

Foreword to the Volume

ELCA social teaching is received much like the news media today. Both are, at one and the same time, appreciated, maligned, decried, valued, often not read carefully, prized, ignored, considered too political, dubbed too long to read, often unused, and championed. While there are many reasons for such varied responses, foremost among them is surely that social teaching speaks into the intersections of contemporary social life, just as does the news media. It speaks into a diverse and often divided society experiencing the dynamics of pluralism, the communications revolution, globalization, unprecedented immigration, and other factors.

Whether maligned or appreciated, our church addresses social questions because, as the first ELCA social statement expresses, we are “a community that lives from and for the

Gospel. Faith is active in love; love calls for justice in the relationships and structures of society.” (“The Church in Society,” 1). God is at work in society, and this society is where God has placed us. Social teaching, then, is part of our Christian response to God’s work, intended to articulate faithful participation in God’s work for the well-being of society and the environment. Whatever our failings, this call is carried out in order to be “true to this church’s mandate to confess and teach both Law and Gospel as the whole Word of the triune God.” (CS, 1). Through its guidance and governance, ELCA social teaching enables engagement from the standpoint of faith with others who speak into public places, whether they are secularists, ecumenical or inter-religious partners, fundamentalists, evangelicals, nones, or others.

Social teaching has the purpose of providing God’s people with comprehensive guidance—a social ethic of responsibility—for vocation, discernment, and formation in a community that acknowledges there is no ultimate authority except from God. Our church addresses social questions because it believes a Lutheran perspective (Lutheran understood as a reform movement in Christ’s universal church) benefits from and with contemporary social analysis and the issues of the day.

ELCA social teaching also governs ELCA public speech and teaching so leaders have community-tested sources

when addressing social questions inside the church and in the public square. Tested how? As a community of moral deliberation (CS, 6) the ELCA uses an extensive and rather distinctive participatory, democratic process to establish its social teaching and policy. The process utilizes people with a diversity of backgrounds, competencies, and skills to lead the work, involving multiple points of feedback—sometimes requiring six years!—toward adoption by ELCA legislative bodies. We believe this testing brings forth the most faithful, though not flawless, contemporary expression by opening immense space for God's Spirit to move and work.

ELCA social teaching provides a structure—builds a home, if you will—of ethical thought for these purposes. Its construction relies on the footings of the Holy Scriptures as its normative foundation. It claims the Reformation insight that the Scriptures are most fundamentally about God's revelation in Christ, and it depends upon the interpretive principle of law and gospel. That is, the Scriptures do not present a fundamentalist rule book but provide the deep support and establish the parameters of the structure. This social teaching house, then, is architecturally shaped by and built with the elements of a dynamic Lutheran confessional theology in faithful interaction with God's ongoing work in human culture.

Within this house each social statement frames out a room devoted to the great social institutions of contemporary life: for example, health care, economic life, criminal justice, racism, human sexuality, education, care for creation, and so forth (www.elca.org/socialstatements). The social messages figuratively bring in additional furniture, décor, and fixtures by addressing particular social questions with attention to practical application. Thus, social messages are devoted to topics like suicide prevention, climate crisis, people living with disabilities, human rights, community violence, and more (www.elca.org/socialmessages). The third set of official documents, called social policy resolutions, furnish the house with specific items by addressing pointed public policy questions, controversial concerns, and focused problems. For example, some of the nearly 150 existing resolutions speak to religious persecution, human trafficking, gender identity discrimination, voting rights, and supporting the vocations of agriculture, among other important issues (<https://www.elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society#Socialresolutions>).

The ELCA house of social teaching opens onto the intersection of social turmoil and today's knotty questions, and yet too many people pass into the intersection without stopping by. This accessible book series, *For the Sake of the World*, is designed to invite everyone into the house for a closer look. As such the series is novel, breath-taking in

scope, and very Lutheran. No book series has ever treated each major ELCA teaching or engaged such a comprehensive series of social questions at this length. At the same time, the series is very Lutheran in the interplay of unpacking fundamental commitments while simultaneously probing with a restless engagement (CS, 3).

The series' writers take the ELCA statement or message as a primary conversation partner and a resource for exploring a social issue or topic. They do so with the purpose of offering tools to enhance the reader's personal understanding and inform one's call to action. Each author has been asked to accessibly explore the biblical and theological sources that undergird the teaching documents. Each writer brings respect for the primary conclusions, visions, and arguments of a particular social document and is appreciative of accountability to them as expressions of this church. Yet, the series does not expect universal agreement. The writers also are asked to probe for what more can be said and asked. One of the prime questions is, What may be missing?

There can be no more fitting first volume in *For the Sake of the World* than this one devoted to "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective." To draw again on the image of raising a building, this first statement, adopted in 1991, provides a foundational floor plan of sorts. "The Church in Society" is not the deep foundation or even the

primary architectural theme or motif constructing the rest of ELCA social teaching, and yet it is the entry way. The first experience of walking into a home or a business establishes a clear message about its purpose, character, and what those who dwell there hold dear. So does this statement.

Careful readers will have noted already how this foreword necessarily has had to draw frequently from the first statement in describing ELCA social teaching. God's deep involvement in society, this church's mandate to speak, the meaning of vocation in everyday life, social teaching as response, community of moral deliberation, restlessness—these all are among the many affirmations or commitments articulated in “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective.” This statement is a primer in a Lutheran approach to being faithful in society. It is a reader for a community that acknowledges there is no ultimate authority except from the God who works for peace, justice, and the healing of the world's hurts and corrosive divisions. Read on and encounter these insights for yourself!

Yet a final word. It also is utterly fitting that Rev. Dr. James Childs is the writer probing this entry into the ELCA house of social teaching. Childs has served as a well-known ELCA theologian and ethicist during the entire life of the ELCA. He is a writer of ethics and a long-time seminary professor and dean. He has given substantive service on boards and task forces of the ELCA. In all these roles he

is recognized as one with a pastoral heart and as one who is dedicated to moral deliberation in the fullest sense of that word.

Beyond the ELCA he is widely respected in circles of theological ethics as a notable contributor to ethical reflection on moral injury, business ethics, sexuality ethics, the nature of Lutheran ethics, and more. Those who know him appreciate his incisive and ever-questioning mind and his relational, rather than esoteric, approach to questions. He is recognized as one who embodies what it means to be grounded in grace and open to engagement for the sake of the world. And, quite significantly, he was on the board that oversaw the preparation of “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective”! He is an apt guide for this volume, the entry way into the house of ELCA social teaching.

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