



VIOLENCE
IN
TELEVISION
PROGRAMMING

A statement adopted by the Fifth General Convention
of The American Lutheran Church, October 1970

VIOLENCE IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

(Adopted by the Fifth General Convention of The American Lutheran Church, October 21-27, 1970, "as a statement expressing the judgment and corporate conviction of The American Lutheran Church as its contribution to the discussions seeking an informed solution to a difficult problem of contemporary life and society.")

A. Regarding Violence

1. We assume that most members of The American Lutheran Church define "violence" as essentially the "amoral aggressive use of physical force, bringing bodily injury to persons or damage to or destruction of their property." We share their concern over the possible effects which the portrayal of violence may have upon the attitudes and actions of viewers and upon social values.

2. We believe, further, that the concept of violence should be extended to include (1) psychic injury, (2) any systematic degradation or dehumanization of any persons or classes of persons, as well as (3) any systematic exclusion from or denial of opportunity to persons on account of their race, religion, national origin, or socio-economic status, and (4) the severely disproportionate depictions of life, which lead to false and misleading conceptions of reality.

3. Violence is essentially a poor and ineffective, even self-defeating, way of handling conflict between persons and groups. It is a process which actually can become socially destructive. It may lead to insensitivity to the problems and sufferings of others, and to an immunization of people and society against the just claims of others upon them. Rather, we search for and advocate alternate patterns of relationships which build upon love and concern, such alternate patterns serving to redirect man's aggressive drives and rechannel his frustrations.

4. Yet, we recognize that at least the threat to use force may be necessary for a just social order — and that the threat to use must be credible, must even be exercised to be fully credible. But, force thus used as a last

resort, either as a means of maintaining order or of securing and preserving cherished values, appears to sanction the use of violence and stimulates violent reaction. Any realistic approach to violence on television must take into account a balanced, whole, unfragmented analysis of man's nature and his capabilities as well as the requirements of an orderly, effectively-functioning society.

B. Regarding Television

5. We see television as a powerful social force, an informative, values-reinforcing, ideas-giving medium, with recreational and escapist possibilities.

6. We distinguish between the actual and the fictional or formula-fitting, "stylized," portrayals of violence. We believe that the two have different probable effects. We are inclined to hold that the more closely the viewer perceives the television picture as portraying a real situation, the more likely it is to affect his attitudes and behavior.

7. As we seek to distinguish between the actual and the fictional we seek criteria to guide such distinctions. Concerning the reporting of actual events, we stress the need for representative accuracy, and for balancing the importance of the right of public access to information against the dangers of possibly inflaming the issue in conflict and of invading the privacy of the persons involved. In any fictionalized or formula-fitting (stylized) programs, we underscore the need for the sense of proportion, in relation both to other programming and to life as a whole. We highlight the urgency of developing portrayals of other responses to injustice and frustration, and of ways of handling conflict more positively than through the violence situations usually portrayed. Our goal in urging this is not to protect people from reality, but to avoid one-sided distortions of reality.

8. We accept the general assumption that television has a significant effect on the attitudes and behavior of persons. We believe that this effect is so subtle and indirect that currently available research methodology cannot precisely measure its impact. We know, of course, that television is not the only influencer of personal attitudes and behavior. We sense that it is the response of some trusted person who helps interpret what is seen and heard that becomes a significant factor, particularly for the child. From our understanding of current research findings we agree that television violence may have a mixed effect, with either constructive or destructive consequences. It may prompt corrective action to end the injustices which bred the violence. But sometimes, as the National Commission on Violence concluded, "Violence on television encourages violent forms of behavior, and fosters moral and social values about violence in daily life which are unacceptable in a civilized society." Neither categorical rejection nor endorsement of violence on television appears to be a valid response.

9. We underscore the need for more research, done under a variety of auspices, which will provide more accurate information on the effects of television viewing upon personal attitudes, personal behavior, and the prevailing social climate. Meanwhile, we believe that constructive action

is needed now, and that such constructive action must take place on the basis of currently-informed judgment, credible hypotheses, and the best-available evidence presently at hand.

10. Whatever our judgments on the effects of television, we recognize that there are many in the broadcasting industry who are doing all they can to serve both the expressed desires of viewers and the genuine public interest. These constructive elements want to see television used to its optimum social potential, not abused either for narrow self-interest, the degradation of persons or groups, or the destruction of society. Such constructive elements, represented especially in leadership persons, we believe require our support, encouragement, and commendation.

11. Television, however, operates in the public domain. Society cannot rely for its control solely on the good intentions of those in the television industry. Therefore, the many interests, elements, and organizations in society need to be involved in clarifying the goals and objectives, defining the standards, and watching over the performance of television. We favor the idea of a Citizens' Commission on Television, a National Council on Broadcasting Excellence, or some similar representative body, however it might be constituted, which would have powers to influence the work and decisions of the Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, and the industry.

C. Regarding Person and Community

12. We regard the television viewer — the perceiver — as a key. All persons do not perceive the same image on the television screen in the same way. Therefore, all programs do not have the same impact. Somehow we must take the perceiver, his age and maturity, his understanding of reality, and the experiences he brings to his perception, into account before we can evaluate the effects of television. We understand, too, that an important element the perceiver brings from his experiences is his own image and picture of himself as a person, in his own right and in relation to others.

13. We express our concern for the values which television espouses or portrays. Many persons within The American Lutheran Church react unfavorably to the false standards, the false values, the false images, and the disproportions which television so often portrays. We feel that television furthers many misconceptions and wrong expectations about the realities of life both in its regular programs and in its commercials. We sense that these discrepancies between what is pictured and what is typical, or indeed the differences between *what is* and *what ought to be*, may be productive of violence even though in and of themselves they picture no violence.

14. We agree that family and group viewing (particularly group viewing under congregational auspices), and the resultant discussions, evaluation, and discriminating valuation of television, need to be fostered. We see the study of various sources of advance information regarding television programming as being an essential tool in this task. We encourage the use of existing sources of information, such as *Saturday Review*, *TV Guide*,

and the Television Information Office, toward this goal. We strongly encourage turning sets off and leaving them off when there is no program which merits viewing. Children especially need this evidence of disciplined viewing, television ought not be made into a babysitter. We urge expressions of appreciation to broadcasters and sponsors for responsible programming.

D. Regarding the Church in Its Approach to Television as a Social Force

15. The church needs to remember and build upon its mediating, reconciling role. Cutting across all groups in society, it can have a positive healing influence unlike that of any other organization. It has a prophetic role, which is an essential aspect of its role as servant of the Living Lord. In this spirit we propose that the Church Council take action to:

a. Encourage study throughout the districts, conferences, and parishes of The American Lutheran Church, of the broad theological, psychological, and sociological implications of "the climate of violence" which is widely assumed to be growing in intensity in contemporary society. Such study should enlist competent scholars and research specialists able to relate existing data and trends to conditions as they prevail, community by community, and to stimulate interest, concern, and responsible action on the part of church members.

b. Encourage study, at all appropriate levels, of television as a social force capable through its programming of exerting immeasurable influence upon society. Such study should take into account the relative potential of various styles and forms of program content (fictional drama, fantasy, factual documentary, news, music, etc.), relating each to its positive or negative potential in the various categories of probable audiences.

c. Encourage members of The American Lutheran Church to avail themselves of such documentary specials, outstanding motion pictures, and other significant television programming as are found to be stimulating, informative, and educational; to the end that

(1) families be admonished to give guidance and leadership to home exposure to television fare, rather than permitting hap-
penstance, unsupervised viewing of whatever may be offered;

(2) small group discussion sessions be encouraged to arrange for planned participation and mutual sharing under local parish auspices;

(3) available sources of advance programming information be publicized for planned utilization by parish group leaders; and

(4) church members be encouraged to build responsive relationships with local television managements, either in appreciation for wholesome programming, or in constructive criticism where warranted.

d. Express appreciation on behalf of The American Lutheran Church to television network officials, and other leaders of the industry at the national level, for their efforts to provide wholesome program materials

for their massive audiences, to reduce the portrayals of violence in television programming and to strip such portrayals of their glamour, and to develop more stringent self-regulatory codes in the best interests of general audience viewing.

e. Encourage representatives of the national television industry to undertake creative new production enterprises designed to enrich program content for whole family viewing, for children's viewing and possible viewing by other specialized audiences on appropriate time schedules not necessarily identical with present scheduling concepts.

f. Encourage the television industry at the national level to expand its research and to encourage other independent research into the social and psychological effectiveness of its output.

g. Approve in principle current public efforts to establish a strong national commission, council, or agency representative of major segments of the general public for the purpose of effectively safeguarding the basic rights, interests, and concerns of the American public, such a body to be so constituted as to be capable of exerting influence upon Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, and the television industry.

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