

A Draft Social Message on Child Protection

This draft social message is being considered by the ELCA and does not represent official ELCA teaching or policy.

1 *“Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the*
2 *kingdom of heaven belongs.’” —Matthew 19:14*

3
4 *“In our modern age the church has made a reputation for being an unsafe place. Not only do*
5 *unbelievers feel unsafe when misjudged or scrutinized by the church, but many believers in Christ*
6 *have left the church because of the issue of safety. As a survivor of sexual child abuse myself and a*
7 *believer ... I personally believe that the majority of the church in our nation does not understand*
8 *how to respond to abuse because there is a lack of knowledge.” —David Linwah Lam, “An Abuse*
9 *Survivor Speaks to the Church”¹*

11 **I. Introduction**

12 The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rejoices that as “Jesus invited the children (Mark
13 10:13-16; cf. Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17) ... so we are to welcome children, teaching and
14 learning from them in ways that recognize their dignity and complexity.”² Holy Scripture invites
15 Christians to welcome children as moral teachers and models of faith, and the Lutheran
16 Confessions lift up children as gifts that call the church to a vocation of responsibility.

17
18 Though recognizing the special responsibilities of parents and caregivers to children, the inherent
19 dignity of children calls all adults within the church and society to responsibility for their well-being,
20 as described in this social message.

21
22 Remembering this calling and confronting the stark, tragic realities of child maltreatment today,
23 this church remembers Jesus’ words, laments the many ways the body of Christ has failed to
24 welcome or protect children, and recommits the ELCA to the protection, care, and nurturing of
25 children.

27 **II. Understanding child maltreatment**

28 *“It’s very scary to think that an adult in your life is bad, and sometimes it’s totally confusing because*
29 *he does other things too. ... Maybe he is even nice to you or helps you with other things when he is*
30 *not hurting you. This does not mean that he is allowed to do to you what he or she is doing. And*
31 *people can be a lot of things at once.”³*

32
33 Child maltreatment is tragically common and includes “all types of physical and/or emotional ill-
34 treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in

¹ David Linwah Lam, “An Abuse Survivor Speaks to the Church,” Religion News Service, July 31, 2015, religionnews.com/2015/07/31/an-abuse-survivor-speaks-to-the-church/.

² *Our Calling in Education* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007), 14.

³ Afnan Attrach-Najjar, Dafna Tener, and Carmit Katz, “‘One Day It Will Be Over, and You Will See Other Landscapes ... You Are Not Alone’: Adult Survivors’ Messages to Children Undergoing Child Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 38, no. 19-20 (2023): 11145, doi.org/10.1177/08862605231178496.

35 actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a
36 relationship of responsibility, trust, or power.”⁴

37
38 In the U.S., at least 1 in 7⁵—and as many as 1 in 4⁶—children experience abuse or neglect. Even
39 these rates may be too low, given that child maltreatment is often unreported. Tragically the Bible
40 and theology often have been—and continue to be—used to justify, defend, or excuse
41 maltreatment. With this social message, the ELCA rejects the manipulation of the Bible or theology
42 to justify or excuse the intentional harming of children.

43
44 Perpetrators of child maltreatment can be parents, nonparents, unrelated caregivers, siblings, or
45 other children. Regardless of its specific form or the relationship or age of the perpetrator, all types
46 of maltreatment represent a violation of the child and a violation of responsibilities for care,
47 protection, and justice.

48 **What are some forms of child maltreatment?**

49
50
51 *Neglect*
52 More than 75% of fatalities⁷ related to child maltreatment involve the failure to meet a child’s basic
53 needs, such as “housing, food, clothing, education, access to medical care, and having feelings
54 validated and appropriately responded to.”⁸ Child neglect is the most common form of
55 maltreatment in the United States.⁹ Though physical, medical, and emotional neglect differ greatly,
56 each involves a failure to meet the minimum needs of a child for health and well-being. Neglect in
57 early childhood is associated with later impairments in language development, cognition, and long-
58 term physical health.¹⁰

59
60 **Physical or material neglect** involves the failure of a responsible adult to provide for the child’s
61 bodily needs, including but not limited to adequate food, water, shelter, and clean clothing. Legally
62 and ethically, physical neglect of a child is different from conditions created solely by household

⁴ “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, 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 Report 2022,” 2024, www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Casey L. Brown, Musa Yilanli, and Angela L. Rabbitt, et al., *Child Physical Abuse and Neglect* (StatPearls Publishing, 2024).

⁷ HHS, “Child Maltreatment Report 2022,” 55.

⁸ Rebecca T. Leeb, Leonard J. Paulozzi, Cindi Melanson, et al., “Child Maltreatment Surveillance: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements,” U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008, stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/11493.

⁹ Nearly 80% of maltreated children experience neglect. Brown et al.

¹⁰ 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.

63 poverty or food insecurity. Poverty, coupled with inadequate public support, makes it difficult for
64 loving parents or caregivers to provide for a child’s needs, despite the adult’s desire to do so.

65
66 Substance abuse by parents and caregivers can increase the risk of child neglect, because adults
67 may be unable to provide care due to incapacitation or addiction. Inadequate knowledge or
68 preparation for raising children can also contribute to neglect, as when a new parent or caregiver
69 simply does not know how best to meet a child’s needs.

70
71 **Medical neglect** is the “failure to provide prescribed medical care or treatment or failure to seek
72 appropriate medical care in a timely manner” and disproportionately affects children with chronic
73 illnesses and disabilities.¹¹ This dangerous form of neglect is challenging to determine and is often
74 subjective. Parents and guardians have the responsibility to make difficult choices about medical
75 care, and at times, this can legitimately involve the refusal of certain forms of care. When adults
76 forego necessary medical care, however, the consequences can be fatal.¹²

77
78 *“In 1989 a Minneapolis Christian Science nurse attended to 11-year-old Ian Lundman for five hours
79 as he lay in a diabetic coma. She observed his vomiting, labored breathing, excessive urination,
80 facial spasms, and clenched teeth. Her concept of care was to give him drops of water through a
81 straw and to tie a sandwich bag and washcloth around his scrotum. She did not call for medical
82 help or ask his mother to obtain it. Later in a wrongful death case she testified that the only thing
83 she had been taught specific to the care of children was how to cut sandwiches in interesting
84 shapes.”¹³*

85
86 This form of neglect is complicated by religious beliefs. Some believe that faith and prayer give
87 individuals power over disease, and reliance on trained medical care reflects distrust of God or a
88 lack of faith. The freedom of parents or guardians to follow their religious beliefs can conflict with
89 the rights of children to adequate, needed medical care. While recognizing the complexity of this
90 conflict, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that “parents may be free to become martyrs
91 themselves. But it does not follow they are free, in identical circumstances, to make martyrs of their
92 children.”¹⁴ Despite this, the health of children in the U.S. and around the world continues to be at
93 risk due to religious beliefs about healing.

94
95 *Abuse*

96 **Emotional or psychological abuse** occurs when parents or caregivers repeatedly fail to provide
97 the emotional support, nurturing, or availability that children need, or when adults undermine a
98 child’s basic psychological needs, such as the need for safety and support. This can include
99 ignoring children, repeatedly shaming or threatening them, dismissing their emotions, being

¹¹ 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.

¹² Over 8% of child maltreatment fatalities involve medical neglect. See HHS, “Child Maltreatment Report 2022,” 55.

¹³ Cited in Rita Swan, “Faith-based Medical Neglect: For Providers and Policymakers,” *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 13 (2020): 346, doi.org/10.1007/s40653-020-00323-z.

¹⁴ Prince v. Massachusetts, 321 U.S. 158 (1944), cited in Stirling, “Understanding Medical Neglect,” 274.

100 emotionally unavailable or distant toward them, or denying comfort during distress.¹⁵ As they
101 develop, children need emotional connection and support, including the opportunity to build trust
102 through caring relationships with adults. When this does not happen because of emotional abuse
103 or neglect, the long-term consequences can be similar to the effects of physical abuse.

104
105 Nearly 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. reports experiencing **physical abuse** as a child.¹⁶ Physical abuse
106 often starts as an attempt at discipline that escalates into harm that threatens the physical safety
107 of the child.¹⁷ The use of physical punishment, such as spanking or hitting, is often rooted in family
108 and religious culture and tradition. Parents or caregivers may learn spanking from their own
109 experiences of physical or corporal punishment.

110
111 In the U.S., more than 12%—*nearly 1 in 8*—of children are victims of child **sexual abuse**.¹⁸ More
112 than 15% of children experience online sexual abuse.¹⁹ Due to the high prevalence of child sexual
113 abuse in the U.S., this church recognizes the likelihood that nearly every worshiping community
114 within the ELCA includes members or guests who are survivors of child sexual abuse.

115
116 Sexual abuse can include but is not limited to inappropriate touching, exposure to pornography,
117 exposing genitals to children or inducing children to do the same, sexual or genital activity, or sexual
118 conversations, flirting, or sexual innuendos shared with children or youth, either in person, online,
119 or via phone or texting.

120
121 This church has declared the sexual abuse of children to be a serious sin and supports the
122 prosecution of “any individual who commits a sexual crime against a minor, including people in
123 leadership positions in the church.”²⁰ Work has been done within this church to provide
124 congregations and leaders with some information and resources they need to address abuse. Yet
125 many leaders do not know how to access resources or information, and resources may not be
126 available or easy to find.²¹ Thus many rostered ministers and lay leaders feel called to minister to

¹⁵ American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) Taskforce, “Practice Guidelines: The Investigation and Determination of Suspected Psychological Maltreatment in Children and Adolescents,” APSAC, 2019, apsac.org/practice-guidelines/.

¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Swedo, Maria V. Aslam, Linda L. Dahlberg, 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.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Swedo et al., “Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences,” 713.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ *Human Sexuality*, 25.

²¹ 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.

127 and support victims of abuse but often lack training and awareness of what to do if they suspect a
128 child has been abused.

129
130 Internationally, 1.7 million children are victimized by commercial sexual exploitation, and 8.7
131 million are victims of forced marriages that often involve child sexual abuse by their spouses.²²
132 Children living in poverty, displaced children, and children with disabilities are at higher risk of
133 commercial sexual exploitation. Women and girls are at significantly higher risk of forced labor and
134 forced marriage. This is not just a serious concern outside of the United States; trafficking for sexual
135 exploitation occurs within the U.S. as well.²³

136
137 This church mourns the rates of child maltreatment and the numbers of children abused within
138 families or in systems of trafficking and exploitation. Each of these numbers represents a child,
139 created by God, whose present and future well-being is threatened. Yet this church also recognizes
140 the many other children who are not represented in these numbers due to vast underreporting of
141 abuse and neglect. Despite valid concerns for justice for those who are falsely accused of harming
142 a child, abuse, particularly sexual abuse in the U.S., is far more likely to be unreported than to be
143 falsely reported. Each unreported case represents a vulnerable child who may not receive the
144 support, care, and protection they need to recover from this trauma.

145 146 **What factors increase children’s risk of maltreatment?**

147
148 Many factors affect the prevalence and risk of child maltreatment. These factors point to solutions
149 for reducing risk and aid the church in understanding the individual sin of abuse within the context
150 of structural sin, including poverty, racism, ableism, and sexism.

151
152 Financial uncertainty, unemployment, and a lack of paid parental leave can exacerbate parental
153 stress and increase the risk of physical abuse and neglect.²⁴ Neglect, both physical and medical, is
154 more likely in households facing poverty. Indeed, poverty is the leading contributor to child neglect
155 in the U.S., though “poverty alone” is not legal evidence of physical neglect in most states.²⁵
156 Similarly, poverty and a lack of adequate health insurance make medical neglect more likely.²⁶

157
158 Poverty is also tied to increasingly punitive responses to maltreatment. For example, household
159 poverty is a strong predictor of decisions by child protective services to remove a child from a
160 home, despite laws in most U.S. states that prohibit defining poverty on its own as evidence of
161 neglect.²⁷ Removing a child from their home is a serious decision that, even when done with good
162 intentions, can have debilitating consequences for the health and well-being of the child and their
163 family.

²² International Labour Organization et al., “Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage” (International Labour Organization, 2022).

²³ Hannabeth Franchino-Olsen, “Vulnerabilities Relevant for Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children/Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: A Systematic Review of Risk Factors,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 22, no. 1 (January 2021): 99-111, doi.org/10.1177/1524838018821956.

²⁴ “Unemployment Linked With Child Maltreatment,” American Academy of Pediatrics, ScienceDaily, last modified October 5, 2010, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/10/101003081452.htm.

²⁵ *In re C.J.V.*, 746 S.E.2d 783 (Ga. Ct. App. 2013).

²⁶ Frasier et al., “Medical Care and Parents,” 279.

²⁷ R.L. Stollar, *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Inc., 2023), 215.

164
165 Racism is also a factor in decisions to remove children from homes, despite federal and state laws
166 prohibiting discrimination. Black children, for example, are twice as likely as white children to be
167 removed from a home even when the circumstances of maltreatment are otherwise similar.²⁸
168 Because of experiences of racism and discrimination, many parents of color are justifiably
169 distrustful of law enforcement and child protection systems. This may make them less likely to seek
170 help when they need it, fearful that asking for help may separate them from their children.

171
172 Children with disabilities are more likely to experience physical abuse, medical neglect, and sexual
173 abuse. They are also vulnerable to placement in care situations without adequate protection from
174 abuse.²⁹ In some cases, lack of medical insurance or adequate social support can threaten the
175 ability of a family to care for a child living with disabilities. In too many cases, however,
176 maltreatment arises from the failure to recognize the worth and dignity of children with disabilities.
177 This church calls upon and encourages congregations to “find appropriate ways to support
178 caregivers of people who live with disabilities” and affirms the rights of children with disabilities to
179 equal protection and freedom from abuse or neglect.³⁰

180
181 Cases of reported sexual abuse are more likely to involve girls as victims.³¹ Transgender children
182 and boys, however, face particular barriers that prevent reporting.³² Transgender children may fear
183 that they will not be listened to or that they will be revictimized. Boys may fear that adults and other
184 children will question their masculinity, strength, or sexuality.³³ Media depictions of abuse of boys
185 by female adults often portray the perpetrators as seductive or coy and the male victims as willful
186 participants in the abuse. This harmful narrative contributes to the stigma boys face as victims of
187 child sexual abuse and makes boys less likely to report abuse and more likely to delay disclosure—
188 and thus less likely to get the emotional and psychological support they need.³⁴

189 190 **What are the consequences of maltreatment for children?**

191
192 *“My parents kept me under very strict discipline, even to the point of making me timid. For the sake*
193 *of a mere nut my mother beat me until the blood flowed. By such strict discipline they finally forced*
194 *me into the monastery; though they meant it heartily well, I was only made timid by it. They weren’t*

²⁸ Lincoln Rice, *The Ethics of Protection: Reimagining Child Welfare in an Anti-Black Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), xix.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ “People Living With Disabilities” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2011), 9, 15.

³¹ HHS, “Child Maltreatment Report 2022.”

³² John C. Thomas and Jonathan Kopel, “Male Victims of Sexual Assault: A Review of the Literature,” *Behavioral Sciences* 13, no. 304 (2023), doi.org/10.3390/bs13040304. See also Marudan Sivagurunathan, Treena Orchard, Joy C. MacDermid, et al., “Barriers and Facilitators Affecting Self-disclosure Among Male Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse: The Service Providers’ Perspective,” *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 88 (2019): 455-465, doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.08.015.

³³ Thomas and Kopel, “Male Victims,” 5-6.

³⁴ Victor I. Vieth, Rita Farrell, Rachel Johnson, 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.

195 *able to keep a right balance between temperament and punishment. ... It's a bad thing if children*
196 *and pupils lose their spirit on account of their parents and teachers.” —Martin Luther³⁵*
197

198 Child neglect and abuse can have significant, long-term consequences. Survivors of child
199 maltreatment face severe emotional and psychological harm, including anger, guilt, and shame,
200 and higher rates of suicidal ideation and self-harm, even years after the maltreatment has ended.
201 These adverse childhood experiences can even have long-term physical risks, including higher
202 rates of cancer, heart disease, liver disease, sexually transmitted infections, obesity, smoking,
203 substance abuse, and sleep disturbances.³⁶
204

205 The ripple effects of trauma caused by abuse and neglect can impact victims of abuse, their
206 families, and the wider community, and trauma's effects can linger across generations.³⁷ Trauma
207 can threaten human agency and, in the case of children, can inhibit healthy psychological,
208 emotional, physical, and sexual development.
209

210 Children victimized by abuse also can experience deep spiritual injury, such as guilt, anger, and
211 persistent beliefs that God is unfair. This is more likely if the perpetrator is a leader in the church or
212 if church teachings or the Bible are used to justify abuse, maintain secrecy, or deny justice to
213 victims.³⁸ The risk of spiritual injury points to the importance of supportive pastoral and spiritual
214 care of survivors, which many professional clinicians are not equipped to provide. Care that attends
215 to the spiritual needs of survivors may be able to moderate symptoms of trauma and can be an
216 important step toward healing.³⁹
217

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

219

220 *“The first adult to hit me was an ELCA deacon. She backhanded me in the mouth as she drove me*
221 *to a church youth event. I didn't tell anyone. Why would I? Being a boy, all they would ask me is,*
222 *‘What did you do to deserve it?’”*
223

224 This social message recognizes with lament the Christian Church's own responsibility for the
225 spiritual injury of survivors of child abuse and the harm caused by child maltreatment.
226

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ 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., “Risk Factor Surveillance.”

³⁷ “Gun-related Violence and Trauma” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2024), 6.

³⁸ 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).

³⁹ 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.

227 Christian beliefs and the Bible have been used frequently to justify or even encourage sexual
228 abuse.⁴⁰ Distortions of the Bible have been used to encourage physical abuse of children. Religious
229 descriptions of parental authority as absolute have left children feeling powerless when victimized.
230 Distorted teachings on forgiveness and grace often seem to excuse or enable abusers.

231
232 Churches, as communities that are assumed to be safe, have allowed perpetrators access to
233 children, both through insufficient protection policies and unclear or inconsistent responses to
234 allegations of abuse. Indeed, some experts suggest that sexual abusers of children may seek out
235 faith communities due to a lack of policies and easy access to children.⁴¹

236
237 Inauthentic and disingenuous actions, taken under the guise of “child protection” and supported by
238 the church, have caused grievous harm. The Indian boarding school era in the U.S. and Canada,
239 made possible by the involvement of churches and church leaders, enabled the abuse of
240 thousands of children for decades. This movement was publicly justified by false appeals to the
241 “best interests” of Native and Indigenous children, who were separated from their families,
242 communities, and culture, and placed in residential centers of rampant abuse. Though boarding
243 schools have closed, healing continues to be needed for the many people impacted by this history.
244 Moreover, racism continues to shape policies that separate children of color from their families,
245 communities, and culture, and this demands our attention.

246
247 Failure to respond effectively to the consequences of abuse has perpetuated the harm done to
248 victims. Church leaders who abuse children are often treated with grace and forgiveness, even as
249 their victims are treated with suspicion. Churches have often encouraged victims to rush to
250 forgiveness without paying sufficient attention to their trauma, the complexity of forgiveness, or the
251 future safety of other children. Failure to address the spiritual harm caused by abuse is a serious
252 and grievous abdication of the church’s responsibility to care for “these little ones” (Matthew 18:6)
253 and their faith.

254
255 The ELCA recognizes that, too often, the Christian Church has:

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

261
262 This confession invites all within the ELCA to recommit to the church’s calling to protect children
263 and to the good news of Jesus Christ for all victims:

- 264 • *You are not broken.*
- 265 • *You are not guilty.*

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ See Stephen L. Smallbone, William L. Marshall, and Richard Wortley, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Evidence, Policy, and Practice* (Willan Publishing, 2008), 9-10; 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.

- 266 • *You are not required to forgive.*
267 • *You are not alone.*

268

269 **III. Elements of a Lutheran theology of childhood**

270

271 This commitment inspires the need for a theological understanding of children and the
272 responsibilities of the church and the community, grounded in Holy Scripture and the Lutheran
273 Confessions.

274

275 **What can Christians learn from Jesus' words and actions toward children?**

276

277 Some Christians look to verses about the use of "the rod" (Proverbs 22:15, 13:24) as biblical
278 counsel for discipline of children. However, many of the punishments described in the Bible are
279 unthinkable today. Deuteronomy 21:18-21, for example, teaches that a "stubborn and rebellious
280 son" should be stoned to death by the men of the city. Proverbs calls for punishments that "wound"
281 those in error (Proverbs 20:30). Thus use of "the rod" in the Bible should be understood in the
282 context of treatment of children that was, at times, brutal and inhumane.⁴²

283

284 These teachings reflect the ancient world's view of children more than they reflect Jesus' model of
285 loving authority and his teachings on children. Jesus' welcome and affirmation of children were
286 revolutionary transformations in how we are to view children. The ancient world viewed children as
287 commodities (2 Kings 4:1); Jesus viewed children as signs of the coming reign of God (Matthew
288 18:3-6). The ancient world punished children with pain and even death; Jesus rebukes those who
289 refuse to welcome and care for children (Matthew 19:13-15).

290

291 This church lifts up Jesus' model of loving authority to parents and caregivers, who exercise
292 authority as "God's representatives" to their children.⁴³ Though the Lutheran Confessions name
293 obedience to parents as a "great, good, and holy work ... assigned to children," parental authority is
294 subject to God and is not without limits.⁴⁴ In the Large Catechism, Luther reminds us that God
295 "does not want scoundrels or tyrants in this office or authority [of parents]."⁴⁵

296

297 The affirmation of parental authority and the counsel for children to obey parents found in the Large
298 Catechism depend on two foundations: first, that parents or caregivers provide adequate physical,
299 emotional, and spiritual care for children, and second, that they do not rule in a tyrannical way that
300 harms the spirit of the child.⁴⁶

⁴² 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.

⁴³ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 401.108.

⁴⁴ "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.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 409.168.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 407.150.

301
302 The ELCA has affirmed the responsibilities of parents, caregivers, the church, and society to
303 children in *Our Calling in Education*:

304
305 Christians enrich our welcoming of children to a life of faith by holding together ...
306 diverse perspectives on [who] they are. ... Remembering that Jesus saw children as
307 teachers of the faith, we will listen attentively to them, honor their insights and
308 questions, and learn from them. We will give special attention to children who are
309 most vulnerable and those who have been wounded, and we will become stronger
310 advocates for them.⁴⁷

311
312 **What do the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions, and ELCA social teachings say about children?**

313
314 A Lutheran theology of childhood may be grounded in the following principles.

315
316 1. *Children are gifts of God entrusted to the world.*

317
318 Luther referred to children as “eternal treasure[s]”⁴⁸ and regarded the care and education of
319 children as sacred responsibilities. In the Bible, children are sources of joy and celebration
320 (Genesis 21:6-7; Luke 1:14). Thus, Christians recognize children as gifts of God entrusted to the
321 care of families, church, and society.

322
323 Viewing children as “gifts” focuses Christians’ gaze on God as the giver rather than on ourselves as
324 receivers. The giftedness of children is not a transactional transfer of ownership that might allow for
325 exploitation but a holy entrusting to adults’ care.

326
327 2. *Children are under the bondage of sin—just like everyone else.*

328
329 The ELCA teaches, “Recognizing that children are sinful is never a warrant to abuse and treat them
330 inhumanely; rather it is a caution against an idealistic view of children as primarily innocent
331 beings.”⁴⁹ Children share in the sin common to all (Romans 3:9-10), though not in a special way that
332 distinguishes them from adults. Admonishments that children—but not adults—are to be
333 physically punished for their misdeeds conflicts with the biblical understanding of humanity’s
334 shared bondage to sin.

335
336 Understanding children’s bondage to sin may also correct problematic views of children’s
337 innocence. All too often, defenders of adults who sexually abuse children portray young victims as
338 seductive, promiscuous, or otherwise lacking the innocence of childhood. Defenders of physical
339 abuse point to the lack of innocence of sinful children. Such arguments seek to diminish the evil of
340 the abuse by diminishing the innocence that has been violated.

341
342 However, what is sinful in child abuse is not the violation of innocence but the harm done to a
343 vulnerable human being. It is their vulnerability, not their innocence, that makes children worthy of
344 special care and protection.

⁴⁷ *Our Calling in Education*, 16.

⁴⁸ Tappert and Lehmann, *Luther’s Works*, 44:13, “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage.”

⁴⁹ *Our Calling in Education*, 15.

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3. *Children are models and teachers of faith.*

As the church and families exercise responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of children, Christians also remember that adults have much to learn from children as they grow.

In the Bible, children often serve as examples of bold, daring faith and morality. 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.⁵⁰ 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). 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).

4. *Children are vulnerable neighbors in need of justice and compassion.*

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.”⁵¹ This teaching is especially relevant to children, who remain vulnerable to and dependent on adults in their households, the church, and the community.

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

Children, though, are more than their vulnerability. 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.”⁵² Their dignity is neither partial nor derivative but inherently present in their creation in God’s image. “The grace of childhood is not merely the pledge of the grace of adulthood.”⁵³

While children’s bodies, faith, and reason may still be developing, their dignity is not. Indeed, “Jesus reinforced the dignity of all children by welcoming and blessing them and saying that to them belongs the kingdom of heaven.”⁵⁴ This inherent dignity entitles children to justice and to freedom from exploitation and maltreatment.

The ELCA has consistently articulated four principles as means of discerning the path of justice:

⁵⁰ Elihu tells Job, “I am young in years, and you are aged; therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you. ... But truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding” (Job 32:6-9).

⁵¹ “Human Rights” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2017), 11.

⁵² “Human Rights,” 4.

⁵³ Karl Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8, trans. David Bourke (Seabury Press, 1977), 37.

⁵⁴ *Our Calling in Education*, 15.

- 384 • “The principle of *sufficiency* means meeting the basic needs of all humanity and all
385 creation.
- 386 • “The principle of *sustainability* means providing an acceptable quality of life for present
387 generations without compromising that of future generations.
- 388 • “The principle of *participation* means all are entitled to be heard and to have their interests
389 considered when decisions are made.
- 390 • “The principle of *solidarity* means that we stand together with all of God’s creation.”⁵⁵
391

392 These principles provide insight into what justice demands for children.

393
394 Sufficiency: Children have the right to have their basic needs met. Parents and caregivers should be
395 supported when they cannot meet children’s needs due to poverty or incapacity.

396
397 Sustainability: Adults have the responsibility to respect and promote⁵⁶ children’s long-term well-
398 being, which includes protecting them from the long-term consequences of maltreatment.

399
400 Participation: Children have the right to be treated as human beings with dignity, regardless of their
401 age.⁵⁷ As moral agents in development, they have the right to be educated and informed as
402 appropriate for their stage of development.⁵⁸

403
404 Solidarity: Justice demands that children have advocates for their rights in public policy and within
405 law enforcement and child protection systems. Within the church, leaders are called to act in
406 solidarity with children, especially when they are potentially threatened by adults, and to provide
407 for their safety and security.⁵⁹

408 409 **What does the ELCA teach about specific issues of justice related to children?**

410
411 ELCA social teaching aids discernment of specific issues of justice related to children.

- 412
413 • This church believes that child labor—when children are forced to work or placed by adults
414 in unsafe industries or jobs—is exploitative and calls on government to protect children
415 from exploitative practices.⁶⁰ Child labor is distinguished from jobs that youth may legally
416 and safely hold. When youth are legally able to work, they deserve the protections needed
417 for all workers from wage theft, workplace hazards, harassment, and discrimination. For
418 that reason, this church expresses concern at the potential relaxation of child labor laws.
419

⁵⁵ “Human Rights,” 11-12. See also *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 6-7; and *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999), 10-17.

⁵⁶ 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.

⁵⁷ “Human Rights,” 6.

⁵⁸ *Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility*, 25.

⁵⁹ “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.

⁶⁰ This church calls for government enforcement of regulations and names child labor as an “exploitative ... labor practice.” *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood*, 10.

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- While recognizing the practice of early marriage in some cultures, this church also raises serious concerns about the potential for harm in “early and forced marriage.”⁶¹ When a child is married to an adult, there is an inherent imbalance of power, which increases the risk of abuse and harm and violates the mutual commitment and trust on which marriage is based.⁶² This church thus rejects marriages that would couple an adult with a child or youth, especially if such a marriage involves sexual intimacy.
 - The principles of justice oblige adults to provide necessary medical care to children when needed. As Lutherans, we recognize that science and the medical arts are gifts of God for our well-being. Prayer is also a gift, and for families facing difficult medical decisions, prayer can be a source of hope, strength, and comfort. But prayer is not an adequate substitute for medical treatment in most cases. Special discernment is required when the burden of care to the patient might outweigh potential benefits.⁶³

434 **IV. Recognizing with thanks the work of child protection**

435 **How has the Christian Church contributed to child protection?**

436

437

438 This church gives thanks for those who work every day to protect and enhance the dignity of

439 children, including therapists and social workers, teachers, child abuse investigators, child

440 advocates, and those providing licensing and training for professionals who work with children. The

441 ELCA gives thanks in particular for the long history of Lutheran social ministry organizations that

442 support families and children and work to keep children in safe homes and reduce their time in

443 foster care.

444

445 This church gives thanks for leaders of children, youth, and family ministry, including outdoor

446 ministries, who faithfully nurture the spiritual and personal development of children and youth and

447 serve an essential role in protecting children and youth.

448

449 This church gives thanks for organizations, communities, and movements that foster relationships

450 and spaces where people victimized by child maltreatment can find support and advocate for

451 justice. For example, we give thanks for the ELCA truth-seeking and truth-telling initiative that raises

452 awareness of Lutheran involvement in Indian boarding schools in the U.S. and Canada and seeks to

453 foster truth-telling and healing for communities victimized by the Indian boarding school

454 movement.

455

456 Though much is being done in the ELCA, this church has much work to do to foster a future of well-

457 being for children and adults.

⁶¹ “Gender-based Violence” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2015), 2.

⁶² *Human Sexuality*, 15ff. See also *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019).

⁶³ “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.

462 **V. This church's renewed response to child abuse and neglect**

463

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

465

466 *Countering practices of harm*

467 This church is called to address scriptural misinterpretations that have been used to justify
468 violence and promote physical punishment of children. This arises from God's call for the whole
469 body of Christ to model peace and for Christians to be peacemakers.⁶⁴ Worshiping communities
470 are called to be safe spaces, free of violence, and should consider establishing buildings and
471 events as "no-hit" zones, where physical intimidation or the use of force are specifically prohibited.

472

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

476

477 *Discerning forgiveness*

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

481

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

488

489 In the Bible, forgiveness assumes a recognition of guilt (often publicly) and the active pursuit of
490 reconciliation (Matthew 5:23). While humans are not saved by our works, forgiveness nonetheless
491 does not imply a complete absence of accountability. Indeed, even the criminal on the cross whom
492 Jesus forgave first confronted his own sin and guilt (Luke 23:39-43). Though we are saved by God's
493 grace and not our confession, Lutherans understand grace as freeing us to love and serve the
494 neighbor and to confront the many ways we fall short of that responsibility.

495

496 Care, then, must be exercised in counseling survivors to forgive those who have harmed them.
497 Though some acknowledge the potential therapeutic release from bonds of anger and resentment,
498 for child victims, the trauma of abuse creates its own bonds.

499

500 To those victims, the ELCA declares that being unable to forgive is not a rejection of faith or the
501 gospel. Rather, forgiveness is a lengthy process of transforming the relationship between the
502 offender and the victim and between the victim, the offender, and the community.⁶⁵ It is neither a
503 straight path nor a single act.

504

505

506

⁶⁴ See *For Peace in God's World* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1995).

⁶⁵ Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

507 *Trauma-informed Ministry*

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

512
513 This social message encourages congregational leaders to seek training in trauma-informed care
514 that recognizes varied and complex responses to trauma. In support, ELCA colleges, universities,
515 and seminaries should find ways to provide trauma-informed care for students and trauma-
516 informed training for emerging leaders.

517
518 Victims are more than their trauma, and those who minister with them share in holy yearning for the
519 fullness of God’s promise of a time when “crying and pain will be no more” (Revelation 21:3-4).⁶⁶

520

521 **VI. Policy guidance for protecting children**

522

523 **How can church policy help prevent and address child maltreatment?**

524

525 Many rostered ministers and lay leaders in the ELCA yearn for clear policies and guidance for
526 preventing and addressing child maltreatment. This section outlines such policies, though it is not
527 exhaustive of these policies.⁶⁷ Synods and congregations are strongly encouraged to implement
528 these policies and to share information about the ELCA’s sexual misconduct prevention
529 procedures. ELCA-related partners, including partners receiving funding from the ELCA, should be
530 encouraged to implement similar child protection policies.

531

532 This message acknowledges significant costs associated with implementing these policies and the
533 need to lower financial barriers for congregations and ministries. Synods and the churchwide
534 organization should consider providing support for their implementation.

535

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

- 538 • Screenings and background checks for all staff and volunteers working with children or
539 youth.
- 540 • A six-month period of involvement with the church before new members or volunteers are
541 allowed to work with youth.
- 542 • Annual training for all paid staff on recognizing and reporting signs of maltreatment.
- 543 • Public posting of written information (for children *and* adults) about how to report abuse or
544 neglect.

⁶⁶ *The Church and Criminal Justice* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2012), 21.

⁶⁷ 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.

- 545 • A “two-deep” policy requiring at least two adults to be present at activities involving
546 children or youth, including having at least two adults involved in any online
547 communications with children or youth, such as text threads, chats, or emails.
- 548 • Sign-in and sign-out lists for events with children and youth, and clear limits on who can
549 sign a child out from an event.
- 550 • Not limiting access of children or youth to food during events such as community meals,
551 banquets, or potlucks, to reduce stigma for children living with food insecurity.
- 552 • Restrictions on photography or video recording of children and youth, including limiting
553 photography or video recording to authorized adults and requiring signed permission forms
554 for the sharing of photographs or video.
- 555 • Restricted access to private or nonvisible areas of a building during events or overnights.
556

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

562 **What policies should guide pastoral care and worship?**

563 This church and its rostered ministers have a responsibility to provide pastoral care for children and
564 youth. This church and its leaders also have the responsibility to provide for the safety of children
565 and youth in such settings. Pastoral counseling of children and youth should be done in a publicly
566 visible place or with a process for maintaining written records or reports on one-on-one counseling
567 sessions with children and youth. Care must be taken to balance privacy and safety in such
568 situations.
569

570 When child abuse occurs, many victims feel isolated and alone. The ELCA truth-seeking and truth-
571 telling initiative, organized in support of people who experienced abuse and trauma from Indian
572 boarding schools, offers important insights for the whole church, including the need to foster safe
573 spaces where victims can share their stories, receive support, and begin to work toward healing.
574

575 **When should suspected child maltreatment be reported?**

576 Sustainability as a principle of justice calls the church to consider long-term consequences of
577 abuse and demands that the church take steps to reduce the long-term harm victims can
578 experience. The ELCA has stated its support for the reporting and prosecution of adult perpetrators
579 of child sexual abuse, including noncontact sexual abuse.⁶⁸ In this social message, we extend this
580 support to all forms of child maltreatment. Reporting is one way in which survivors of abuse can
581 access the care and treatment they need.
582

583 The ELCA expects all leaders in the church—rostered and lay, volunteer and paid—to report
584 allegations or reasonable suspicions of child maltreatment to the appropriate secular authorities,
585 who are equipped to investigate allegations.
586

587 ⁶⁸ *Human Sexuality*, 25.

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

594
595 The ELCA constitution, in general, supports the confidentiality of confession and pastoral
596 counseling. This confidentiality is an important part of spiritual care. It often fosters the trust
597 necessary for people to seek spiritual care when overwhelmed by guilt, shame, or fear. However,
598 when a person seeking pastoral care or confession “intends great harm to self or others,” this
599 church recognizes an exception to the protection of confidentiality.⁶⁹ Though state laws vary on
600 rostered ministers’ status as mandated reporters, in this church, the right to confidentiality in
601 pastoral counseling or individual confession does not override the body of Christ’s clear biblical
602 mandate to protect the vulnerable. Rostered ministers thus have an obligation to report child
603 maltreatment that is ongoing or that they believe is likely to reoccur.

604
605 Overwhelming research points to the long-term negative effects of child maltreatment on the
606 physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of children, affecting them well into
607 adulthood. The connection between these experiences and future ill effects is so strong that it
608 should be considered when evaluating what constitutes “great harm” and an exception to
609 confidentiality.

610
611 Counseling perpetrators of child abuse, especially child sexual abuse, requires specific skills and
612 training that few pastors have. In humility, ministers must recognize their inability to provide such
613 specialized treatment and urge perpetrators who seek their pastoral counsel to instead seek
614 professional counseling.

615
616 The ELCA affirms that those who commit crimes and harm others “are still human beings” and “are
617 in need of accompaniment and of receiving the gift of the gospel in word and sacrament.”⁷⁰ This
618 church teaches that adults who harm children are not separated from the grace of God. However,
619 the safety of vulnerable neighbors and the community requires careful discernment and
620 boundaries for the participation of past offenders in worshiping communities and church activities.
621 As a community rooted in the gospel, we are called to accompany people who commit crimes. But
622 we are also called to protect those who are vulnerable. This requires “extraordinary care” and
623 prayerful discernment.⁷¹

624

625 **What is the ELCA’s response to abuse that occurs within the church?**

626

627 Child abuse that is perpetrated by leaders within the church can be especially traumatizing to
628 victims and faith communities. These tragedies threaten trust in the church and in God.
629 Accordingly, the ELCA’s “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline” explicitly provides that abuse of

⁶⁹ ELCA, “Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions,” 7.45, 39.

⁷⁰ *The Church and Criminal Justice*, 25 and 29.

⁷¹ “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.” *The Church and Criminal Justice*, 27.

630 another, including child abuse, sexual abuse, and abuse of family members, is conduct
631 incompatible with the ministerial office.⁷²

632
633 Because of the gravity of the violation, when a rostered minister is reported for suspected child
634 abuse, the minister should be temporarily suspended from their call during the investigation out of
635 an abundance of caution for the whole community.⁷³

636
637 In cases where a rostered minister has engaged in child abuse, the ELCA synod should promptly
638 commence appropriate disciplinary proceedings under Chapter 20 of the ELCA constitution and
639 “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline.” In these proceedings, this church urges disciplinary
640 committees to consider permanent removal from the roster when appropriate.

641
642 This church also acknowledges that victims can be retraumatized during investigations. Thus
643 special care should be provided for the protection of victims during investigations and disciplinary
644 proceedings.

645
646 **What training and resources are needed to protect and nurture children?**

647
648 Many people throughout the ELCA are inspired by the Holy Spirit to do more to protect children and
649 yearn for the training and resources to do so.

650
651 To answer this need, this message urges collaboration among synods and the churchwide
652 organization in providing training and resources for rostered ministers and lay leaders. In addition to
653 current boundaries training, rostered ministers and lay leaders should be encouraged and
654 equipped to receive training in recognizing and reporting abuse as well as guidance for preaching
655 and teaching on the topic of child maltreatment.

656
657 Seminaries are encouraged to provide coursework related to ministry with victims and perpetrators,
658 including teaching seminarians the value of recognizing the limits of their expertise in this
659 specialized area of counseling. Because Scripture is often manipulated to justify or excuse child
660 abuse, and because of the great spiritual harm done to victims, seminaries and lay training schools
661 are encouraged to equip students to interpret the Bible and theology in authentic ways that correct
662 these distortions.

663
664 Congregations, outdoor ministries, and campus ministries are encouraged to continue to provide
665 training for new staff in recognizing and reporting child abuse and child neglect. This church
666 supports their efforts to remove from paid staff and leadership any adult accused of harming a
667 child and gives thanks for ministries providing trauma-informed spiritual care and development for
668 young people.

669
670 The ELCA benefits from the resources on sexual misconduct that many synods and the churchwide
671 organization already provide. At the same time, we acknowledge a need for greater awareness and

⁷² “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.

⁷³ 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.

672 ease of access to these resources.⁷⁴ This message encourages synods and the churchwide
673 organization of the ELCA to continue developing new resources as needed and to find means to
674 ensure that such resources are easily accessible. ELCA synods and the churchwide organization
675 are also encouraged to provide resources for parents and caregivers on effective forms of
676 nonphysical discipline and theological resources that can equip the church to address child
677 maltreatment, including speaking out against religiously motivated medical neglect.

678
679 Rostered ministers and congregational leaders are encouraged to familiarize themselves with
680 existing ELCA resources on sexual misconduct, including resources on reporting child abuse and
681 preventing sexual misconduct.

682
683 In addition to providing resources and training, synods can be key partners in providing pastoral
684 care when child abuse occurs within a congregation or worshiping community.

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

686
687
688 Recognizing society’s role in protecting and caring for children, the ELCA encourages individual
689 members and the Witness in Society ministry of the churchwide organization to advocate for just,
690 effective public policies, including:

- 691 • Funding and support for households facing poverty, to reduce the risk of medical and
692 material neglect.
- 693 • Fair wages, parental leave, and paid sick leave laws, which allow caregivers time to care for
694 their children and which reduce the risk of abuse or neglect.
- 695 • Support for families of children with disabilities as well as robust oversight of schools and
696 care facilities attending to children living with disabilities.
- 697 • Robust child labor laws that prevent children from being placed in hazardous working
698 conditions.
- 699 • Effective child trafficking laws and reasonable legal limits on age of consent for marriage.
- 700 • Ratification by the U.S. of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 701 • Legislation that addresses bullying and harassment, especially when it occurs online.

702
703 During investigations of suspected child maltreatment, children can be retraumatized by
704 encounters with law enforcement, attorneys, and investigators. For this reason, the ELCA
705 recognizes the role of child advocates to accompany and shelter children during the process. This
706 church also recognizes the important role of chaplains in addressing the spiritual trauma children
707 can face both from their victimization and during investigations and court proceedings. The ELCA
708 thus encourages public policy advocacy to support the work of both child advocates and chaplains
709 and urges increased funding for both these important roles.

710 711 **VII. Conclusion: Guided by the good news of Jesus Christ**

712
713 The special calling of the church to protect, nurture, and care for children is an ongoing
714 responsibility. It demands of the church honesty about the complicity of God’s people in the
715 harming of God’s children. It also inspires hope for love and justice in the world now and for the
716 fullness of peace in the world to come.

⁷⁴ Most experts suggest that online resources be “one click away” from a homepage for ease of access.

717

718 We reflect on the words of Paul: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor
719 rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else
720 in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans
721 8:38-39).

722

723 Drawing on those words, this church declares to victims of all forms of child maltreatment:

724 We are convinced that neither your trauma, nor your pain, nor your grief, nor the injustice done to
725 you, nor the failure of adults around you, nor your anger, nor your doubt, nor your fear can separate
726 you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You were created in God’s own image, and you
727 remain God’s beloved child.

728

729 This church’s public witness will be guided by this promise. We will speak with vulnerable children
730 when they can speak, and we will speak on their behalf when they cannot find the words. We will
731 support justice for all children, and we will exercise the sacred responsibility to which God calls the
732 Christian Church, to nurture and protect these precious gifts.

733

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