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A Social Statement on: Abortion

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



A Social Statement on:

ABORTION¹

This social teaching statement was adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote at the second biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in Orlando, Florida, August 28-September 4, 1991.

I. OUR UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN CHRIST

A. The Basis of Our Unity

We in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are united with all human beings and the whole creation because God has created us and all that exists.

We are united in Christ with all Christians in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

As Lutherans we are united in our confession that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We believe that the Bible is the authoritative source and norm for Christian faith and life.

B. The Gift of Our Diversity

Because we are united in Christ through faith, we have both the freedom and the obligation to engage in serious deliberation on moral matters.

Induced abortion, the act of intentionally terminating a developing life in the womb, is one of the issues about which members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have serious differences. These differences are also found within society.

1. The issue of abortion was addressed by the Lutheran Church in America in its social statement, *Sex, Marriage, and Family* (1970) and in a 1978 clarifying minute. The American Lutheran Church addressed this issue in a series of statements in 1974, 1976, and 1980.

Differences hold promise or peril. Our differences are deep and potentially divisive. However, they are also a gift that can lead us into constructive conversation about our faith and its implications for our life in the world.

C. Talking about Our Differences

The topic of abortion evokes strong and varied convictions about the social order, the roles of women and men, human life and human responsibility, freedom and limits, sexual morality, and the significance of children in our lives. It involves powerful feelings that are based on different life experiences and interpretations of Christian faith and life in the world. If we are to take our differences seriously, we must learn how to talk about them in ways that do justice to our diversity.

The language used in discussing abortion should ignore neither the value of unborn life nor the value of the woman and her other relationships. It should neither obscure the moral seriousness of the decision faced by the woman nor hide the moral value of the newly conceived life. Nor is it helpful to use the language of 'rights' in absolute ways that imply that no other significant moral claims intrude. A developing life in the womb does not have an absolute right to be born, nor does a pregnant woman have an absolute right to terminate a pregnancy. The concern for both the life of the woman and the developing life in her womb expresses a common commitment to life. This requires that we move beyond the usual 'pro-life' versus 'pro-choice' language in discussing abortion.

II. CONVICTIONS OF OUR FAITH

Some basic faith convictions undergird our judgments on abortion:

- Human beings, created in God's image as male and female (Genesis 1:27-28), are persons of intrinsic value and dignity. Human beings live in community, with responsibility and accountability to God, self, and others. Women, faced with unintended pregnancies, are called to be good stewards of life by making responsible decisions in light of these relationships. Women and men share equally in the responsibility and accountability for procreation, although it is women who are most intimately affected by decisions about abortion.
- All of life is a mysterious, awesome gift of God. Biblical passages express the God-given mystery of creation (Psalm 139; Jeremiah 1:5; Isaiah 40:26ff; Luke 1:41; Acts 17:24-25). God creates life, redeems it through Jesus Christ, and fulfills it in the coming of the reign of God. Personal human life is a part of this divine drama. God creates a human being through complex genetic, physiological, and relational developments.² Human life in all phases of its development is God-given and, therefore, has intrinsic value, worth, and dignity. Guided by

God's Law, which orders and preserves life, human beings are called to respect and care for the life that God gives.

- What God has created has become corrupted by sin. Sin is both a condition of alienation from God and the acts that issue from this condition. Human judgments, actions, organizations, and practices are marked by a distortion of God's will and purpose for life. Sin is evident in the many ways human lives are not given equal respect or treated with high value, but are subject to abuse, violence, and neglect by individuals, groups, and entire societies. We are caught up in a web of sin in which we both sin and are sinned against.
- God calls us to repentance, renewal, and responsible living. We have 'died to sin' through our Baptism into Christ and through him are raised to new life (Romans 6:2ff). We are forgiven and sustained through God's grace. Our faith is to be active in love and our freedom used for the benefit of one another. This is the fruit of the Spirit manifest in our lives. We are to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).
- As a community of forgiven sinners, justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we are empowered so that we might do what is effective in serving the needs of the neighbor. Inspired by Jesus' own ministry, our love for neighbor embraces especially those who are most vulnerable, including both the pregnant woman and the life in her womb.

III. THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY SUPPORTIVE OF LIFE

Because we believe that God is the creator of life, the number of induced abortions is a source of deep concern to this church. We mourn the loss of life that God has created.^A The strong Christian presumption is to preserve and protect

2. Embryology provides insight into the complex mystery of God's creative activity. How we interpret and evaluate this data makes a difference in how we as Christians make decisions regarding abortion:

The genetic material from the egg and sperm unite at the point of fertilization and form a unique, undifferentiated, loose cluster of cells. From 40-75 percent of these zygotes spontaneously fail to implant in the uterus. After implantation occurs at about two weeks after fertilization, the complex process of developmental differentiation begins, with a close symbiotic relationship between the embryo and the mother's body. At about the eighth week, the embryo becomes a fetus. Integrated brain functioning begins to emerge at about the tenth week, followed by the increasingly complex emergence of functional, behavioral, and eventually psychic individuality. The social aspect emerges through recognition by and relation with others, most dramatically as birth is approached. The fetus becomes viable when it is capable of surviving disconnected from the placenta. Depending upon technological supports, this can occur at 24 weeks if not earlier.

life. Abortion ought to be an option only of last resort. Therefore, as a church we seek to reduce the need to turn to abortion as the answer to unintended pregnancies.^B

We also deplore the circumstances that lead a woman to consider abortion as the best option available to her. We are moved particularly by the anguish of women who face unwanted pregnancies alone. The panic and isolation of such pregnancies, even in the best of circumstances, can be traumatic. Poverty, lack of supportive relationships, immaturity, oppressive social realities, sexism, and racism can intensify her sense of powerlessness. The prospect of having and caring for a child can seem overwhelming.

We confess our sin as a community of faith.^C We often have fallen short in respecting God's gift of life and in providing conditions more conducive for bringing new life into the world.

As a community of faith we seek to live out our support for life in all its dimensions. We are committed to supporting those who face problematic pregnancies in ways that effectively address their immediate as well as long-term needs. This can include financial, nutritional, medical, educational, social, and psychological, as well as spiritual support.

Our ministry of hospitality to all people ought to include women who have had abortions, women who are considering abortions, children, families, and those who bear and raise children under all kinds of circumstances. This should be reflected throughout congregational life and church policy. Congregations are encouraged to support day-care centers and nurseries in their facilities. Services and shelter should be provided, especially to enable young mothers and fathers to continue their education and care for their children. Members should also be encouraged to become foster and/or adoptive parents. By our policies and practices as a church we need to indicate that we are truly supportive of children through the long years after, and not only before, they are born.

Marriage is the appropriate context for sexual intercourse. This continues to be the position of this church. We affirm that the goodness of sexual intercourse goes beyond its procreative purpose.³ Whenever sexual intercourse occurs apart from the intent to conceive, the use of contraceptives is the responsibility of the man and of the woman.

3. These positions are represented in predecessor social statements of the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America. Because a social statement on human sexuality is expected to be considered by this church in 1993, matters of sexuality are not dealt with at length in this statement.

Our congregations and church schools ought to provide sex education in the context of the Christian faith. Such education, beginning in the elementary years, needs to emphasize values such as responsibility, mutuality, and abstinence from sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Parents should also be prepared to teach sexual responsibility to their children in the home. It is especially important that young men and young women be taught to exercise their sexuality responsibly.

Because this church recognizes parenthood as a vocation that women and men share, we should encourage and educate males, from an early age, to assume more responsibility for raising children. Congregations should provide parenting classes and support groups for fathers and for mothers.

In keeping with our commitment to become communities that are truly life-affirming, this church challenges the following life-degrading attitudes that permeate the prevailing culture and may contribute to the high incidence of abortion: messages in the media and elsewhere that encourage irresponsible sexual activity; materialism, individualism, and excessive concern for self-interest; the desire for ‘perfect’ children, and treating those who are not as if they were ‘disposable’; attitudes and practices that are inhospitable to children and to the women who bear them; low regard of human life, especially the lives of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, or Native Americans, and of many women and children who are poor.

Through these and other efforts, we as a church seek to reduce the need to turn to abortion as the answer to unintended pregnancies.

IV. GUIDANCE IN MAKING DECISIONS REGARDING UNINTENDED PREGNANCIES

We are called to be a compassionate community, praying and standing with those who struggle with decisions regarding unintended pregnancies. We encourage women and men to seek support and counsel from family members, pastors, professionals, and confidants whom they trust and respect. Church members must not only be aware of the moral complexity of the situation, but be able and willing to listen and walk with women and men through the process of decision-making, healing, and renewal, a process that may include feelings such as grief, guilt, relief, denial, regret, or anger.^D

Pastors and other members of this church should be trained to provide counsel that is competent and respectful of the integrity of the woman, the man, and others who may be involved in these decisions. The professional expertise of the church’s social ministry organizations should also be utilized. It is important that those who counsel persons faced with unintended pregnancies respect how deeply the woman’s pregnancy involves her whole person — body, mind and spirit — in

relation to all the commitments that comprise her stewardship of life. Counsellors should seek to call forth her power to act responsibly after prayerful reflection upon all factors involved.

Regardless of the decisions, our pastoral response must be a gracious affirmation of the value of women's lives and assistance in dealing with ongoing implications of their decisions for their own well-being and their relationships.

A. Continuing the Pregnancy

Because of the Christian presumption to preserve and protect life, this church, in most circumstances, encourages women with unintended pregnancies to continue the pregnancy. Faith and trust in God's promises has the power to sustain people in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In each set of circumstances, there must also be a realistic assessment of what will be necessary to bear, nurture, and provide for children over the long-term, and what resources are available or need to be provided for this purpose. The needs of children are a constant. The parenting arrangements through which these needs are met may vary. If it is not possible for both parents to raise the child, this might be done by one parent, by the extended family, or by foster or adoptive parents.

This church encourages and seeks to support adoption as a positive option to abortion. Because adoption is an increasingly more open process today, it generally is easier for birth parents to have a role in selecting the adoptive parents and in maintaining some contact with the child. These possibilities can be helpful in the grieving process that is likely to occur when birth parent(s) choose to place the child for adoption after having bonded with the child during pregnancy. Care needs to be taken in selecting adoption processes that do not exploit but safeguard the welfare of all parties involved. At the same time, we recognize that there are unintended pregnancies for which adoption is not an acceptable option.

We encourage and seek to make it possible for people of diverse cultural and racial backgrounds and with limited financial means to adopt children. We encourage those who contemplate adopting to consider adopting children with special needs. Mothers and fathers choosing to place their children for adoption should be affirmed and supported in view of society's prejudices against such decisions.

B. Ending a Pregnancy

This church recognizes that there can be sound reasons for ending a pregnancy through induced abortion. The following provides guidance for those considering such a decision. We recognize that conscientious decisions need to be made in re-

lation to difficult circumstances that vary greatly. What is determined to be a morally responsible decision in one situation may not be in another. In reflecting ethically on what should be done in the case of an unintended pregnancy, consideration should be given to the status and condition of the life in the womb. We also need to consider the conditions under which the pregnancy occurred and the implications of the pregnancy for the woman's life.

An abortion is morally responsible in those cases in which continuation of a pregnancy presents a clear threat to the physical life of the woman.

A woman should not be morally obligated to carry the resulting pregnancy to term if the pregnancy occurs when both parties do not participate willingly in sexual intercourse.^E This is especially true in cases of rape and incest. This can also be the case in some situations in which women are so dominated and oppressed that they have no choice regarding sexual intercourse and little access to contraceptives. Some conceptions occur under dehumanizing conditions that are contrary to God's purposes.

There are circumstances of extreme fetal abnormality, which will result in severe suffering and very early death of an infant. In such cases, after competent medical consultations, the parent(s) may responsibly choose to terminate the pregnancy. Whether they choose to continue or to end such pregnancies, this church supports the parent(s) with compassion, recognizing the struggle involved in the decision.

Although abortion raises significant moral issues at any stage of fetal development, the closer the life in the womb comes to full term the more serious such issues become.^F When a child can survive outside a womb, it becomes possible for other people, and not only the mother, to nourish and care for the child. This church opposes ending intrauterine life when a fetus is developed enough to live outside a uterus with the aid of reasonable and necessary technology. If a pregnancy needs to be interrupted after this point, every reasonable and necessary effort should be made to support this life, unless there are lethal fetal abnormalities indicating that the prospective newborn will die very soon.

Our biblical and confessional commitments provide the basis for us to continue deliberating together on the moral issues related to these decisions. We have the responsibility to make the best possible decisions in light of the information available to us and our sense of accountability to God, neighbor, and self. In these decisions, we must ultimately rely on the grace of God.

V. PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES RELATED TO ABORTION

The purpose of law is to protect life and liberty, and to provide for the general

welfare of society. One of the clearest ways in which a society both expresses its attitudes and values, and shapes them, is through law. Therefore, the church's position on abortion must include guidance for the political decisions whereby justice is sought in the community, from before the pregnancy to long afterward.

What is legal is not necessarily moral, and what is moral should not necessarily be enacted into law. Laws cannot enforce Christian love, but in principle and application they should be just. Christians as citizens and this church as an institution should join with others to advocate for and support just laws and to work to change those, which are unjust. In our attempts to influence the shaping of public policy, we should not disregard the rights of others, but work faithfully through the public processes by which justice is sought for all.

A. Prevention of Unintended Pregnancies

Prevention of unintended pregnancies is crucial in lessening the number of abortions. In addition to efforts within church and home, this church supports appropriate forms of sex education in schools, community pregnancy prevention programs, and parenting preparation classes. We recognize the need for contraceptives to be available, for voluntary sterilization to be considered, and for research and development of new forms of contraception.

B. Support for Life after Birth

Many women choose abortion in a desperate attempt to survive in a hostile social environment. In order to affirm the value of life and reduce the number of abortions, it is essential for us as a church to work to improve support for life in society.

Greater social responsibility for the care, welfare, and education of children and families is needed through such measures as access to quality, affordable health care, child care, and housing. Sufficient income support for families needs to be provided by employers, or, in the case of the unemployed, through government assistance. As a society we need to provide increased support for education, nutrition, and services that protect children from abuse and neglect.^G

Because parenthood is a vocation that women and men share, this church supports public and private initiatives to provide adequate maternity and paternity leaves, greater flexibility in the work place, and efforts to correct the disparity between the incomes of men and women.

The law must hold both parents responsible for the financial support of their children.

C. The Regulation of Abortion

Members of this church hold different opinions about the role and extent of public law and regulation in relation to abortion. The spectrum of disagreement ranges from those who believe all abortions should be prohibited by law, except to save the life of the mother, to those who oppose any law seeking to regulate abortion, except to protect the health and safety of the woman. For some, the question of pregnancy and abortion is not a matter for governmental interference, but a matter of religious liberty and freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment. For others, the law's function in protecting life needs to include the life in the womb. Some stress the limited ability of law to stop abortions, and contend that there is increased danger to women if abortions are made illegal. They maintain that regulation takes away a woman's freedom to choose abortion as well as her freedom to affirm life by choosing to bear the child. Still others see the need to work for laws that both protect life in the womb to a greater degree and protect women's freedom to choose abortion in certain circumstances.

The position of this church is that government has a legitimate role in regulating abortion. A major challenge is to formulate policy regarding abortion that will have sufficient consensus to be enforceable. Furthermore, any proposed regulation should contribute toward the intended goals without generating problems worse than those it seeks to address.

In the case of abortion, public policy has a double challenge. One is to be effective in protecting prenatal life. The other is to protect the dignity of women and their freedom to make responsible decisions in difficult situations. Pursuing those ends is particularly formidable because our society is so divided on this issue, and because women, people of color, and those of low income are so under-represented in legislative and judicial processes. In its advocacy regarding these issues, this church should exert every effort to see that the needs of those most directly affected, particularly the pregnant woman and the life in her womb, are seriously considered in the political process.

Laws should be enacted and enforced justly for the preservation and enhancement of life, and should avoid unduly encumbering or endangering the lives of women.

Because of our conviction that both the life of the woman and the life in her womb must be respected by law, this church opposes:

- the total lack of regulation of abortion;
- legislation that would outlaw abortion in all circumstances;
- laws that prevent access to information about all options available to women faced with unintended pregnancies;
- laws that deny access to safe and affordable services for morally justifiable

- abortions;
- mandatory or coerced abortion or sterilization;
- laws that prevent couples from practicing contraception;
- laws that are primarily intended to harass those contemplating or deciding for an abortion.

The position of this church is that, in cases where the life of the mother is threatened, where pregnancy results from rape or incest, or where the embryo or fetus has lethal abnormalities incompatible with life, abortion prior to viability should not be prohibited by law or by lack of public funding of abortions for low income women. On the other hand, this church supports legislation that prohibits abortions that are performed after the fetus is determined to be viable, except when the mother's life is threatened or when lethal abnormalities indicate the prospective newborn will die very soon.

Beyond these situations, this church neither supports nor opposes laws prohibiting abortion.

D. Some Issues Requiring Further Deliberation

It is the position of this church that further deliberation is needed on such questions as whether consultation with the spouse or partner should be required, whether and how parental consent should be required for a minor seeking an abortion, and whether public funds should be used to pay for abortions.

On the issue of public funding of abortions, two important values are in conflict—the concern for equity of access to legal medical services, and the concern that people's tax money not be used to pay for what some people consider profoundly wrong. While we strongly affirm family communication and support, the law should recognize that in some cases husband or partner involvement in the decision could be unwise or dangerous (e.g., if the relationship is broken or violent). If a law requires parental consent when the woman is a minor, it should specify other trusted adults as alternatives if parental involvement is inappropriate or unsafe.

It is through the public processes of our society that the common good is sought for all. This church encourages its members to participate in the public debate on abortion in a spirit of respect for those with whom they differ. Committed to a process of raising and deliberating the difficult and unresolved questions, this church encourages its members, informed by faith understandings and by their conscience, to decide and act on this issue in ways that are responsive to God and to the needs of the neighbor.

In conclusion, the church's role in society begins long before and extends far beyond legislative regulation. It seeks to shape attitudes and values that affirm people in whatever circumstances they find themselves. Its pastoral care, compassionate outreach, and life-sustaining assistance are crucial in supporting those who bear children, as well as those who choose not to do so. Through these and other means the people of God seek to be truly supportive of life.

Social teaching statements provide an analysis and interpretation of an issue, set forth basic theological and ethical perspectives related to it, and offer guidance for the corporate Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its individual members. They also illustrate the implications of their teaching for the social practice of this church. In their use as teaching documents, their authority is persuasive, not coercive. (From Social Statements in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, adopted by the 1989 Churchwide Assembly, which also specifies that an addendum "be added to those statements that elicit significant division in the Churchwide Assembly summarizing dissenting points of view.")

Addendum

The following amendments (at the points indicated in the text) received significant support at the Churchwide Assembly but they did not receive the vote needed for approval:

- A—"... and oppose induced abortion as a method of birth control."
- B—"... and thereby the number of abortions."
- C—to expand the paragraph as follows: "We recognize that the violation or the taking of human life in any way is not in accord with God's ultimate will for creation and therefore sinful. We confess our sin as a community of faith. All who participate in this decision must be guided by the theological principles of 'tragic last option' or 'greater good,' which acknowledges that God has given to humankind the gift of discernment. We often have fallen short"
- D—to insert a new paragraph at this point: "The support given by members of this church will seek to witness to the scriptural norm that God is the creator and preserver of life. This church, and especially the pastors, will carry out its ministry with both God's Law and God's Gospel, and proclaim forgiveness and new life to all who are troubled and penitent."
- E—"A woman should not be morally obligated to carry the resulting pregnancy to term if the pregnancy occurs in cases of rape and incest."
- F—"Abortion is not acceptable later than the first trimester."
- G—"The Church must work vigorously to support state and national legislation to provide free prenatal and maternity care to women whose medical needs are not adequately met through medical insurance."

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