predecessor body documents provide some clues in that they are opposed to broad religious exemptions. In addition, historical Lutheran thinking has encouraged use of medical means and includes no history of objection to or exemption from the use of medicine, such as that found among Jehovah’s Witnesses or Christian Scientists.

The Lutheran tradition

In Lutheran teaching, historically, medicine is considered a gift of God for the good of the community. This is true whether it concerns individual medical treatment or when established by medical authorities in civil society and government. A little discussed aspect of the Reformation is its abandonment of the church’s privilege in the 16th century to be exempted from rules and regulations established by appropriate authorities in government. The ELCA certainly affirms the 1st amendment in the Bill of Rights but has never drawn upon that source for exemptions on public health care issues.

See, for instance, Luther on fleeing “...a Deadly Plague”:

“Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.”

From Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 119–38. The [whole treatise](#) is conveniently republished on Christianity Today, accessed September 1, 2021 .