

A Draft Social Message on Child Protection

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

4
5 *"In our modern age the church has made a reputation for*
6 *being an unsafe place. Not only do unbelievers feel unsafe*
7 *when misjudged or scrutinized by the church, but many*
8 *believers in Christ have left the church because of the*
9 *issue of safety. As a survivor of sexual child abuse myself*
10 *and a believer ... I personally believe that the majority of*
11 *the church in our nation does not understand how to*

12 *respond to abuse because there is a lack of knowledge.”*

13 —David Linwah Lam, “An Abuse Survivor Speaks to the
14 Church”¹

15

16 **I. Introduction**

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

26

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.

27 Though recognizing the special responsibilities of parents
28 and caregivers to children, the inherent dignity of children
29 calls all adults within the church and society to
30 responsibility for their well-being, as described in this
31 social message.

32

33 Remembering this calling and confronting the stark, tragic
34 realities of child maltreatment today, this church
35 remembers Jesus' words, laments the many ways the
36 body of Christ has failed to welcome or protect children,
37 and recommits the ELCA to the protection, care, and
38 nurturing of children.

39

40 **II. Understanding child maltreatment**

41 *"It's very scary to think that an adult in your life is bad,*
42 *and sometimes it's totally confusing because he does*
43 *other things too. ... Maybe he is even nice to you or helps*
44 *you with other things when he is not hurting you. This*

45 *does not mean that he is allowed to do to you what he or*
46 *she is doing. And people can be a lot of things at once.”³*

47

48 Child maltreatment is tragically common and includes “all
49 types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual
50 abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other
51 exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to
52 the child’s health, survival, development, or dignity in the
53 context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power.”

54 4

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.

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

55

56 In the U.S., at least 1 in 7⁵—and as many as 1 in 4⁶—
57 children experience abuse or neglect. Even these rates
58 may be too low, given that child maltreatment is often
59 unreported. Tragically the Bible and theology often have
60 been—*and continue to be*—used to justify, defend, or
61 excuse maltreatment. With this social message, the ELCA
62 rejects the manipulation of the Bible or theology to justify
63 or excuse the intentional harming of children.

64

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).

65 Perpetrators of child maltreatment can be parents,
66 nonparents, unrelated caregivers, siblings, or other
67 children. Regardless of its specific form or the relationship
68 or age of the perpetrator, all types of maltreatment
69 represent a violation of the child and a violation of
70 responsibilities for care, protection, and justice.

71

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

73

74 *Neglect*

75 More than 75% of fatalities⁷ related to child maltreatment
76 involve the failure to meet a child's basic needs, such as
77 "housing, food, clothing, education, access to medical
78 care, and having feelings validated and appropriately
79 responded to."⁸ Child neglect is the most common form of

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.

80 maltreatment in the United States.⁹ Though physical,
81 medical, and emotional neglect differ greatly, each
82 involves a failure to meet the minimum needs of a child
83 for health and well-being. Neglect in early childhood is
84 associated with later impairments in language
85 development, cognition, and long-term physical health.¹⁰

86

87 **Physical or material neglect** involves the failure of a
88 responsible adult to provide for the child's bodily needs,
89 including but not limited to adequate food, water, shelter,
90 and clean clothing. Legally and ethically, physical neglect
91 of a child is different from conditions created solely by
92 household poverty or food insecurity. Poverty, coupled
93 with inadequate public support, makes it difficult for loving

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.

94 parents or caregivers to provide for a child's needs,
95 despite the adult's desire to do so.

96

97 Substance abuse by parents and caregivers can increase
98 the risk of child neglect, because adults may be unable to
99 provide care due to incapacitation or addiction.

100 Inadequate knowledge or preparation for raising children
101 can also contribute to neglect, as when a new parent or
102 caregiver simply does not know how best to meet a child's
103 needs.

104

105 **Medical neglect** is the "failure to provide prescribed
106 medical care or treatment or failure to seek appropriate
107 medical care in a timely manner" and disproportionately
108 affects children with chronic illnesses and disabilities.¹¹

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.

109 This dangerous form of neglect is challenging to
110 determine and is often subjective. Parents and guardians
111 have the responsibility to make difficult choices about
112 medical care, and at times, this can legitimately involve
113 the refusal of certain forms of care. When adults forego
114 necessary medical care, however, the consequences can
115 be fatal.¹²

116

117 *"In 1989 a Minneapolis Christian Science nurse attended*
118 *to 11-year-old Ian Lundman for five hours as he lay in a*
119 *diabetic coma. She observed his vomiting, labored*
120 *breathing, excessive urination, facial spasms, and*
121 *clenched teeth. Her concept of care was to give him drops*
122 *of water through a straw and to tie a sandwich bag and*
123 *washcloth around his scrotum. She did not call for medical*
124 *help or ask his mother to obtain it. Later in a wrongful*
125 *death case she testified that the only thing she had been*

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

126 *taught specific to the care of children was how to cut*
127 *sandwiches in interesting shapes.”¹³*

128

129 This form of neglect is complicated by religious beliefs.
130 Some believe that faith and prayer give individuals power
131 over disease, and reliance on trained medical care reflects
132 distrust of God or a lack of faith. The freedom of parents
133 or guardians to follow their religious beliefs can conflict
134 with the rights of children to adequate, needed medical
135 care. While recognizing the complexity of this conflict, the
136 U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that “parents may be free
137 to become martyrs themselves. But it does not follow they
138 are free, in identical circumstances, to make martyrs of
139 their children.”¹⁴ Despite this, the health of children in the

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.

140 U.S. and around the world continues to be at risk due to
141 religious beliefs about healing.

142

143 *Abuse*

144 **Emotional or psychological abuse** occurs when
145 parents or caregivers repeatedly fail to provide the
146 emotional support, nurturing, or availability that children
147 need, or when adults undermine a child’s basic
148 psychological needs, such as the need for safety and
149 support. This can include ignoring children, repeatedly
150 shaming or threatening them, dismissing their emotions,
151 being emotionally unavailable or distant toward them, or
152 denying comfort during distress.¹⁵ As they develop,
153 children need emotional connection and support, including
154 the opportunity to build trust through caring relationships
155 with adults. When this does not happen because of

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/.

156 emotional abuse or neglect, the long-term consequences
157 can be similar to the effects of physical abuse.

158

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

167

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.

168 In the U.S., more than 12%—*nearly 1 in 8*—of children
169 are victims of child **sexual abuse**.¹⁸ More than 15% of
170 children experience online sexual abuse.¹⁹ Due to the high
171 prevalence of child sexual abuse in the U.S., this church
172 recognizes the likelihood that nearly every worshipping
173 community within the ELCA includes members or guests
174 who are survivors of child sexual abuse.

175

176 Sexual abuse can include but is not limited to
177 inappropriate touching, exposure to pornography,
178 exposing genitals to children or inducing children to do the

¹⁸ Swedo et al., “Prevalance 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.

179 same, sexual or genital activity, or sexual conversations,
180 flirting, or sexual innuendos shared with children or youth,
181 either in person, online, or via phone or texting.

182

183 This church has declared the sexual abuse of children to
184 be a serious sin and supports the prosecution of “any
185 individual who commits a sexual crime against a minor,
186 including people in leadership positions in the church.”²⁰

187 Work has been done within this church to provide
188 congregations and leaders with some information and
189 resources they need to address abuse. Yet many leaders
190 do not know how to access resources or information, and
191 resources may not be available or easy to find.²¹ Thus

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

192 many rostered ministers and lay leaders feel called to
193 minister to and support victims of abuse but often lack
194 training and awareness of what to do if they suspect a
195 child has been abused.

196

197 Internationally, 1.7 million children are victimized by
198 commercial sexual exploitation, and 8.7 million are victims
199 of forced marriages that often involve child sexual abuse
200 by their spouses.²² Children living in poverty, displaced
201 children, and children with disabilities are at higher risk of
202 commercial sexual exploitation. Women and girls are at
203 significantly higher risk of forced labor and forced
204 marriage. This is not just a serious concern outside of the
205 United States; trafficking for sexual exploitation occurs
206 within the U.S. as well.²³

207

America), July 10, 2023, resources.elca.org/quality-of-call-initiative/elca-sexual-boundary-violations-full-report.

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.

208 This church mourns the rates of child maltreatment and
209 the numbers of children abused within families or in
210 systems of trafficking and exploitation. Each of these
211 numbers represents a child, created by God, whose
212 present and future well-being is threatened. Yet this
213 church also recognizes the many other children who are
214 not represented in these numbers due to vast
215 underreporting of abuse and neglect. Despite valid
216 concerns for justice for those who are falsely accused of
217 harming a child, abuse, particularly sexual abuse in the
218 U.S., is far more likely to be unreported than to be falsely
219 reported. Each unreported case represents a vulnerable
220 child who may not receive the support, care, and
221 protection they need to recover from this trauma.

222

223 **What factors increase children's risk of**
224 **maltreatment?**

225

226 Many factors affect the prevalence and risk of child
227 maltreatment. These factors point to solutions for
228 reducing risk and aid the church in understanding the
229 individual sin of abuse within the context of structural sin,
230 including poverty, racism, ableism, and sexism.

231
232 Financial uncertainty, unemployment, and a lack of paid
233 parental leave can exacerbate parental stress and increase
234 the risk of physical abuse and neglect.²⁴ Neglect, both
235 physical and medical, is more likely in households facing
236 poverty. Indeed, poverty is the leading contributor to child
237 neglect in the U.S., though “poverty alone” is not legal
238 evidence of physical neglect in most states.²⁵ Similarly,

²⁴ “Unemployment Linked With Child Maltreatment,”
American Academy of Pediatrics, ScienceDaily, last
modified October 5, 2010,
[www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/10/101003081452.h
tm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/10/101003081452.htm).

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

239 poverty and a lack of adequate health insurance make
240 medical neglect more likely.²⁶

241
242 Poverty is also tied to increasingly punitive responses to
243 maltreatment. For example, household poverty is a strong
244 predictor of decisions by child protective services to
245 remove a child from a home, despite laws in most U.S.
246 states that prohibit defining poverty on its own as
247 evidence of neglect.²⁷ Removing a child from their home is
248 a serious decision that, even when done with good
249 intentions, can have debilitating consequences for the
250 health and well-being of the child and their family.

251
252 Racism is also a factor in decisions to remove children
253 from homes, despite federal and state laws prohibiting
254 discrimination. Black children, for example, are twice as

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.

255 likely as white children to be removed from a home even
256 when the circumstances of maltreatment are otherwise
257 similar.²⁸ Because of experiences of racism and
258 discrimination, many parents of color are justifiably
259 distrustful of law enforcement and child protection
260 systems. This may make them less likely to seek help
261 when they need it, fearful that asking for help may
262 separate them from their children.

263

264 Children with disabilities are more likely to experience
265 physical abuse, medical neglect, and sexual abuse. They
266 are also vulnerable to placement in care situations without
267 adequate protection from abuse.²⁹ In some cases, lack of
268 medical insurance or adequate social support can threaten

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.

269 the ability of a family to care for a child living with
270 disabilities. In too many cases, however, maltreatment
271 arises from the failure to recognize the worth and dignity
272 of children with disabilities. This church calls upon and
273 encourages congregations to “find appropriate ways to
274 support caregivers of people who live with disabilities” and
275 affirms the rights of children with disabilities to equal
276 protection and freedom from abuse or neglect.³⁰

277

278 Cases of reported sexual abuse are more likely to involve
279 girls as victims.³¹ Transgender children and boys,
280 however, face particular barriers that prevent reporting.³²

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

281 Transgender children may fear that they will not be
282 listened to or that they will be revictimized. Boys may fear
283 that adults and other children will question their
284 masculinity, strength, or sexuality.³³ Media depictions of
285 abuse of boys by female adults often portray the
286 perpetrators as seductive or coy and the male victims as
287 willful participants in the abuse. This harmful narrative
288 contributes to the stigma boys face as victims of child
289 sexual abuse and makes boys less likely to report abuse
290 and more likely to delay disclosure—and thus less likely to
291 get the emotional and psychological support they need.³⁴

292

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.

293 **What are the consequences of maltreatment**
294 **for children?**

295

296 *"My parents kept me under very strict discipline, even to*
297 *the point of making me timid. For the sake of a mere nut*
298 *my mother beat me until the blood flowed. By such strict*
299 *discipline they finally forced me into the monastery;*
300 *though they meant it heartily well, I was only made timid*
301 *by it. They weren't able to keep a right balance between*
302 *temperament and punishment. ... It's a bad thing if*
303 *children and pupils lose their spirit on account of their*
304 *parents and teachers."*—Martin Luther³⁵

305

306 Child neglect and abuse can have significant, long-term
307 consequences. Survivors of child maltreatment face severe
308 emotional and psychological harm, including anger, guilt,

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.

309 and shame, and higher rates of suicidal ideation and self-
310 harm, even years after the maltreatment has ended.
311 These adverse childhood experiences can even have long-
312 term physical risks, including higher rates of cancer, heart
313 disease, liver disease, sexually transmitted infections,
314 obesity, smoking, substance abuse, and sleep
315 disturbances.³⁶

316

317 The ripple effects of trauma caused by abuse and neglect
318 can impact victims of abuse, their families, and the wider
319 community, and trauma's effects can linger across
320 generations.³⁷ Trauma can threaten human agency and, in

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.

321 the case of children, can inhibit healthy psychological,
322 emotional, physical, and sexual development.

323

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

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,"

335

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

338

339 *"The first adult to hit me was an ELCA deacon. She*
340 *backhanded me in the mouth as she drove me to a church*
341 *youth event. I didn't tell anyone. Why would I? Being a*
342 *boy, all they would ask me is, 'What did you do to deserve*
343 *it?'"*

344

345 This social message recognizes with lament the Christian
346 Church's own responsibility for the spiritual injury of
347 survivors of child abuse and the harm caused by child
348 maltreatment.

349

Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and
Policy, 1, no. 2 (2009): 130–145,
doi.org/10.1037/a0016211.

350 Christian beliefs and the Bible have been used frequently
351 to justify or even encourage sexual abuse.⁴⁰ Distortions of
352 the Bible have been used to encourage physical abuse of
353 children. Religious descriptions of parental authority as
354 absolute have left children feeling powerless when
355 victimized. Distorted teachings on forgiveness and grace
356 often seem to excuse or enable abusers.

357

358 Churches, as communities that are assumed to be safe,
359 have allowed perpetrators access to children, both
360 through insufficient protection policies and unclear or
361 inconsistent responses to allegations of abuse. Indeed,
362 some experts suggest that sexual abusers of children may
363 seek out faith communities due to a lack of policies and
364 easy access to children.⁴¹

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,*

365

366 Inauthentic and disingenuous actions, taken under the
367 guise of “child protection” and supported by the church,
368 have caused grievous harm. The Indian boarding school
369 era in the U.S. and Canada, made possible by the
370 involvement of churches and church leaders, enabled the
371 abuse of thousands of children for decades. This
372 movement was publicly justified by false appeals to the
373 “best interests” of Native and Indigenous children, who
374 were separated from their families, communities, and
375 culture, and placed in residential centers of rampant
376 abuse. Though boarding schools have closed, healing

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.

377 continues to be needed for the many people impacted by
378 this history. Moreover, racism continues to shape policies
379 that separate children of color from their families,
380 communities, and culture, and this demands our attention.

381
382 Failure to respond effectively to the consequences of
383 abuse has perpetuated the harm done to victims. Church
384 leaders who abuse children are often treated with grace
385 and forgiveness, even as their victims are treated with
386 suspicion. Churches have often encouraged victims to rush
387 to forgiveness without paying sufficient attention to their
388 trauma, the complexity of forgiveness, or the future safety
389 of other children. Failure to address the spiritual harm
390 caused by abuse is a serious and grievous abdication of
391 the church's responsibility to care for "these little ones"
392 (Matthew 18:6) and their faith.

393
394 The ELCA recognizes that, too often, the Christian Church
395 has:

- 396 • Allowed abusers access to vulnerable children.

- 397 • Allowed theological and scriptural justification for
398 abuse, neglect, and threats to children.
- 399 • Failed to recognize the fullness of the image of God in
400 children.
- 401 • Failed to welcome and care for them as Jesus would
402 have us.
- 403 • Allowed racism and white supremacy to justify abuse
404 under the guise of “child protection.”

405

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

- 409 • *You are not broken.*
- 410 • *You are not guilty.*
- 411 • *You are not required to forgive.*
- 412 • *You are not alone.*

413

414 **III. Elements of a Lutheran theology of**
415 **childhood**

416

417 This commitment inspires the need for a theological
418 understanding of children and the responsibilities of the
419 church and the community, grounded in Holy Scripture
420 and the Lutheran Confessions.

421

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

424

425 Some Christians look to verses about the use of "the rod"
426 (Proverbs 22:15, 13:24) as biblical counsel for discipline of
427 children. However, many of the punishments described in
428 the Bible are unthinkable today. Deuteronomy 21:18-21,
429 for example, teaches that a "stubborn and rebellious son"
430 should be stoned to death by the men of the city.

431 Proverbs calls for punishments that "wound" those in error
432 (Proverbs 20:30). Thus use of "the rod" in the Bible should

433 be understood in the context of treatment of children that
434 was, at times, brutal and inhumane.⁴²

435
436 These teachings reflect the ancient world's view of
437 children more than they reflect Jesus' model of loving
438 authority and his teachings on children. Jesus' welcome
439 and affirmation of children were revolutionary
440 transformations in how we are to view children. The
441 ancient world viewed children as commodities (2 Kings
442 4:1); Jesus viewed children as signs of the coming reign of
443 God (Matthew 18:3-6). The ancient world punished
444 children with pain and even death; Jesus rebukes those

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.

445 who refuse to welcome and care for children (Matthew
446 19:13-15).

447

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

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.

457

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

464

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

468

469 Christians enrich our welcoming of children to a
470 life of faith by holding together ... diverse
471 perspectives on [who] they are. ... Remembering
472 that Jesus saw children as teachers of the faith,
473 we will listen attentively to them, honor their
474 insights and questions, and learn from them. We

⁴⁶ Ibid, 407.150.

475 will give special attention to children who are
476 most vulnerable and those who have been
477 wounded, and we will become stronger
478 advocates for them.⁴⁷

479

480 **What do the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions,** 481 **and ELCA social teachings say about children?**

482

483 A Lutheran theology of childhood may be grounded in the
484 following principles.

485

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

487

488 Luther referred to children as “eternal treasure[s]”⁴⁸ and
489 regarded the care and education of children as sacred
490 responsibilities. In the Bible, children are sources of joy
491 and celebration (Genesis 21:6-7; Luke 1:14). Thus,

⁴⁷ *Our Calling in Education*, 16.

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

492 Christians recognize children as gifts of God entrusted to
493 the care of families, church, and society.

494

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

500

501 *2. Children are under the bondage of sin—just like*
502 *everyone else.*

503

504 The ELCA teaches, “Recognizing that children are sinful is
505 never a warrant to abuse and treat them inhumanely;
506 rather it is a caution against an idealistic view of children
507 as primarily innocent beings.”⁴⁹ Children share in the sin
508 common to all (Romans 3:9-10), though not in a special
509 way that distinguishes them from adults. Admonishments

⁴⁹ *Our Calling in Education*, 15.

510 that children—but not adults—are to be physically
511 punished for their misdeeds conflicts with the biblical
512 understanding of humanity’s shared bondage to sin.

513

514 Understanding children’s bondage to sin may also correct
515 problematic views of children’s innocence. All too often,
516 defenders of adults who sexually abuse children portray
517 young victims as seductive, promiscuous, or otherwise
518 lacking the innocence of childhood. Defenders of physical
519 abuse point to the lack of innocence of sinful children.

520 Such arguments seek to diminish the evil of the abuse by
521 diminishing the innocence that has been violated.

522

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

527

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

529

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

534

535 In the Bible, children often serve as examples of bold,
536 daring faith and morality. Through the shepherd boy
537 David, God teaches an important lesson about strength
538 and leadership (1 Samuel 17). Young Elihu, whose youth
539 made him “timid,” speaks a bold word of faith and truth to
540 Job and his friends.⁵⁰ The unnamed girl held captive in
541 Namaan’s household (2 Kings 5:1-14) risks her own safety
542 to declare to the Aramean Namaan that the God of Israel
543 can cure his leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14). Jesus preaches that
544 adults should look to children as exemplars of what it

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).

545 means to live in the coming reign of God (Matthew 18:3-
546 6).

547

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

550

551 In the Bible, the faithfulness of the people of God is
552 judged by their treatment of orphans and other vulnerable
553 neighbors (Isaiah 10:1-2). Through the prophet Isaiah,
554 God commands the people to “defend the orphan” (Isaiah
555 1:17). God’s treatment of children provides a model for
556 compassionate care of children (1 Kings 17:8-16).

557

558 Recognizing the church’s calling to defend and care for
559 vulnerable neighbors, this church has declared, “The
560 needs of the vulnerable and marginalized must be
561 represented and given particular and vigorous attention.”⁵¹

562 This teaching is especially relevant to children, who

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

563 remain vulnerable to and dependent on adults in their
564 households, the church, and the community.

565

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

568

569 Children, though, are more than their vulnerability. Their
570 right to protection and care is rooted in their creation in
571 the image of God, which endows them with dignity that
572 “society should not deny ... for any reason.”⁵² Their dignity
573 is neither partial nor derivative but inherently present in
574 their creation in God’s image. “The grace of childhood is
575 not merely the pledge of the grace of adulthood.”⁵³

576

577 While children’s bodies, faith, and reason may still be
578 developing, their dignity is not. Indeed, “Jesus reinforced

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.

579 the dignity of all children by welcoming and blessing them
580 and saying that to them belongs the kingdom of
581 heaven.”⁵⁴ This inherent dignity entitles children to justice
582 and to freedom from exploitation and maltreatment.

583

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

- 586 • “The principle of *sufficiency* means meeting the basic
587 needs of all humanity and all creation.
- 588 • “The principle of *sustainability* means providing an
589 acceptable quality of life for present generations
590 without compromising that of future generations.
- 591 • “The principle of *participation* means all are entitled
592 to be heard and to have their interests considered
593 when decisions are made.
- 594 • “The principle of *solidarity* means that we stand
595 together with all of God’s creation.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Our Calling in Education*, 15.

⁵⁵ “Human Rights,” 11-12. See also *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran

596

597 These principles provide insight into what justice demands
598 for children.

599

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

604

605 Sustainability: Adults have the responsibility to respect
606 and promote⁵⁶ children's long-term well-being, which
607 includes protecting them from the long-term
608 consequences of maltreatment.

609

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.

610 Participation: Children have the right to be treated as
611 human beings with dignity, regardless of their age.⁵⁷ As
612 moral agents in development, they have the right to be
613 educated and informed as appropriate for their stage of
614 development.⁵⁸

615
616 Solidarity: Justice demands that children have advocates
617 for their rights in public policy and within law enforcement
618 and child protection systems. Within the church, leaders
619 are called to act in solidarity with children, especially when
620 they are potentially threatened by adults, and to provide
621 for their safety and security.⁵⁹

622

623 **What does the ELCA teach about specific**
624 **issues of justice related to children?**

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.

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

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

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

- 641 • While recognizing the practice of early marriage in
642 some cultures, this church also raises serious
643 concerns about the potential for harm in “early and
644 forced marriage.”⁶¹ When a child is married to an
645 adult, there is an inherent imbalance of power, which
646 increases the risk of abuse and harm and violates the
647 mutual commitment and trust on which marriage is
648 based.⁶² This church thus rejects marriages that
649 would couple an adult with a child or youth, especially
650 if such a marriage involves sexual intimacy.
- 651
- 652 • The principles of justice oblige adults to provide
653 necessary medical care to children when needed. As
654 Lutherans, we recognize that science and the medical
655 arts are gifts of God for our well-being. Prayer is also
656 a gift, and for families facing difficult medical

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).

657 decisions, prayer can be a source of hope, strength,
658 and comfort. But prayer is not an adequate substitute
659 for medical treatment in most cases. Special
660 discernment is required when the burden of care to
661 the patient might outweigh potential benefits.⁶³

662

663 **IV. Recognizing with thanks the work of** 664 **child protection**

665

666 **How has the Christian Church contributed to** 667 **child protection?**

668

669 This church gives thanks for those who work every day to
670 protect and enhance the dignity of children, including
671 therapists and social workers, teachers, child abuse
672 investigators, child advocates, and those providing

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.

673 licensing and training for professionals who work with
674 children. The ELCA gives thanks in particular for the long
675 history of Lutheran social ministry organizations that
676 support families and children and work to keep children in
677 safe homes and reduce their time in foster care.

678

679 This church gives thanks for leaders of children, youth,
680 and family ministry, including outdoor ministries, who
681 faithfully nurture the spiritual and personal development
682 of children and youth and serve an essential role in
683 protecting children and youth.

684

685 This church gives thanks for organizations, communities,
686 and movements that foster relationships and spaces
687 where people victimized by child maltreatment can find
688 support and advocate for justice. For example, we give
689 thanks for the ELCA truth-seeking and truth-telling
690 initiative that raises awareness of Lutheran involvement in
691 Indian boarding schools in the U.S. and Canada and seeks

692 to foster truth-telling and healing for communities
693 victimized by the Indian boarding school movement.

694

695 Though much is being done in the ELCA, this church has
696 much work to do to foster a future of well-being for
697 children and adults.

698

699

700

701

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

704

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

707

708 *Countering practices of harm*

709 This church is called to address scriptural
710 misinterpretations that have been used to justify violence

711 and promote physical punishment of children. This arises
712 from God's call for the whole body of Christ to model
713 peace and for Christians to be peacemakers.⁶⁴ Worshiping
714 communities are called to be safe spaces, free of violence,
715 and should consider establishing buildings and events as
716 "no-hit" zones, where physical intimidation or the use of
717 force are specifically prohibited.

718

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

725

726 *Discerning forgiveness*

727 Christians are called to share the good news of God's
728 grace through Jesus Christ. Lutherans affirm that we are

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

729 set free from sin by God's loving word of forgiveness and
730 called to share the gospel of grace with all the world.

731

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

742

743 In the Bible, forgiveness assumes a recognition of guilt
744 (often publicly) and the active pursuit of reconciliation
745 (Matthew 5:23). While humans are not saved by our
746 works, forgiveness nonetheless does not imply a complete
747 absence of accountability. Indeed, even the criminal on
748 the cross whom Jesus forgave first confronted his own sin

749 and guilt (Luke 23:39-43). Though we are saved by God's
750 grace and not our confession, Lutherans understand grace
751 as freeing us to love and serve the neighbor and to
752 confront the many ways we fall short of that responsibility.

753

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

759

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

766

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

767

768

769 *Trauma-informed Ministry*

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

776

777 This social message encourages congregational leaders to
778 seek training in trauma-informed care that recognizes
779 varied and complex responses to trauma. In support,
780 ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries should find
781 ways to provide trauma-informed care for students and
782 trauma-informed training for emerging leaders.

783

784 Victims are more than their trauma, and those who
785 minister with them share in holy yearning for the fullness

786 of God’s promise of a time when “crying and pain will be
787 no more” (Revelation 21:3-4).⁶⁶

788

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

790

791 **How can church policy help prevent and** 792 **address child maltreatment?**

793

794 Many rostered ministers and lay leaders in the ELCA yearn
795 for clear policies and guidance for preventing and
796 addressing child maltreatment. This section outlines such
797 policies, though it is not exhaustive of these policies.⁶⁷

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

798 Synods and congregations are strongly encouraged to
799 implement these policies and to share information about
800 the ELCA's sexual misconduct prevention procedures.
801 ELCA-related partners, including partners receiving
802 funding from the ELCA, should be encouraged to
803 implement similar child protection policies.

804

805 This message acknowledges significant costs associated
806 with implementing these policies and the need to lower
807 financial barriers for congregations and ministries. Synods
808 and the churchwide organization should consider providing
809 support for their implementation.

810

811 Congregations, ministries, and worshiping communities
812 within the ELCA are strongly encouraged and *morally*

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](https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/programs/index.html).

813 *ought* to implement and clearly communicate the following
814 policies *at a minimum*:

- 815 • Screenings and background checks for all staff and
816 volunteers working with children or youth.
- 817 • A six-month period of involvement with the church
818 before new members or volunteers are allowed to
819 work with youth.
- 820 • Annual training for all paid staff on recognizing and
821 reporting signs of maltreatment.
- 822 • Public posting of written information (for children *and*
823 adults) about how to report abuse or neglect.
- 824 • A “two-deep” policy requiring at least two adults to be
825 present at activities involving children or youth,
826 including having at least two adults involved in any
827 online communications with children or youth, such as
828 text threads, chats, or emails.
- 829 • Sign-in and sign-out lists for events with children and
830 youth, and clear limits on who can sign a child out
831 from an event.

- 832 • Not limiting access of children or youth to food during
833 events such as community meals, banquets, or
834 potlucks, to reduce stigma for children living with
835 food insecurity.
- 836 • Restrictions on photography or video recording of
837 children and youth, including limiting photography or
838 video recording to authorized adults and requiring
839 signed permission forms for the sharing of
840 photographs or video.
- 841 • Restricted access to private or nonvisible areas of a
842 building during events or overnights.

843

844 In addition to these policies, congregations, synods,
845 ministries, and institutions of the ELCA are called upon to
846 collaborate in raising awareness of existing ELCA
847 resources on sexual misconduct and child abuse, to
848 provide ongoing training and resources for children, youth,
849 and family ministers, and to involve children, youth, and
850 family ministers in substantive decision-making about child

851 protection policies at the congregational, synodical, and
852 churchwide level.

853

854 **What policies should guide pastoral care and**
855 **worship?**

856

857 This church and its rostered ministers have a responsibility
858 to provide pastoral care for children and youth. This
859 church and its leaders also have the responsibility to
860 provide for the safety of children and youth in such
861 settings. Pastoral counseling of children and youth should
862 be done in a publicly visible place or with a process for
863 maintaining written records or reports on one-on-one
864 counseling sessions with children and youth. Care must be
865 taken to balance privacy and safety in such situations.

866

867 When child abuse occurs, many victims feel isolated and
868 alone. The ELCA truth-seeking and truth-telling initiative,
869 organized in support of people who experienced abuse

870 and trauma from Indian boarding schools, offers
871 important insights for the whole church, including the
872 need to foster safe spaces where victims can share their
873 stories, receive support, and begin to work toward
874 healing.

875

876 **When should suspected child maltreatment be** 877 **reported?**

878

879 Sustainability as a principle of justice calls the church to
880 consider long-term consequences of abuse and demands
881 that the church take steps to reduce the long-term harm
882 victims can experience. The ELCA has stated its support
883 for the reporting and prosecution of adult perpetrators of
884 child sexual abuse, including noncontact sexual abuse.⁶⁸
885 In this social message, we extend this support to all forms
886 of child maltreatment. Reporting is one way in which

⁶⁸ *Human Sexuality*, 25.

887 survivors of abuse can access the care and treatment they
888 need.

889

890 The ELCA expects all leaders in the church—rostered and
891 lay, volunteer and paid—to report allegations or
892 reasonable suspicions of child maltreatment to the
893 appropriate secular authorities, who are equipped to
894 investigate allegations.

895

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

903

904 The ELCA constitution, in general, supports the
905 confidentiality of confession and pastoral counseling. This
906 confidentiality is an important part of spiritual care. It

907 often fosters the trust necessary for people to seek
908 spiritual care when overwhelmed by guilt, shame, or fear.
909 However, when a person seeking pastoral care or
910 confession “intends great harm to self or others,” this
911 church recognizes an exception to the protection of
912 confidentiality.⁶⁹ Though state laws vary on rostered
913 ministers’ status as mandated reporters, in this church,
914 the right to confidentiality in pastoral counseling or
915 individual confession does not override the body of Christ’s
916 clear biblical mandate to protect the vulnerable. Rostered
917 ministers thus have an obligation to report child
918 maltreatment that is ongoing or that they believe is likely
919 to reoccur.

920

921 Overwhelming research points to the long-term negative
922 effects of child maltreatment on the physical, emotional,
923 mental, and spiritual well-being of children, affecting them
924 well into adulthood. The connection between these

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

925 experiences and future ill effects is so strong that it should
926 be considered when evaluating what constitutes “great
927 harm” and an exception to confidentiality.

928

929 Counseling perpetrators of child abuse, especially child
930 sexual abuse, requires specific skills and training that few
931 pastors have. In humility, ministers must recognize their
932 inability to provide such specialized treatment and urge
933 perpetrators who seek their pastoral counsel to instead
934 seek professional counseling.

935

936 The ELCA affirms that those who commit crimes and harm
937 others “are still human beings” and “are in need of
938 accompaniment and of receiving the gift of the gospel in
939 word and sacrament.”⁷⁰ This church teaches that adults
940 who harm children are not separated from the grace of
941 God. However, the safety of vulnerable neighbors and the
942 community requires careful discernment and boundaries

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

943 for the participation of past offenders in worshiping
944 communities and church activities. As a community rooted
945 in the gospel, we are called to accompany people who
946 commit crimes. But we are also called to protect those
947 who are vulnerable. This requires “extraordinary care” and
948 prayerful discernment.⁷¹

949

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

952

953 Child abuse that is perpetrated by leaders within the
954 church can be especially traumatizing to victims and faith
955 communities. These tragedies threaten trust in the church

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.

956 and in God. Accordingly, the ELCA's "Definitions and
957 Guidelines for Discipline" explicitly provides that abuse of
958 another, including child abuse, sexual abuse, and abuse of
959 family members, is conduct incompatible with the
960 ministerial office.⁷²

961
962 Because of the gravity of the violation, when a rostered
963 minister is reported for suspected child abuse, the minister
964 should be temporarily suspended from their call during the
965 investigation out of an abundance of caution for the whole
966 community.⁷³

967
968 In cases where a rostered minister has engaged in child
969 abuse, the ELCA synod should promptly commence

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.

970 appropriate disciplinary proceedings under Chapter 20 of
971 the ELCA constitution and "Definitions and Guidelines for
972 Discipline." In these proceedings, this church urges
973 disciplinary committees to consider permanent removal
974 from the roster when appropriate.

975

976 This church also acknowledges that victims can be
977 retraumatized during investigations. Thus special care
978 should be provided for the protection of victims during
979 investigations and disciplinary proceedings.

980

981 **What training and resources are needed to**
982 **protect and nurture children?**

983

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

987

988 To answer this need, this message urges collaboration
989 among synods and the churchwide organization in
990 providing training and resources for rostered ministers and
991 lay leaders. In addition to current boundaries training,
992 rostered ministers and lay leaders should be encouraged
993 and equipped to receive training in recognizing and
994 reporting abuse as well as guidance for preaching and
995 teaching on the topic of child maltreatment.

996

997 Seminaries are encouraged to provide coursework related
998 to ministry with victims and perpetrators, including
999 teaching seminarians the value of recognizing the limits of
1000 their expertise in this specialized area of counseling.

1001 Because Scripture is often manipulated to justify or excuse
1002 child abuse, and because of the great spiritual harm done
1003 to victims, seminaries and lay training schools are
1004 encouraged to equip students to interpret the Bible and
1005 theology in authentic ways that correct these distortions.

1006

1007 Congregations, outdoor ministries, and campus ministries
1008 are encouraged to continue to provide training for new
1009 staff in recognizing and reporting child abuse and child
1010 neglect. This church supports their efforts to remove from
1011 paid staff and leadership any adult accused of harming a
1012 child and gives thanks for ministries providing trauma-
1013 informed spiritual care and development for young people.

1014

1015 The ELCA benefits from the resources on sexual
1016 misconduct that many synods and the churchwide
1017 organization already provide. At the same time, we
1018 acknowledge a need for greater awareness and ease of
1019 access to these resources.⁷⁴ This message encourages
1020 synods and the churchwide organization of the ELCA to
1021 continue developing new resources as needed and to find
1022 means to ensure that such resources are easily accessible.
1023 ELCA synods and the churchwide organization are also
1024 encouraged to provide resources for parents and

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

1025 caregivers on effective forms of nonphysical discipline and
1026 theological resources that can equip the church to address
1027 child maltreatment, including speaking out against
1028 religiously motivated medical neglect.

1029

1030 Rostered ministers and congregational leaders are
1031 encouraged to familiarize themselves with existing ELCA
1032 resources on sexual misconduct, including resources on
1033 reporting child abuse and preventing sexual misconduct.

1034

1035 In addition to providing resources and training, synods
1036 can be key partners in providing pastoral care when child
1037 abuse occurs within a congregation or worshiping
1038 community.

1039

1040 **What public policies are needed to protect and**
1041 **care for children?**

1042

1043 Recognizing society's role in protecting and caring for
1044 children, the ELCA encourages individual members and
1045 the Witness in Society ministry of the churchwide
1046 organization to advocate for just, effective public policies,
1047 including:

- 1048 • Funding and support for households facing poverty,
1049 to reduce the risk of medical and material neglect.
- 1050 • Fair wages, parental leave, and paid sick leave laws,
1051 which allow caregivers time to care for their children
1052 and which reduce the risk of abuse or neglect.
- 1053 • Support for families of children with disabilities as well
1054 as robust oversight of schools and care facilities
1055 attending to children living with disabilities.
- 1056 • Robust child labor laws that prevent children from
1057 being placed in hazardous working conditions.
- 1058 • Effective child trafficking laws and reasonable legal
1059 limits on age of consent for marriage.
- 1060 • Ratification by the U.S. of the United Nations
1061 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- 1062 • Legislation that addresses bullying and harassment,
1063 especially when it occurs online.

1064

1065 During investigations of suspected child maltreatment,
1066 children can be retraumatized by encounters with law
1067 enforcement, attorneys, and investigators. For this reason,
1068 the ELCA recognizes the role of child advocates to
1069 accompany and shelter children during the process. This
1070 church also recognizes the important role of chaplains in
1071 addressing the spiritual trauma children can face both
1072 from their victimization and during investigations and
1073 court proceedings. The ELCA thus encourages public
1074 policy advocacy to support the work of both child
1075 advocates and chaplains and urges increased funding for
1076 both these important roles.

1077

1078 **VII. Conclusion: Guided by the good news**
1079 **of Jesus Christ**

1080

1081 The special calling of the church to protect, nurture, and
1082 care for children is an ongoing responsibility. It demands
1083 of the church honesty about the complicity of God's
1084 people in the harming of God's children. It also inspires
1085 hope for love and justice in the world now and for the
1086 fullness of peace in the world to come.

1087

1088 We reflect on the words of Paul: "For I am convinced that
1089 neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things
1090 present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor
1091 depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to
1092 separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"
1093 (Romans 8:38-39).

1094

1095 Drawing on those words, this church declares to victims of
1096 all forms of child maltreatment:

1097 We are convinced that neither your trauma, nor your pain,
1098 nor your grief, nor the injustice done to you, nor the
1099 failure of adults around you, nor your anger, nor your
1100 doubt, nor your fear can separate you from the love of

1101 God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You were created in God's
1102 own image, and you remain God's beloved child.

1103

1104 This church's public witness will be guided by this
1105 promise. We will speak with vulnerable children when they
1106 can speak, and we will speak on their behalf when they
1107 cannot find the words. We will support justice for all
1108 children, and we will exercise the sacred responsibility to
1109 which God calls the Christian Church, to nurture and
1110 protect these precious gifts.

1111

1112 In so doing, this church will bear witness to the coming
1113 reign of God—and the fullness of peace, healing, and
1114 wholeness that awaits children, youth, adults, and all of
1115 creation.