A Social Message on Child Protection

This social message was adopted by the ELCA Church Council on November 12, 2025.

The text below has not been copyedited and is shared for informational purposes only. Final copies of the adopted social message will be available in print and online soon.

"Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'" —Matthew 19:14

Introduction

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rejoices that as "Jesus invited the children (Mark 10:13-16; cf., Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17), and so we are to welcome children, teaching and learning from them in ways that recognize their dignity and complexity."[1] The stark, tragic realities of child abuse and neglect in the U.S. today demand renewed commitment to this church's sacred calling.

This social message draws on Holy Scripture, Lutheran traditions, research, and the experiences of ELCA Lutherans to deepen this church's understanding of child maltreatment, to offer a theological vision of childhood, and to call all members of the ELCA to strengthen their commitment to the dignity and well-being of children.

There are four sections in this social message:

I. Understanding Child Maltreatment
II. The Church and Child Protection
III. Elements of a Lutheran Theology of Childhood
IV. Guidance for Protecting Children

Section I, "Understanding Child Maltreatment," provides information on various forms of child maltreatment, including definitions, rates of prevalence within the United States, intersecting factors, and potential long-term consequences for children.

Section II, "The Church and Child Protection," laments the ways faith communities have contributed to or failed to prevent child maltreatment and points in hope to new ways of being and acting through God.

Section III, "Elements of a Lutheran Theology of Childhood," describes some grounding principles of a Lutheran theology of childhood and describes some of the requirements of justice for all children.

Section IV, "Guidance for Protecting Children," describes some basic principles of the ELCA's commitment to child protection, recommends policies for worshiping communities and ministries within the ELCA, and describes policies related to pastoral care, reporting, and responses to child maltreatment within the ELCA. The section further encourages members and ministries of the ELCA to advocate for just public policies to protect children.

An appendix at the end of this social message provides more information on child protection policies for worshiping communities.

I. Understanding child maltreatment[2]

In the United States, at least 1 in 7[3]—and as many as 1 in 4[4]—children experience abuse or neglect. Even these rates may be too low, given that child maltreatment is often unreported. Both abuse and neglect can take many forms, some of which are described below. This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is intended to provide a broader understanding of some forms of neglect and abuse.

Regardless of its specific form or the relationship or age of the perpetrator, all types of maltreatment represent a violation of the child and a violation of responsibilities for care, protection, and justice, as later sections describe.

What are some forms of child maltreatment?

Neglect

More than 75% of children who died as a result of maltreatment suffered neglect.[5] Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment in the U.S.[6] and involves the failure to meet a child's basic needs, such as "housing, food, clothing, education, access to medical care, and having feelings validated and appropriately responded to."[7] Neglect in early childhood is associated with later impairments in language development, cognition, and long-term physical health.[8]

Physical or material neglect involves the failure of a responsible adult to provide for the child's bodily needs, including but not limited to adequate food, water, shelter, and clean clothing. Examples of physical or material neglect include (but are not limited to) insufficient nutrition, unsafe or unsanitary housing conditions, or a lack of weather-appropriate clothing.

Poverty, coupled with inadequate public support, makes it difficult for loving parents or caregivers to provide for a child's needs, but poverty or food insecurity alone are not forms of neglect. Legally and ethically, physical neglect of a child is different from conditions created solely by household poverty or food insecurity.

Medical neglect is the refusal "to provide prescribed medical care or treatment or failure to seek appropriate medical care in a timely manner" and disproportionately affects children with chronic illnesses and disabilities.[9] This form of neglect is challenging to determine and is often subjective. Parents and guardians have the responsibility to make difficult choices about medical care, and at times, this can legitimately involve the refusal of certain forms of care.[10] When adults forego necessary medical care for children, however, the consequences can be fatal.[11]

Medical neglect can be complicated by religious beliefs. Some believe that faith and prayer give individuals power over disease. Some believe that reliance on trained medical care reflects distrust of God or a lack of faith. The freedom of parents or guardians to follow their religious beliefs can conflict with the rights of children to adequate, needed medical care.

While recognizing the complexity of this conflict, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that "parents may be free to become martyrs themselves. But it does not follow they are free, in identical circumstances, to make martyrs of their children."[12] Despite this, the physical health of children in the U.S. and around the world continues to be at risk due to religious beliefs about healing.

Abuse

Neglect involves a person (typically an adult) with responsibility for the care or well-being of a child. Abuse, on the other hand, can be perpetrated by anyone, including (but not limited to) parents. Potential perpetrators can include extended family members, trusted adults, strangers, individuals in positions of power or authority, siblings, or other children. It can occur in a variety of settings, including homes, schools, care centers, churches, and other public or private spaces. Though abuse can happen anywhere, child abuse most commonly occurs in the home and is perpetrated by someone the child knows and trusts.

Emotional or psychological abuse occurs when parents or caregivers repeatedly fail to provide the emotional support, nurturing, or availability that children need. It occurs when others undermine a child's basic psychological needs, such as the need for safety and support. This abuse can include ignoring children, repeatedly shaming or threatening them, or dismissing their emotions. Other forms include being emotionally unavailable or distant toward them or denying comfort during distress.[13]

As they develop, children need emotional connection and support, including the opportunities to feel safe and to build trust through caring relationships with adults, older youth, and peers. When this does not happen because of emotional abuse or neglect, the long-term consequences can be similar to the effects of physical abuse.

Physical abuse is the use of physical force that can inflict injury or harm. In some definitions, this includes threats of injury or harm, which can have the same psychological and emotional effects as physical injury.[14] Nearly 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. reports experiencing physical abuse as a child.[15] Physical abuse in the home or institutional settings often starts as an attempt at discipline that escalates into harm that threatens the physical safety of the child.[16] The use of physical punishment, such as spanking or hitting, is often rooted in family and religious culture and tradition. Parents or caregivers may learn spanking from their own experiences of physical or corporal punishment.

Sexual abuse can include but is not limited to inappropriate touching, exposure to pornography, exposing genitals to children or inducing children to do the same, sexual or genital activity, or sexual conversations, flirting, or sexual innuendos shared with children or youth, either in person, online, or via phone or texting.

In the U.S., more than 12%—*nearly 1 in 8*—adults report experiencing sexual abuse as children.[17] More than 15% of children experience online sexual abuse.[18] Online sexual abuse takes many forms, including receiving unwanted sexual images, the use of coercion or threats to force sharing of sexual images of oneself or another child, or sexual conversations with adults or older youth.

Due to the high prevalence of child sexual abuse in the U.S., this church recognizes the likelihood that nearly every worshiping community within the ELCA includes people who are survivors of child sexual abuse.

How do other ethical or social issues influence child maltreatment?

Many ethical and social issues intersect with child maltreatment. These factors provide a broader understanding of the reality of maltreatment within the context of other social realities and point to

solutions for reducing risk. Some of these factors increase the prevalence of neglect and abuse, while others can inhibit prevention and appropriate responses when neglect or abuse occur.

Some factors directly impact adults' ability to care for and protect children and point to the need for public support for parents and caregivers.

Inadequate knowledge or preparation for raising children, for example, can contribute to neglect, as when a new parent or caregiver simply does not know how best to meet a child's needs. In some cases, a child may be abused by a sibling or an unrelated adult, and parents or caregivers may not know how to respond effectively. This is especially true when the abuser is also a child.[19] In some cases, a parent or caregiver may themselves be victims of violence and may fear reporting their own abuse or the abuse of a child.

The substance abuse and addiction of parents and caregivers increase the risk of child neglect because adults may be unable to provide care due to incapacitation or addiction. Substance abuse by adults in the home also increases the risk that children in the home will experience abuse.[20]

Financial uncertainty, unemployment, and a lack of paid parental leave can exacerbate parental stress and increase the risk of physical abuse and neglect.[21] Similarly, poverty and a lack of adequate health insurance increase the risk that a child will not receive needed medical care.[22]

Though children living in poverty have an increased risk of abuse or neglect,[23] child maltreatment happens in families of any socioeconomic status. Identifying abuse and neglect in affluent families and intervening to protect children can be particularly challenging due to complex power dynamics between wealthy parents, social workers, and child protection authorities.[24]

Families in poverty receive more scrutiny from researchers, law enforcement, and child protective services, which may obscure neglect and abuse in wealthier families. The lack of attention to maltreatment in affluent families and barriers to effective intervention can make it difficult for children in affluent families to get the support they need.

In part due to these disparities, poverty is also tied to increasingly punitive responses to maltreatment. For example, household poverty is a strong predictor of decisions by child protective services to remove a child from a home, despite laws in most U.S. states that prohibit defining poverty on its own as evidence of neglect.[25] Removing a child from their home is a serious decision that, even when done with good intentions, can have debilitating consequences for the health and well-being of the child and their family.

Racial and cultural bias and structural racism can also impact decisions to remove children from homes, despite federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination.[26] Black children, for example, are twice as likely as white children to be removed from a home even when the circumstances of maltreatment are otherwise similar.[27] Because of experiences of racism and discrimination, many parents of color are justifiably distrustful of law enforcement and child protection systems. This may make them less likely to seek help when they need it, fearful that asking for help may lead to punitive rather than supportive responses.

Children with disabilities are more likely to experience physical abuse, medical neglect, and sexual abuse. They are also vulnerable to placement in care situations without adequate protection from

abuse.[28] In some cases, lack of medical insurance or inadequate social support can threaten the ability of a family to care for a child living with disabilities.

In too many cases, however, maltreatment arises from ableism, which is prejudice or discrimination arising from the refusal to recognize the worth and dignity of people with disabilities. Acknowledging this, the ELCA has called upon congregations to "find appropriate ways to support caregivers of people who live with disabilities" and affirms the rights of children with disabilities to equal protection and freedom from abuse or neglect.[29]

Treatment based on a child's sex, gender, or sexuality can profoundly shape the risk and experience of child maltreatment. Cases of reported sexual abuse are more likely to involve girls as victims.[30] Girls are also substantially more likely to experience online sexual abuse.[31]

LGBTQIA+ children are at much higher risk of experiencing sexual, physical, and emotional or psychological abuse from adults and peers.[32] Some may also experience physical or material neglect when parents or caregivers force LGBTQIA+ children or youth out of the home due to their sex, gender, gender identity, or sexuality.

Barriers to reporting may also differ by gender. Based on experiences of other victims during investigations or court cases, girls may fear that reporting sexual abuse will lead to them being portrayed as promiscuous and thus complicit in their own victimization. Transgender children may fear that they will not be listened to or that they will be revictimized.

Boys may fear that adults and other children will question their masculinity, strength, or sexuality.[33] Media depictions of abuse of boys by female adults often portray the perpetrators as seductive or coy and the male victims as willing participants in the abuse. This harmful narrative contributes to the stigma boys face as victims of child sexual abuse and makes boys less likely to report abuse and more likely to delay disclosure—and thus less likely to get the emotional and psychological support they need.[34]

These factors point to the need for a variety of responses. These include robust public support for parents, services to reduce poverty and food insecurity, increased access to addiction treatment, increased attention to the needs of children in affluent families, and ongoing education and support for parents, including new adoptive or foster parents. The disparities in outcomes for children also point to the need for more just approaches to child protection.

What are the consequences of maltreatment for children?

In the Gospels, Jesus warns the disciples of their responsibility for the spiritual harm that can result from mistreatment of children, admonishing them of the consequences should "any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble" (Matthew 18:6; see also Mark 9:36-42).[35] Martin Luther, reflecting on his own experiences of physical beatings, observed, "It's a bad thing if children and pupils lose their spirit on account of their parents and teachers."[36]

Modern research into "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) confirms and broadens our understanding that child neglect and abuse can have significant, long-term consequences that inhibit healthy psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual development. ACEs such as neglect and abuse place children at higher risk of severe, long-term emotional and psychological harm,

including anger, guilt, and shame, and higher rates of suicidal ideation and self-harm, even years after the maltreatment has ended. Research has found long-term physical risks of ACEs, too, including higher rates of cancer, heart disease, liver disease, sexually transmitted infections, obesity, smoking, substance abuse, and sleep disturbances.[37]

The ripple effects of trauma caused by abuse and neglect can impact victims of abuse, their families, and the wider community. Moreover, trauma's effects can linger across generations.[38]

Children victimized by abuse also can experience deep spiritual injury, such as guilt, anger at God or the church, and persistent beliefs that God is unfair. This is more likely if the perpetrator is a leader in the church or if church teachings or the Bible is used to justify abuse, maintain secrecy, or deny justice to victims.[39]

This risk of spiritual injury points to the importance of supportive pastoral and spiritual care of survivors, which many professional clinicians are not equipped to provide. Care that attends to the spiritual needs of survivors may be able to moderate symptoms of trauma and can be an important step toward healing.[40]

This church mourns the alarming rates of children abused or neglected. Each of these numbers represents a child, created by God, whose present and future well-being is threatened. Yet this church also recognizes the many other children who are not represented in these numbers due to vast underreporting of abuse and neglect. Despite valid concerns for justice for those who are falsely accused of harming a child, abuse is far more likely to be unreported than to be falsely reported. Each unreported case represents a vulnerable child who may not receive the support, care, and protection they need to recover from this trauma.

II. The church and child protection

While this church recognizes with gratitude the work many are doing to care for, educate, nurture, and protect children, this social message also recognizes with lament the Christian Church's own responsibility for the spiritual injury of survivors of child abuse and the harm caused by child maltreatment. We hear the voices crying out for the ELCA to follow the example of Christ in welcoming and caring for children with love and safety.

The ELCA recognizes that, too often, the Christian Church has:

- Allowed abusers access to vulnerable children.
- Allowed theological and scriptural justification for abuse, neglect, and threats to children.
- Failed to recognize the fullness of the image of God in children.
- Failed to welcome and care for children as Jesus would have us.
- Allowed racism and white supremacy to justify abuse under the guise of "child protection."

How has the Christian Church contributed to the prevalence of child maltreatment?

Some Christians have used narrow interpretations of the Bible or misguided religious beliefs to excuse or cover up sexual abuse.[41] Some verses of the Bible—taken out of textual and historical context—have been used to justify or encourage physical abuse. Religious descriptions of parental authority as absolute have left children feeling powerless when victimized. Leadership in the ELCA

have too often not confronted these harmful teachings with reminders about appropriate limits to the exercise of authority and the priority of loving care of children found in Holy Scripture.

The teachings of this church too often have neglected the experiences, perspectives, and needs of children.[42]

Some congregations, including within the ELCA, have allowed perpetrators access to children, both through insufficient protection policies and unclear or inconsistent responses to allegations of abuse. Indeed, some experts suggest that sexual abusers of children may seek out faith communities due to a lack of policies and easy access to children.[43]

Even when clear teaching and official policy exist, as in the ELCA's expectation that all suspected abuse is to be reported, leaders often are not equipped to act responsibly. Thus many rostered ministers and lay leaders feel called to minister to and support victims of abuse but may lack training and awareness of what to do if they suspect a child has been abused. They often do not know how to access resources or information, and resources may not be available or easy to find.[44]

Inauthentic and disingenuous actions, taken under the guise of "child protection" and supported by the church, also have caused grievous harm. The Indian boarding school era in the U.S. and Canada, made possible by the leadership of churches and their collaboration with the government, enabled the abuse of thousands of children for decades. This movement was publicly justified by misleading appeals to the "best interests" of Native and Indigenous children, who were separated from their families, communities, and culture, and placed in residential centers of rampant abuse.

Though boarding schools have closed, Native Americans today carry in their bodies and communities the impacts of intergenerational trauma. Healing continues to be needed by the many people impacted by this history.[45]

This church's failure to respond effectively to the consequences of abuse has perpetuated the harm done to victims. Church leaders who abuse children are often treated with tolerance and forgiveness, even though their victims may be treated with suspicion. Churches have often encouraged victims to rush to forgiveness without paying sufficient attention to their trauma, the complexity of forgiveness, or the future safety of other children. Failure to address the spiritual harm caused by abuse is a serious and grievous abdication of the church's responsibility to care for "these little ones" and their faith.

While acknowledging the ways the ELCA and the Christian Church have fallen short of our responsibilities to children, this church turns in hope to God's power of enabling confession and new ways of being. In that spirit, this church recommits to its calling to protect children and to witness to the good news of the gospel for all.

III. Elements of a Lutheran theology of childhood

The second great commandment—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39)—lays the foundation for the church's treatment of children. Too often, Lutheran theology has conceived of the "neighbor" as an adult and neglected the responsibilities inherent in loving children as oneself. Protecting children begins with perceiving all children as images of God and as neighbors whom the church is called to love and to serve.[46]

This perspective on children is echoed in Jesus' welcome and affirmation of children. Jesus' teachings in the first century were revolutionary transformations in how adults are to view children and to exercise loving authority. In contrast to the neglect or commodification of children (cf. 2 Kings 4:1), Jesus viewed children as signs of the coming reign of God (Matthew 18:3-6). In contrast to views of children as disobedient and deserving of punishment, Jesus rebukes those who refuse to welcome and care for children (Matthew 19:13-15).

This model of authority counters punitive and abusive exercises of authority that some Christians base on biblical verses, especially verses about the use of "the rod" in Proverbs 22:15, 13:24. The use of "the rod" in the Bible should be understood in the context of treatment of children that was, at times, brutal and inhumane.[47]

This church lifts up Jesus' model of loving authority, as reflected in the gospels and the Lutheran Confessions, to parents and caregivers, who exercise authority as "God's representatives" to their children.[48] Though the Lutheran Confessions name obedience to parents as a "great, good, and holy work … assigned to children," parental authority is subject to God and is not without limits. [49] In the Large Catechism, Luther reminds us that God "does not want scoundrels or tyrants in this office or authority [of parents]."[50]

The affirmation of parental authority and the counsel for children to obey parents, found in the Large Catechism, depend on two foundations. First, parents or caregivers are expected to provide adequate physical, emotional, and spiritual care for children. Second, they are not to rule in a tyrannical way that harms the spirit of the child.[51]

The ELCA has affirmed the responsibilities of parents, caregivers, the church, and society to children in *Our Calling in Education*:

> Christians enrich our welcoming of children to a life of faith by holding together … diverse perspectives on [who] they are. … Remembering that Jesus saw children as teachers of the faith, we will listen attentively to them, honor their insights and questions, and learn from them. We will give special attention to children who are most vulnerable and those who have been wounded, and we will become stronger advocates for them. [52]

What grounding principles for a Lutheran theology of childhood can be drawn from the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions and theology, and ELCA social teaching?

A Lutheran theology of childhood, grounded in the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions, ELCA social teachings, and Lutheran theology, can deepen the church's appreciation of the humanity of children and the church's responsibilities toward them. This social message offers several foundational principles toward a Lutheran theology of childhood.[53]

Children are "gifts of God[, and] God entrusts parents, the Church, and society to welcome and care for children as full participants of their communities."[54] Luther referred to children as "eternal treasure[s]"[55] and regarded the care and education of children as sacred responsibilities. In the Bible, children are sources of joy and celebration (Genesis 21:6-7; Luke 1:14).

The giftedness of children is not a transactional transfer of ownership that might allow for exploitation. Rather, "as gifts of God, children are sources of hope, joy, delight, and also obligation."[56] In the Lutheran traditions, this includes the responsibility to provide for children's education and to celebrate and foster the ways children's gifts and strengths can contribute to the common good of families and communities, even at a young age.

Children are "fully human and made in the image of God [and,] therefore, are worthy of the dignity and respect due to all human beings."[57] Their right to protection and care is rooted in their creation in the image of God, which endows them with dignity that "society should not deny … for any reason."[58] Children's dignity and value are not merely potential traits that children earn by the kinds of adults they may become.[59]

Children are both "models and teachers of faith" and developing beings, whom adults are to instruct and guide, that children may be "formed for their vocation … with gentleness and love."[60] In the Bible, children often serve as examples of bold, daring faith and morality.[61] Jesus preaches that adults should look to children as exemplars of what it means to live in the coming reign of God (Matthew 18:3-6).

Yet children are also still developing—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and morally—and adults are called to teach and guide them. Through word and example, adults should instruct all children in the unconditional love and forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ. As children learn about sin, adults are called to share the grace of the gospel and to remind children that "all have sinned," and yet all are "justified by [God's] grace as a gift" (Romans 3:23-24.)

Adults, especially rostered leaders, in the ELCA are also called to teach children that this gift of grace neither justifies nor excuses abuse or neglect. Child abuse and neglect are sins of the people who harm children. In faith formation and education, children should be reminded of God's concern for their well-being and safety and supported with appropriate pastoral care.

Children are vulnerable neighbors, and adults are called to provide for, protect, and seek justice for all children. In the Bible, the faithfulness of the people of God is judged by their treatment of orphans and other vulnerable neighbors (Isaiah 10:1-2). Through the prophet Isaiah, God commands the people to "defend the orphan" (Isaiah 1:17). God's treatment of children provides a model for compassionate care of children (1 Kings 17:8-16).

Recognizing the church's calling to defend and care for vulnerable neighbors, this church has declared, "The needs of the vulnerable and marginalized must be represented and given particular and vigorous attention."[62] This teaching is especially relevant to children, who remain vulnerable to and dependent on adults in their households, the church, and the community.

In previous social teachings, the ELCA has recognized the particular vulnerability of children caught in social, political, and economic systems outside their control. For example, this church has:

- Called for an end to the "trying, sentencing, and incarceration [of] children in the adult [criminal justice] system."[63]
- Urged protection of the rights of Palestinian children against detention and torture.[64]
- Affirmed the church's accompaniment and advocacy for migrant children through the ELCA's AMMPARO strategy.[65]

The ELCA gives thanks to leaders and ministries that support children and families caught in these systems.

What does it mean to treat children with dignity and justice?

"Jesus reinforced the dignity of all children by welcoming and blessing them and saying that to them belongs the kingdom of heaven."[66] This inherent dignity entitles children to justice and to freedom from exploitation and maltreatment.

The ELCA has consistently articulated four principles of justice:

- "The principle of *sufficiency* means meeting the basic needs of all humanity and all creation.
- "The principle of *sustainability* means providing an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.
- "The principle of *participation* means all are entitled to be heard and to have their interests considered when decisions are made.
- "The principle of *solidarity* means that we stand together with all of God's creation."[67]

These principles provide insight into what justice demands for children.

Sufficiency: Children have the right to have their basic needs met. Parents and caregivers should be supported when they cannot meet children's needs due to poverty or incapacity.

Sustainability: Adults have the responsibility to respect and promote[68] children's long-term well-being, which includes protecting them from the long-term consequences of maltreatment.

Participation: Children have the right to be treated as human beings with dignity, regardless of their age.[69] They have the right to be educated and informed as appropriate for their stage of development.[70]

Solidarity: Solidarity demands that children have advocates for their rights in public policy and within law enforcement and child protection systems. Within the church, leaders are called to act in solidarity with children, especially when they are potentially threatened by adults, and to provide for their safety and security.[71]

Some situations require careful moral discernment of what justice requires. The principle of sufficiency, for example, obliges adults to provide necessary medical care for children. However, justice also requires special discernment when the burden of care to the patient might outweigh potential benefits.[72]

The principles of justice also inform this church's teaching that child labor—when children are forced to work or placed by adults in unsafe industries or jobs—is exploitative. [73] The principle of solidarity grounds this church's deep concern at the relaxation of child labor laws in the U.S. and advocacy for laws that protect children from exploitation. However, the principle of participation also grounds support for youth who choose to work in safe, age-appropriate jobs, where they develop important skills and contribute to the community.

IV. Guidance for protecting children

What are some basic commitments of the ELCA to child protection?

Reporting

The ELCA expects all leaders in the church—rostered and lay, volunteer and paid—to report suspected child neglect or abuse to the appropriate secular authorities, who are equipped to investigate allegations.[74] This includes reporting child maltreatment that occurs in the church, the home, or other settings.

Countering violence with peace

This church is called to address scriptural misinterpretations that have been used to justify violence and promote physical punishment of children. This arises from God's call for the whole body of Christ to model peace and for Christians to be peacemakers.[75] Worshiping communities are called to be safe spaces, free of violence, where physical intimidation or the use of force—including physical discipline—are specifically prohibited.

In their public witness, Christians are called to advocate against violent conflict that leaves children more vulnerable, especially in situations of war or forced displacement. This includes collective efforts to hold accountable perpetrators of abuse or violence against children.

Discerning forgiveness

Christians are called to share the good news of God's grace through Jesus Christ. Lutherans affirm that we are set free from sin by God's loving word of forgiveness and called to share the gospel of grace with all the world.

In the Bible, forgiveness assumes a recognition of guilt (often public) and the active pursuit of reconciliation (Matthew 5:23). Forgiveness does not imply a complete absence of accountability. Indeed, even the criminal on the cross whom Jesus forgave first confronted his own sin and guilt (Luke 23:39-43). Though we are saved by God's grace and neither by our confession of sin nor our works of repentance, Lutherans understand grace as freeing us to love and serve the neighbor and to confront the many ways we fall short of that responsibility.

Too often, the promise of forgiveness becomes a harmful burden when God's church urges victims of child abuse to rush to forgiveness of their abusers. Christians, through the act of forgiving others, strive for a moral ideal that reflects God's free gift of grace to us. When we demand that others forgive, however, it risks transforming this gift of God into a new religious law. Under such a law, victims may experience guilt, a fear that they themselves will not be forgiven, and anger at the church and God for demanding such a sacrifice.

Leaders in the ELCA must exercise care when supporting victims of child maltreatment through the process of forgiveness, including when victims are not ready to forgive. Though some acknowledge the potential therapeutic release from bonds of anger and resentment, for child victims, the trauma of abuse creates its own bonds.

This church expects leaders providing pastoral care to make clear to victims of child maltreatment that being unable to forgive is not a rejection of faith or the gospel. Rather, forgiveness is a lengthy

process of transforming the relationship between the offender and the victim and between the victim, the offender, and the community.[76] It is neither a straight path nor a single act.

Trauma-informed Ministry

This church is called to accompany victims toward healing with an awareness of the deep and lasting impacts of trauma. Though trauma may not be resolved completely, this church calls itself to learn and practice effective responses to trauma and to exercise trauma-informed and healing-centered ministry.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) outlines six principles of a trauma-informed approach: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues.[77]

A trauma-informed approach will look different in different settings. Some examples of trauma-informed practices include:

- Creating a welcoming, nonjudgmental environment.
- Letting people who have experienced trauma lead their process of healing.
- Recognizing that trauma may cause unexpected emotional reactions to situations.
- Clearly communicating and adhering to policies for safety.
- Considering how sermons, songs, or Scripture readings may be heard by someone experiencing trauma.
- Helping survivors of abuse to advocate for themselves.[78]

This social message encourages congregational leaders to seek training in trauma-informed care. In support, ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries should find ways to provide trauma-informed care for students and trauma-informed training for emerging leaders.[79]

Victims are more than their trauma, and those who minister to them share in holy yearning for the fullness of God's promise of a time when "crying and pain will be no more" (Revelation 21:3-4).[80]

How can church policy help prevent and address child maltreatment?[81]

Many rostered ministers, lay leaders, members, and survivors of maltreatment in the ELCA yearn for clear policies and guidance for preventing and addressing child maltreatment. This section outlines such policies, though it is not exhaustive.[82]

For more information on these policies, see the appendix to this social message.

Congregations, ministries, and other worshiping communities within the ELCA are strongly encouraged to implement and clearly communicate the following policies *at a minimum*:

- Screenings and background checks for all staff and volunteers working with children or youth.
- A waiting period of involvement with the church before new members or volunteers are permitted to accompany children or youth on trips or overnight events.
- Annual training for leaders on recognizing and reporting signs of maltreatment.

- Public posting of written information (for children *and* adults) about how to report suspected abuse or neglect.
- A "two-deep" policy requiring at least two adults to be present whenever children and youth are transported and at activities involving children or youth, including having at least two adults involved in any online communications with children or youth, such as text threads, chats, or emails.
- Sign-in and sign-out lists for events with children and youth, and clear limits on who can sign a child out from an event.
- Sensitivity to food insecurity, including avoiding behaviors that shame children for eating too much or taking food home from events.
- Policies on photography or video recording of children and youth, including limiting photography or video recording to authorized adults and requiring signed permission forms for the sharing of photographs or video.
- Limited access to private or nonvisible areas of a building during events or overnights.

In addition to these policies, congregations, synods, ministries, and institutions of the ELCA are called upon to collaborate in raising awareness of existing ELCA resources on sexual misconduct and child abuse, to provide ongoing training and resources for children, youth, and family ministers, and to involve children, youth, and family ministers in substantive decision-making about child protection policies at the congregational, synodical, and churchwide level.

Some congregations are concerned that a lack of volunteers, staff, or funding can hinder implementation of policies. Synods and the churchwide organization of the ELCA should consider providing financial support, information about free or low-cost training available from organizations and agencies, and avenues for leaders to share creative ideas for implementation in different settings.

A congregation's capacity to implement policies should inspire creativity, thoughtful discernment, and dialogue. However, it should not end in inaction toward this church's commitment to protect all people from harm.

What policies should guide pastoral care and worship?

This church and its rostered ministers have a responsibility to provide pastoral care for children and youth and see to the safety of children and youth in all settings. Pastoral counseling of children and youth should be done in a publicly visible place. Leaders should also maintain written records or reports on one-on-one counseling sessions with children and youth. Care must be taken to balance privacy and safety in such situations.

Counseling perpetrators of child abuse, especially child sexual abuse, requires specific skills and training that few rostered leaders have. In humility, leaders providing pastoral care must urge perpetrators to instead seek professional counseling. This church gives thanks for seminaries and organizations that provide training in this specialized area and encourages all rostered leaders to avail themselves of this training.

As a community rooted in the gospel, the ELCA affirms that those who commit crimes and harm others "are still human beings" and "are in need of accompaniment and of receiving the gift of the

gospel in word and sacrament."[83] This church teaches that adults who harm children are not separated from the grace of God.

However, the church is also called to protect those who are vulnerable. This requires "extraordinary care" and prayerful discernment.[84] Worshiping communities are encouraged to utilize resources from the ELCA churchwide organization's misconduct prevention staff or their synod in their discernment and planning.

What does this church teach about confidentiality in pastoral care and reporting?

The ELCA expects all leaders in the church—rostered and lay, volunteer and paid—to report suspected child neglect or abuse to the appropriate secular authorities, who are equipped to investigate allegations.[85] This includes reporting child maltreatment that occurs in the church, the home, or other settings.

Love and justice call the church to consider long-term consequences of maltreatment and obligate the church to take steps to reduce the long-term harm victims can experience. The ELCA has stated its support for the reporting and prosecution of adult perpetrators of child sexual abuse, including noncontact sexual abuse.[86] This social message extends this support to all forms of child maltreatment. Reporting is one way in which survivors of abuse can access the care and treatment they need.

This, of course, presents special concerns for confidentiality within private confession to a rostered minister. Some fear that perpetrators of abuse will not confess if a requirement to report exists. Others fear that without such a requirement, perpetrators may use confession as spiritual absolution, allowing them to continue the abuse without guilt.

The ELCA constitution, in general, supports the confidentiality of confession and pastoral counseling as an important element of spiritual care. Confidentiality fosters the trust necessary for people to seek spiritual care when overwhelmed by guilt, shame, or fear. However, when a person seeking pastoral care or confession "intends great harm to self or others," this church recognizes an exception to the protection of confidentiality.[87]

Overwhelming research points to the long-term negative effects of child maltreatment on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of children. The connection between these experiences and future ill effects is so strong that it should be considered when evaluating what constitutes "great harm" and an exception to confidentiality.

Though state laws vary on rostered ministers' status as mandated reporters, in this church, the right to confidentiality in pastoral counseling or individual confession does not override the body of Christ's clear biblical mandate to protect the vulnerable. Rostered ministers thus are expected to report child maltreatment. In situations of counseling or confession when someone may disclose that they have harmed a child, the rostered minister should inform them of the limits of confidentiality.

What is the ELCA's response to abuse that occurs within the church?

Child abuse that is perpetrated by trusted people within the church can be especially traumatizing to victims and faith communities. These tragedies threaten trust in the church and in God. Accordingly, the ELCA's "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline" explicitly provides that abuse of another, including child abuse, sexual abuse, and abuse of family members, is conduct incompatible with the ministerial office.[88]

Because of the gravity of the violation, when a rostered minister is reported for suspected child abuse, the minister should be administratively suspended from their call during the investigation out of an abundance of caution for the whole community.[89] If the allegations involve a volunteer or lay leader, they should also be removed from their role during an investigation.

In addition to reporting suspected child maltreatment by a rostered minister to law enforcement or child protective services, the synod bishop should commence appropriate disciplinary proceedings as soon as doing so will not interfere with government investigations.[90] In these proceedings, this church urges disciplinary committees to consider permanent removal from the roster when appropriate.

This church also acknowledges that victims can be retraumatized during investigations. Care and advocacy for a victim's rights should be provided for the protection of victims during investigations and disciplinary proceedings.

What training and resources are needed to protect and nurture children?

Many people throughout the ELCA are inspired by the Holy Spirit to do more to protect children and yearn for the training and resources to do so.

Synods and the churchwide organization are urged to collaborate in providing training and resources for rostered ministers and lay leaders in recognizing and reporting abuse as well as guidance for preaching and teaching on the topic of child maltreatment.

The ELCA benefits from the resources on sexual misconduct that many synods and the churchwide organization already provide. At the same time, we acknowledge a need for greater awareness and ease of access to these resources.[91] Synods and the churchwide organization are encouraged to continue developing new resources as needed and to find means to ensure that such resources are easily accessible.

Synods and the churchwide organization are also encouraged to provide resources for parents and caregivers on effective forms of nonphysical discipline and theological resources that can equip the church to address child maltreatment, including speaking out against religiously motivated medical neglect.

In addition to providing resources and training, synods can be key partners in providing pastoral care to the community when child abuse occurs.

Seminaries are encouraged to provide coursework related to ministry with victims and perpetrators. Where possible, seminaries should equip rostered leaders for this type of specialized counseling.

Because Scripture is often manipulated to justify or excuse child abuse, and because of the great spiritual harm done to victims, seminaries and lay training schools are encouraged to equip students to interpret the Bible and theology in ways that correct these distortions.

Congregations, outdoor ministries, schools, and campus ministries are encouraged to continue to provide training for new staff in recognizing and reporting child abuse and child neglect. This church supports their efforts to remove from leadership any adult accused of harming a child and gives thanks for ministries providing trauma-informed spiritual care and development for young people. Congregations with related schools or campus ministries are urged to support the efforts of schools or campus ministries in implementing effective policies.

Rostered ministers and congregational leaders are urged to familiarize themselves with existing ELCA resources on sexual misconduct, including resources on reporting child abuse and preventing sexual misconduct.

What public policies are needed to protect and care for children?

Recognizing society's role in protecting and caring for children, the ELCA encourages individual members and the ELCA's Witness in Society to advocate for just, effective public policies, including:

- Funding and support for households facing poverty or food insecurity.[92]
- Living wage, paid family leave,[93] and paid sick leave laws,[94] which allow caregivers resources and time to care for their children and which reduce the risk of abuse or neglect.
- Support for families of children with disabilities as well as oversight of schools and care facilities attending to children living with disabilities.
- Support for and protection of children in the foster care system, including as youth "age out" of the system and begin life on their own.
- Oversight of agencies empowered to remove children from homes, including robust anti-discrimination measures.
- Robust child labor laws that prevent children from being placed in hazardous working conditions.
- Effective child trafficking laws and support for migrant and immigrant children.
- Ratification by the U.S. of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Legislation that addresses bullying and harassment, including when it occurs online.
- Gun violence prevention legislation, such as universal background checks,[95] that reduces risk to children in situations of abuse in the home.[96]

During investigations of suspected child maltreatment, children can be retraumatized by encounters with law enforcement, attorneys, and investigators. For this reason, the ELCA recognizes the role of child advocates to accompany and shelter children during the process.

This church also recognizes the important role of trained chaplains[97] in addressing the spiritual trauma children can face both from their victimization and during investigations and court proceedings. The ELCA thus encourages public policy advocacy to support the work of both child advocates and trained chaplains and urges increased funding for both these important roles.

V. Conclusion: Guided by the good news of Jesus Christ

This church draws hope from the promise of God's love and from the many people, organizations, and ministries both within and outside the ELCA that serve, care for, nurture, and protect children, including:

- Leaders of children, youth, and family ministry, including outdoor ministries and ELCA schools and learning centers.
- Therapists, counselors, teachers, health care professionals, and advocates who meet the needs of children in the U.S. facing trauma or instability.
- Ministries and social service organizations that accompany new parents and caregivers.
- Organizations, communities, and movements that support victims in advocacy for justice, healing, and legal protection.
- Workers who protect and enhance the dignity of children, including social workers, teachers, child abuse investigators, prosecutors, child advocates, and those providing licensing and training for professionals who work with children.
- Lutheran social ministry organizations that support families and children.

In concluding this message, we reflect on the words of Paul: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Drawing on those words, this church declares to victims of all forms of child maltreatment:
We are convinced that neither your trauma, nor your pain, nor your grief, nor the injustice done to you, nor the sin of adults around you, nor your anger, nor your doubt, nor your fear can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You were created in God's own image, and you remain God's beloved child.

This church's public witness will be guided by this promise. We will speak with vulnerable children when they can speak, and we will speak on their behalf when they cannot find the words. We will establish policies and practices to prevent harm, and we will accompany victims as they seek healing. We will support justice for all children, and we will exercise the sacred responsibility to which God calls the Christian Church, to nurture and protect these precious gifts.

In so doing, this church will bear witness to the coming reign of God—and to the fullness of peace, healing, and wholeness that awaits children, youth, adults, and all of creation.

APPENDIX — Child Protection Policies

The most important way worshiping communities can protect children from harm is by establishing and following clear policies. Below, we offer more information about the policies recommended in this social message.

1. **Screenings and background checks for all staff and volunteers working with children or youth.**

Though screening and background checks are not a perfect way to prevent harm, they are an essential step toward protecting children in the church. They "should be considered as one part of a comprehensive *process* that has multiple components" and will not look exactly the same in every worshiping community.[98]

Practices to consider include: adding to job postings a statement about the church's commitment to child protection, asking interview questions about a candidate's approach to managing children's behavior, requiring staff or volunteers to read and sign a child protection policy, and reviewing criminal background checks on staff and volunteers.

2. **A waiting period of involvement with the church before new members or volunteers are permitted to accompany children or youth on trips or overnight events.**

Most child abuse occurs in the home and is perpetrated by someone the child knows well and trusts. However, abuse can occur in any setting, including worshiping communities, where abusers have access to children. A waiting period before working directly with children is an imperfect but important preventative measure that allows the community to get to know a new person before allowing them increased access to spaces or events involving children. This waiting period can also provide time for the community to recognize and address concerns before a new person has increased access to children.

3. **Annual training for all leaders on recognizing and reporting signs of maltreatment.**

As this social message notes, many staff and volunteers in the church want to protect children but often are unsure how to do so. Many are burdened by uncertainty about whether or how to report what they have witnessed or heard. Differences in state laws make this more complex.

The ELCA is clear in its teaching that all instances of suspected child maltreatment are to be reported by church leaders to appropriate authorities. The ELCA churchwide organization and most ELCA synods provide information about reporting, and congregational leaders are encouraged to avail themselves of this information. The churchwide organization and synods are encouraged to provide access to ongoing training, including for worshiping communities that may not have the capacity or funding to access training on their own.

4. **Public posting of written information (for children *and* adults) about how to report abuse or neglect.**[99]

Given the high rates of child maltreatment in the United States, it is likely that every ELCA worshiping community includes someone who is experiencing or has experienced abuse or

neglect. Many victims of abuse or neglect do not know how to seek help or may be afraid of seeking help.

Posting this information accomplishes two related goals. First, it provides people with the information they need to protect themselves or others. Second, public posting of information communicates the community's commitment to child protection.

5. **A "two-deep" policy requiring at least two leaders to be present whenever children and youth are transported and at activities involving children or youth, including having at least two adults involved in any online communications with children or youth, such as text threads, chats, or emails.**

Having more than one leader present during children's activities reduces the risk of abuse and can provide other benefits. In emergencies, two-deep leadership can ensure sufficient leadership to protect children and respond to the emergency. In cases of suspected child abuse, two-deep leadership also can ensure mutual accountability and support when a leader makes a report. For text threads and online communications, leaders can utilize technologies that automatically create a record of communications that other leaders can review. Similarly, leaders can communicate with an email address that other adults have access to.

6. **Sign-in and sign-out lists for events with children and youth, and clear limits on who can sign a child out from an event.**

The church can play an important role in preventing child maltreatment outside of church activities. Sign-in and sign-out lists can help ensure that children are in the care of safe, trusted adults. This is especially important if a child may be at risk from a specific adult due to past abuse or neglect.

7. **Sensitivity to food insecurity, including avoiding behaviors that shame children for eating too much or taking food home from events.**

Schools and churches are vital sources of nutritious, sufficient food for children experiencing food insecurity. Taking extra food, either to consume immediately or to take home, can be a sign of food insecurity. Yet many children who experience food insecurity also feel stigmatized or isolated and may not ask for the food they need. At events involving food, actively welcoming all children to take what they need (including "seconds") can reduce stigma or shame and ensure that children who are hungry are fed.

8. **Policies on photography or video recording of children and youth, including limiting photography or video recording to authorized adults and requiring signed permission forms for the sharing of photographs or video.**

Recording and sharing images of children raises several issues of moral concern for the church, including privacy, ownership of an image, and safety.

The internet and social media grant the ability to share images and video with friends and strangers. Once shared, though, no one—including the subject in the image or video and the person who took it—can fully control how an image or video is used. Companies may use images for commercial purposes. Abusers of children may use or share images and recordings for predatory purposes.

Revealing a child's name and location can expose them to significant risk, especially when the child has been a victim of past abuse or may be targeted by an adult who means them harm.

Clear policies about the recording and sharing of images or videos of children can reduce these risks. Most policies include stipulations such as not using a child's full name when sharing images; limiting identifiable information (such as age, name of school, or city of residence); allowing parents, caregivers, or youth to opt out of recording; and limiting who can take photos, especially during children's events.[100]

9. Limited access to private or nonvisible areas of a building during events or overnights.

Abusers of children often seek ways to isolate a child from their peers or from trusted leaders. At church events, a child should never be alone and out-of-view of others with an unrelated adult. However, it is important to remember that abuse can be perpetrated by anyone, including an older youth or a peer. Limiting access to private or nonvisible areas of a building can reduce the risk that a child is alone with someone who may harm them. In addition to protecting children from abuse, this policy can ensure that other emergencies receive immediate attention from leaders.

---

[1] *Our Calling in Education* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007), 14.

[2] "Child maltreatment" is a broad term that includes "all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power." "Child Maltreatment," World Health Organization, last modified November 5, 2024, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment. Though the specific legal definition of child maltreatment is left to individual states in the U.S., federal law defines maltreatment as "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation … or an act of failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm" to a child. See U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, "Child Maltreatment 2022," 2024, www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment.

[3] David Finkelhor, Heather A. Turner, and Anne Shattuck, "Prevalence of Childhood Exposure to Violence, Crime, and Abuse: Results From the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence," *JAMA Pediatrics* 169, no. 8 (2015): 746–754, doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.0676.

[4] Casey L. Brown, Musa Yilanli, and Angela L. Rabbitt, et al., *Child Physical Abuse and Neglect* (StatPearls Publishing, 2024).

[5] HHS, "Child Maltreatment 2022," 55.

[6] Nearly 80% of maltreated children experience either neglect alone or in combination with other forms of maltreatment. Brown et al.

[7] Ileana Arias, Rebecca T. Leeb, Cindi Melanson. Leonard J. Paulozzi, et al., "Child Maltreatment Surveillance: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements," U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 2008, stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11493.

[8] John Stirling, "Understanding Medical Neglect: When Needed Care Is Delayed or Refused," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 13 (2020): 271, doi.org/10.1007/s40653-019-00260-6.

[9] Lori D. Frasier, Nicole Smith, and Kathryn Crowell, "When Medical Care and Parents Collide—Parents Who Refuse Testing and/or Treatment for Children," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 13 (2020): 277, doi.org/10.1007/s40653-019-00271-3. See also Stirling, "Understanding Medical Neglect," 273.

[10] Medical decisions are complex and involve a variety of factors and people. In the ELCA's social statement on *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2003), this church acknowledges, "Human healing activities in all their variety … can be avenues of healing blessed and empowered by God. Because human beings are finite, none of these activities will produce perfect health;

because of sin, each of them can be abused" (p. 5). Due to the complex and personal nature of medical decision-making, this church teaches, "Simply because a treatment or procedure exists does not mean that it should be used in every instance. The patient, family, and health-care providers need to make thoughtful decisions that serve the patient's goals and well-being and that take seriously the limits of health care resources. … We encourage people to talk together with their families and health care providers about treatment goals and types of care, and to make decisions that reflect their responsibility to be good stewards of their health and the resources that are available" (p. 8). Though this church supports individual freedom to make health care decisions—whether for oneself or on behalf of or in consideration of another person—this freedom should be understood within the context of the relationship between self and others, and self and God (see *Caring for Health*, p. 22.)

[11] Over 8% of child maltreatment fatalities involve medical neglect. See HHS, "Child Maltreatment 2022," 55.

[12] Prince v. Massachusetts, 321 U.S. 158 (1944), cited in Stirling, "Understanding Medical Neglect," 274.

[13] American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) Taskforce, "Practice Guidelines: The Investigation and Determination of Suspected Psychological Maltreatment of Children and Adolescents," APSAC, 2025, apsac.org/practice-guidelines/. A list of possible forms of psychological maltreatment can be found at apsac.org/apsac-announces-revisions-to-its-definitions-of-psychological-maltreatment/.

[14] See for example "Physical Abuse" in "Recognize the Signs of Child Abuse," Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, www.dfps.texas.gov/child_protection/child_safety/recognize_abuse.asp.

[15] Elizabeth A. Swedo, Maria V. Aslam, Linda L. Dahlberg, Phyllis Holditch Niolon, et al., "Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences Among U.S. Adults—Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2011-2020," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 72, no. 26 (June 30, 2023): 707-715, doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7226a2.

[16] Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 40.

[17] Swedo et al., "Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences," 713.

[18] David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, and Deirdre Colburn, "The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse With Online Sexual Abuse Added," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 149 (2024), doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106634. This church recognizes online child abuse as "one of the most important child-protection issues of our time" and calls for care and vigilance on behalf of parents, caregivers, society, and lawmakers. See *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2009), 26.

[19] Parents of children who abuse their siblings often experience the interconnected challenges of protecting the child who has been abused, loving the child who committed the abuse, and confronting their own trauma at learning about the abuse. See Tova Lewin, Brandy Black, Maria Socolof, and Anat Talmon, "The Parental Experience and Emotional Response to Sibling Sexual Abuse: When a Parent's Most Valuable Gift Becomes a Source of Trauma," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 162, no. 3 (April 2025), doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107079.

[20] Laura Lander, Janie Howsare, and Marilyn Byrne, "The Impact of Substance Use Disorders on Families and Children: From Theory to Practice," *Social Work in Public Health* 28, no. 3-4 (2013): 194-205, doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2013.759005.

[21] "Unemployment Linked With Child Maltreatment," American Academy of Pediatrics, ScienceDaily, last modified October 5, 2010, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/10/101003081452.htm.

[22] Frasier et al., "Medical Care and Parents," 279.

[23] Mark A. Bellis, Karen Hughes, Nicola Leckenby, Clare Perkins, et al., "National Household Survey of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Their Relationship With Resilience to Health-harming Behaviors in England," *BMC Medicine* 12, no. 1 (2014): 1-10, doi.org/10.1186/1741-7015-12-72; Andrea J. Sedlak, Jane Mettenburg, Monica Basena, Ian Peta, et al., "Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)," Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services 9 (2010): 2010, cap.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/sedlaknis.pdf; and Kathryn Maguire-Jack and Kierra Sattler, "Neighborhood Poverty, Family Economic Well-being, and Child Maltreatment," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 38, no. 5-6 (Sept 4, 2022): 4814-4831, doi.org/10.1177/08862605221119522.

[24] Claudia Bernard and Tom Greenwood, "Recognizing and Addressing Child Neglect in Affluent Families," Child & Family Social Work 24, no. 2 (May 2019): 340-347, doi.org/10.1111%2Fcfs.12619.

[25] R.L. Stollar, *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Inc., 2023), 215.

[26] Children's Bureau, "Child Welfare Practice to Address Racial Disproportionality and Disparity," Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (April 2021), available at govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-HE-PURL-gpo159394/pdf/GOVPUB-HE-PURL-gpo159394.pdf.
[27] Lincoln Rice, *The Ethics of Protection: Reimagining Child Welfare in an Anti-Black Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), xix.
[28] See Lori A. Legano, Larry W. Desch, Stephen A. Messner, et al., "Maltreatment of Children With Disabilities," *Pediatrics* 147, no. 5 (May 2021), doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-050920.
[29] "People Living With Disabilities" (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2011), 9, 15.
[30] HHS, "Child Maltreatment 2022."
[31] David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, and Deirdre Colburn, "Prevalence of Online Sexual Offenses Against Children in the U.S.," *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 10 (October 14, 2022), doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.34471.
[32] Ibid.
[33] John C. Thomas and Jonathan Kopel, "Male Victims of Sexual Assault: A Review of the Literature," *Behavioral Sciences* 13, no. 4 (April 2023). doi.org/10.3390/bs13040304.
[34] Victor I. Vieth, Rita Farrell, Rachel Johnson, Tomiko Mackey, et al. "Where the Boys Are: Investigating and Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse When the Victim Is Male," Zero Abuse Project, accessed January 15, 2025, tinyurl.com/dhk8x2ed.
[35] See Victor I. Vieth, "Child Abuse and the Lutheran Confessional: A Call to Elevate Christ's Teachings on Children Above Church Traditions," in Craig L. Nessan and Victor I. Vieth, eds., *Here We Stand: A Lutheran Response to Child Abuse* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2025), 221.
[36] "My parents kept me under very strict discipline, even to the point of making me timid. For the sake of a mere nut my mother beat me until the blood flowed. By such strict discipline they finally forced me into the monastery; though they meant it heartily well, I was only made timid by it. They weren't able to keep a right balance between temperament and punishment. … It's a bad thing if children and pupils lose their spirit on account of their parents and teachers." Martin Luther, Table Talk, No. 3566A, "Children Must Be Disciplined With Understanding," in Theodore G. Tappert and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. *Luther's Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1967), 54:234-235.
[37] See Vincent J. Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245-258; Christopher M. Jones, Melissa T. Merrick, and Debra E. Houry, "Identifying and Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 323, no. 1 (2019): 25-26; and Swedo et al., "Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences." For more information on ACEs, see cdc.gov/aces/about/index.html.
[38] "Gun-related Violence and Trauma" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2024), 6.
[39] Victor I. Vieth and Pete Singer, "Wounded Souls: The Need for Child Protection Professionals and Faith Leaders to Recognize and Respond to the Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse," *Mitchell Hamline Law Review* 45, no. 4, Article 6 (2019).
[40] Donald F. Walker, Henri Webb Reed, Tiffany O'Neill, et al., "Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 1, no. 2 (2009): 130–145, doi.org/10.1037/a0016211.
[41] Adam Saradjian and Dany Nobus, "Cognitive Distortions of Religious Professionals Who Sexually Abuse Children," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18, no. 8 (2003): 905-923, doi.org/10.1177/0886260503253881.
The following sources offer examples of such misuses of the Bible and theology. Some of these sources contain graphic descriptions of sexual abuse that may be disturbing to some readers. Sexual Ause Advisory Group, *Caring Well: A Report From the SBC [Southern Baptist Convention] Sexual Abuse Advisory Group* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2018); and Victor I. Vieth, "Lessons From the SBC Sexual Abuse Crisis," *Faith & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (Winter 2023), p. 61-73, www.civicresearchinstitute.com/online/PDF/FIPV-1503-06-Vieth-SBC.pdf. See also Basyle Tchividjian and Victor Vieth, "When the Child Abuser Has a Bible: Investigating Child Maltreatment Sanctioned or Condoned by a Religious Leader" *Faculty Publications and Presentations* 53 (2011), digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lusol_fac_pubs/53; and Victor I. Vieth, "The Need for a Trauma-informed

Lutheran Theology: A Case Study on Lutheran Study Bibles," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 51, no. 3 (July 2024), 52-66, currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/472.

[42] See Marcia J. Bunge, "Lutheran Foundations for Promoting Child Well-being and Addressing Child Maltreatment," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 24, no. 2 (April/May 2024), learn.elca.org/jle/lutheran-foundations-for-promoting-child-well-being-and-addressing-child-maltreatment/; Timothy J. Wengert, "'No Saxon Children Were Harmed in the Making of This Catechism': Luther's Catechisms of 1529 and Child Abuse," in Nessan and Vieth, eds., *Here We Stand*, 28-44, and Martin J. Lohrmann, "Support for Children in the Lutheran Confessions," in Nessan and Vieth, eds., *Here We Stand*, 45-57; and Vieth, "Lutheran Study Bibles."

[43] See Stephen L. Smallbone, William L. Marshall, and Richard Wortley, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Evidence, Policy, and Practice* (Willan Publishing, 2008), 9-10; and Cory Jewell Jensen, "Understanding and Working With Adult Sex Offenders in the Church," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 3 (July 2018): 38, currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/133; and Stephanie Kewley, Anthony R. Beech, and Leigh Harkins, "Examining the Role of Faith Community Groups With Sexual Offenders: A Systematic Review," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 25 (2015): 147, dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2015.07.016.

[44] For example, a 2023 study found that only 35 of 65 ELCA synod websites provided policies specifically addressing child sexual abuse, and only 17 synods had information on reporting suspected abuse that included up-to-date contact information for law enforcement. ELCA Quality of Call Initiative for Women in Ministry, "Sexual Boundary Violations in the ELCA: Prevalence, Policy and Prevention" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), July 10, 2023, resources.elca.org/quality-of-call-initiative/elca-sexual-boundary-violations-full-report.

[45] For more on this history and current work being done to identify victims and provide opportunities for healing, visit the ELCA Truth-Seeking and Truth-Telling Initiative at elca.org/our-work/congregations-and-synods/ministries-of-diverse-cultures-and-communities/indigenous-ministries-and-tribal-relations/indian-boarding-schools.

[46] As Lutheran theologian Marcia J. Bunge notes, "The neighbor includes all people, regardless of age or other distinctions, and all have equal worth." Bunge, "Lutheran Foundations," para. 9.

[47] Indeed, the punishments described in some verses of the Bible are unthinkable today. Deuteronomy 21:18-21, for example, teaches that a "stubborn and rebellious son" should be stoned to death by the men of the city. Proverbs calls for punishments that "wound" those in error (Proverbs 20:30). This punitive and violent model of authority was challenged by early Jewish commentators, whose translations of "lashes" or "flogging" referred to the use of words rather than weapons. See Michael Avioz, "The Law of the Disrespectful Son and Daughter," *The Torah* (2015), thetorah.com/article/the-law-of-the-disrespectful-son-and-daughter; and Vieth, *On This Rock*, 12. See also Cindy Miller-Perrin and Robin Perrin, "Changing Attitudes About Spanking Among Conservative Christians Using Interventions That Focus on Empirical Research Evidence and Progressive Biblical Interpretations," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 71 (2017): 516, doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.03.015. Infanticide and exposure (leaving a vulnerable child, often an infant, exposed without shelter so that they would die) were common enough in the ancient world that Jewish and Christian writers specifically condemned the practice.

[48] Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 401.108.

[49] "If God's Word and will are placed first and are observed, nothing ought to be considered more important than the will and word of our parents, provided that these, too, are subordinated to God and are not set into opposition to the preceding commandments," Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 402.116.

[50] Ibid, 409.168.

[51] Ibid, 407.150.

[52] *Our Calling in Education*, 16.

[53] This section of this social message draws substantially and at times directly on the extensive work of Lutheran theologian Marcia J. Bunge. From among her many writings, see especially "Lutheran Foundations," 2024; "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006), 549-578; Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); and Marica J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2021). See also Bunge's chapter and other chapters in Nessan and Vieth, *Here We Stand*. Some of these principles are also found in the ELCA's social

statement *Our Calling in Education* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007), which also drew heavily on Bunge's work.
[54] *Our Calling in Education*, 15.
[55] Tappert and Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, 44:13, "A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage."
[56] *Our Calling in Education*, 15.
[57] *Our Calling in Education*, 15.
[58] "Human Rights," 4.
[59] The ELCA further affirms, "Human life in all phases of its development is God-given and, therefore, has intrinsic value, worth, and dignity." ELCA, *Abortion* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991), 2. Theologian Karl Rahner echoed this view of children's dignity as inherent, writing, "The grace of childhood is not merely the pledge of the grace of adulthood." Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8, trans. David Bourke (Seabury Press, 1977), 37.
[60] *Our Calling in Education*, 15.
[61] Through the shepherd boy David, God teaches an important lesson about strength and leadership (1 Samuel 17). Young Elihu, whose youth made him "timid," speaks a bold word of faith and truth to Job and his friends (Job 32:6-9). The unnamed girl held captive in Namaan's household (2 Kings 5:1-14) risks her own safety to declare to the Aramean Namaan that the God of Israel can cure his leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14). See also Amy Lindemann Allen, "Baptism and Children in Mark's Vision of the Realm of God," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47, no. 4 (Fall 2020), 31-35.
[62] "Human Rights" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2017), 11.
[63] *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2012), 12.
[64] "Protecting the Civil Rights of Palestinian Children," ELCA social policy resolution CA19.02.06h, 2019.
[65] "Affirming AMMPARO Strategy," ELCA social policy resolution CA16.02.03m, 2016.
[66] *Our Calling in Education*, 15.
[67] "Human Rights," 11-12. See also *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 6-7; *Faith, Sexism, and Justice*, 7 and 48-50; and *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999), 10-17.
[68] For a discussion of the moral demands of respecting and promoting well-being in the community of life, see *Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2011), 16-20.
[69] "Human Rights," 6.
[70] *Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility*, 25.
[71] "This church will work with all people to craft fair and comprehensive laws particularly aimed at protecting the weakest and most vulnerable among us, especially children, from sexual harm." *Human Sexuality*, 35.
[72] "Patients have a right to refuse unduly burdensome treatments which are disproportionate to the expected benefits." "End-of-life Decisions" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1992), 3.
[73] This church calls for government enforcement of regulations and names child labor as an "exploitative … labor practice." *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood*, 10.
[74] ELCA teaching supports the prosecution of "any individual who commits a sexual crime against a minor, including people in leadership positions in the church … [and] expects that all church leaders will report all instances of suspected child abuse." *Human Sexuality*, 25.
[75] See *For Peace in God's World* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1995).
[76] Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[77] *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, HHS Publication No. 14-4884, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014), Rockville, Md., 10. Available at samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-approaches-programs. A trauma-informed approach empowers people experiencing trauma to define when these principles are present. For example, "safety is not defined by leadership or those with more power; it is defined by the person who experienced the trauma"; see Pete Singer, "Toward a More Trauma-informed Church: Equipping Lutheran Congregations to Prevent and Respond to Abuse," in Nessan and Vieth, eds. *Here We Stand*, 373.
[78] For these and many more examples of trauma-informed practices, see Singer, "Toward a More Trauma-Informed Church," 363-391.

[79] The ELEA, a ministry of ELCA schools and learning centers, provides a wide array of resources related to child protection and trauma-informed ministry with children. See elcaschools.org/educational-resources/.
[80] *The Church and Criminal Justice*, 21.
[81] "This church calls for the adoption of preventive measures, including educational programs, appropriate policies, and screening of individuals who care for, supervise, or work with children within this church" (*Human Sexuality*, 25).
[82] The Office of the Secretary of the ELCA provides resources, including sample policies for child abuse prevention and information on making a report, online at elca.org/about/churchwide/office-of-the-secretary/legal-issues/sexual-misconduct-prevention. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have policy recommendations for organizations serving children and youth. See Janet Saul and Natalie C. Audage, "Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures" (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007), cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/programs/index.html.
[83] *The Church and Criminal Justice*, 25, 29.
[84] "Congregations that contemplate allowing anyone who has been convicted of a sexual offense or who the congregation believes may present a danger to children or others should prayerfully realize that we also are called to protect the innocent and vulnerable. When relating to those who present such a concern, congregations should act with extraordinary care"; see *The Church and Criminal Justice*, 27.
[85] *Human Sexuality*, 25.
[86] *Human Sexuality*, 25.
[87] ELCA, "Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions," 7.45, 37. See also *Human Sexuality*, 25.
[88] "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2021), definition 16 and sections B.4, B.5, B.9, and B.11.
[89] See ELCA, "Constitution, Bylaws," 20.22.23 and 20.23.06. The trauma of child abuse allegations within a worshiping community should be considered as "adversely affecting" the local community.
[90] See Chapter 20 of ELCA, "Constitution, Bylaws" and "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline."
[91] Most experts suggest that online resources be "one click away" from a homepage for ease of access.
[92] Such programs include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, and school breakfast and lunch programs.
[93] Recent research found that publicly funded paid family leave led to significantly lower reports of child maltreatment and a reduction in removal of children from their homes. Lindsey Rose Bullinger, Kerri M. Raissian, Bart Klika, Melissa Merrick, at al., "More Than Snuggles: The Effect of Paid Family Leave on Infant Maltreatment," *Child Maltreatment* (2026), published online ahead of print, doi.org/10.1177/10775595251318939.
[94] Researchers from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that, during the years 2011-2022, child maltreatment reports declined 11% following the adoption of a state paid sick leave mandate. Monica Deza, Johanna Catherine Maclean, and Alberto Ortega, "Paid Sick Leave and Maltreatment," National Bureau of Economic Research (May 2025), doi.org/10.3386/w33758.
[95] "Gun Violence Prevention," Social Policy Resolution, CA16.02.031.
[96] "Guns in the home increase the risk of use and extend the power dynamic of abusers to threaten and control." "Gun-related Violence and Trauma" (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2024), 10.
[97] As part of a multidisciplinary team, chaplains can play a vital role in providing spiritual support to survivors of abuse. This role requires specialized training. See Vieth and Singer, "Wounded Souls" (2019), 1228-1230.
[98] Massachusetts Legislative Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention, "Guidelines and Tools for the Development of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention and Intervention Plans by Youth-serving Organizations in Massachusetts," June 2017, 34, safekidsthrive.org/the-report/key-sections/section-2-screening-and-background-checks-for-selecting-employees-and-volunteers/.
[99] Phone numbers for reporting in each state can be found at childwelfare.gov/state-child-abuse-and-neglect-reporting-numbers/.
[100] For more information, see the ELCA's "Photo Guidelines for Congregations," available at resources.elca.org.