

A Policy on How the Church Addresses Social Issues

This paper was prepared by the ELCIC Division for Church and Society and adopted by the National Church Council, April, 1991 as a policy of the ELCIC.

A Servant Church

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, {17} and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: {18} "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, {19} to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." {20} And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. {21} Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

(Luke 4:16-21 NRSV)

Confessing faith in the triune God, the Church is a community called to incarnate the love of God in a world broken and divided by sin. This servant vocation is expressed in the mission of the church in the world under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This servant vocation involves the Church in exercising a social responsibility as a community within a broader community. The church is both "visible and invisible." As part of the Church catholic's visible witness in the world, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada {ELCIC} participates in the broader life of society, not that society might be redeemed but that the love of God might be present.

One way the church offers a public witness is through its social statements, resolutions, and study papers. This document outlines the various ways in which the church develops policy documents for this public witness.

A Mandate for a Public Witness

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada holds that,

"The mission of this church, as an expression of the universal Church and as an instrument of the Holy Spirit, is to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people in Canada and around the world through the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments and through service in Christ's name." (ELCIC Constitution, Art. IV, Sect. 1)

Among the varied means for this ministry, the ELCIC has committed itself to,

"Study issues in contemporary society in the light of the Word of God and respond publicly to social and moral issues as an advocate for justice and as an agent for reconciliation." (ELCIC Constitution, Art. IV, Sect. 2f.)

To facilitate this aspect of the mission of this church, the ELCIC has established and maintains the Division for Church and Society. One of the responsibilities of this Division is to:

"Continuously examine the social problems of the day in the light of the Gospel and assist this church in the formation of social statements, in being an advocate for justice and an agent of

reconciliation, and in reflecting its social responsibility at all levels of its life." (ELCIC Constitution Art. XII, Sect. 5 b.i.)

The Bylaws of this church state further that:

"In fulfilling the responsibilities and duties set out in the constitution and elsewhere in the bylaws, the Division for Church and Society shall:

- a. Engage in special study or research projects at the request of this church;
- b. Prepare study papers and evaluations on social problems and issues for consideration by this church;
- c. Consult with synods about social issues and trends within their jurisdiction which may be identified as areas of national concern." (ELCIC Bylaws, Part XIII a-b-c.)

The Bylaws also authorize that the National Church Council:

"...may issue official statements on social or moral issues in the name of this church between its conventions on recommendation of the Division for Church and Society when, in the judgment of the council, an emergency exists or when delay of such action until the next convention would impair the timeliness of an utterance that this church ought in conscience to make. Concurrence of two-thirds of the total membership of the council shall be required in each such instance." (ELCIC Bylaws, Part VII, Section 11)

Our Historical Legacy

In addressing social issues, the ELCIC affirms the historic witness of the apostolic church. The faith which is ours is a gift from God witnessed through those who have preceded and surround us in the community of the Church. Recognizing this relationship, our public witness is grounded in the Scriptures, the Confessions of the church, and the mutual witness of the saints through prayer, study, reflection and service. Our public witness therefore does not offer ultimate answers but the collective wisdom of faithful people gathered as a community of believers living in a specific time.

In coordinating this ministry, the Division for Church and Society has inherited the rich legacy of social statements and study documents from the two ELCIC predecessor bodies of the Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada. The Division for Church and Society has recognized the importance of these documents by recommending that Social Statements and Study Documents from these predecessor bodies be "received as resources for instruction and guidance for the life and witness of the ELCIC," which are commended "to those who are addressing current social issues." (DCS-86-41)

These documents then serve as statements of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and should provide a foundation from which newly developed social statements or resolutions or study documents will emerge. These historical statements will in turn be complemented, supplemented, superseded as the ELCIC takes new and possibly different actions on emerging social concerns, questions and issues.

Purpose of Public Statements

In addressing ethical issues of church and society, the ELCIC undertakes its public witness recognizing fully the paradox and ambiguity of social ethics. The Apostle Paul reminds us of

these limitations in writing, "...There is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23) The purpose of public statements is therefore:

- 1) To serve as teaching opportunities for the people of God;
- 2) To guide the internal life of the ELCIC and support its corporate public witness to society;
- 3) To support individual Christians in their respective vocations.

Types of Public Statements:

At the 1987 convention of the ELCIC, the following guidelines for developing Social Statements and Study Documents were adopted:

"That the board of the Division for Church and Society use the following guidelines for developing Social Statements and Study Documents:

- a) Areas of focus of Social Statements shall normally come from this church in convention or from the Division for Church and Society as it listens and responds to the ELCIC membership and to the national and international social context in which we live.
- b) It shall be the policy of this church that Social Statements be made only after this church at its various levels has taken responsibility to study the issue in question in the light of the Gospel.
- c) The Division for Church and Society together with other divisions, offices and/or auxiliaries of this church shall prepare study/learning materials and study/learning opportunities for its membership.
- d) Normally an area of focus shall be studied for a minimum of two years before this church in convention addresses the issue in the form of a social statement."(NC-87-45)

In endeavouring to offer a responsible and appropriate public witness in interpreting this action the ELCIC normally uses one of the four following approaches to making our public witness.

A Social Statement

A Social Statement is a theological and ethical document that provides a foundation for understanding God's living word in the light of the changing realities of the modern world. A Social Statement seeks to provide the social analysis and theological basis for the collective ELCIC understanding of a continuing crucial issue that arises out of the mission of the ELCIC.

A Social Statement normally focuses on a broad social theme rather than a specific issue. Specific issues may emerge within this broader discussion (eg. A "Statement on Peace" might well include reference to disarmament).

A Social Statement shall normally include a descriptive section which indicates the reasons which give rise to the statement and an analysis of the social problem to be addressed; a normative section which states the biblical and theological foundations for ethical decision making; and a regulative section which applies these insights to the contemporary situation. Specific implementing resolutions may also be attached to a Social Statement.

The process of developing a Social Statement is as important as the Social Statement itself. The normal process for development of a Social Statement will involve:

- 1) A request from a national church convention or the Division for Church and Society.
- 2) Development of a first draft for circulation to ELCIC members for study and response. A writing team may be convened to facilitate this process.

Drafting should include:

- a) Consultation with other divisions, offices, Seminaries, institutions, and agencies of the ELCIC.
- b) Consultation with Synod Church and Society committees.
- c) Consultation with experts in disciplines that are relevant to the particular field of consideration.
- d) Consultation with ecumenical partners.
- 3) Hearings/forums/workshops at various church wide events such as ELCIC/Synod conventions, conference meetings, specially convened regional events.
- 4) A Second draft may be reviewed by those individuals with special competence. The Second draft will be distributed prior to the ELCIC convention at which the statement will be considered.
- 5) The Division for Church and Society is responsible for the development, preparation and revision of social statements. These statements should be tested with the synods.
- 6) Approval by Convention and referral back to the Division for future action and/or implementation.

An ELCIC Convention Position Resolution

The ELCIC may also establish a position to govern its life or to make a public statement to address a specific public policy issue. These Position Resolutions should be consistent with and informed by Social Statements adopted by the ELCIC.

Position Resolutions may be of varying length and detail. These resolutions should include a short theological rationale and social analysis.

Position Resolutions may arise through recommendations from ELCIC Church Council, Divisions, Offices or recognized Taskforces etc; from Petitions submitted through synods or from elected Convention delegates.

Divisions and Offices are encouraged to develop position recommendations in:

- 1) Consultation with other divisions, offices, Seminaries, institutions, and agencies of the ELCIC.
- 2) Consultation with Synod Church and Society committees.
- 3) Consultation with experts in disciplines that are relevant to the particular field of consideration.
- 4) Consultation with ecumenical partners.

and encourage;

- 5) Hearings/forums/workshops at various church wide events such as ELCIC/Synod conventions, conference meetings, specially convened regional events.

When considered at the National Church Convention, position resolutions may be referred to the appropriate Division/Office for action, implementation or modification.

An ELCIC Church Council Policy Resolution

In the interim between conventions, the ELCIC Church Council may adopt policy resolutions to address continuing emerging social issues. These policy resolutions should be consistent with and informed by relevant ELCIC Social Statements and Convention Position Resolutions. These policy resolutions may originate in Church Council or upon recommendation from a Board of an ELCIC Division or Office. These actions are reviewed in the Report of the Church Council to the ELCIC Convention.

An ELCIC Study Document

In an effort to study and discuss various social issues, the Board of a Division or Office may issue a Study Document. These Study Documents assist the ELCIC in considering crucial social questions.

Study Documents serve as a resource to the ELCIC in the following ways:

- 1) They raise relevant questions and offer a perspective on an issue of importance to the ELCIC;
- 2) They may include possible policy recommendations but need not result in policy decisions in the form of resolutions or statements;
- 3) They may be developed by the ELCIC and/or ecumenical or Lutheran partners;

Study Documents are not binding upon the life and public witness of the ELCIC. They offer relevant and important background information on an issue. They may lead to a Social Statement or a Position Resolution. The principal role of a Study Document is to provide opportunity for reflection and discussion on an issue.

Concluding Concerns

In engaging in a public witness, the ELCIC measures the effectiveness of this ministry by the twin criteria of prophetic credibility and pastoral responsibility.

Prophetic credibility is recognizing that our statements must address the concrete social reality faced by members of the global family. Therefore they require that the ELCIC ensure through the contribution of those with special competence, that these statements address the real questions faced by society. The test becomes, does the public statement help increase an understanding of the issues and directions for future actions?

Pastoral responsibility recognizes that the teaching of the church has an influence on individuals and communities faced with the serious ambiguities of living in a complex world. The ELCIC does not make statements simply for the sake of making statements, but for helping those faced

with serious ethical and moral choices. The test of a statement's pastoral responsibility is, does a public statement help those facing such decisions?

The ELCIC's public statements are always proximate answers to the ever changing reality of God's world. While hoping to encourage responsible Christian discipleship, such public statements do not obligate all members of the ELCIC to agree. Honest disagreement should not be seen as a sign of disunity, but as a means of forcing the ELCIC to new understandings and insights. After such debate and discussion, those delegates to a convention and members of Boards, who in conscience cannot subscribe to an adopted policy statement, should always be allowed to register their disagreement in the official record of the proceedings. However, once adopted the Social Statements, Position Resolutions and Policy Resolutions are normative for the elected officers, staff and elected or appointed representatives of the church in representing the ELCIC.

Adopting a Social Statement or a Policy resolution must always recognize that such decisions also require a strategy for implementation. These strategies involve at the least education and advocacy. In this public witness, the ELCIC not only helps to shape public policy, but is also shaped by the pressing social needs of the world. Therefore, the ELCIC needs to evaluate regularly its positions and policies in the light of ever new realities. This requires an on-going process of social analysis, theological reflection and prophetic action.