



Church in Society: *A Lutheran Perspective*

by Roger A. Willer

INTRODUCTION

AFFIRMATIONS

- ☞ The Gospel and the Church
- ☞ The Church Universal
- ☞ The Church ‘In’ But Not ‘From’ the World
- ☞ The Church’s Responsibility in Society
- ☞ The Baptismal Vocation of Christians
- ☞ A Community of Moral Deliberation

COMMITMENTS

- ☞ Sustaining Vocation
- ☞ Witnessing as an Institution
- ☞ Deliberating on Social Questions

GOD’S FAITHFUL LOVE [CONCLUSION]

ENDNOTES

Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective is available for download at www.elca.org/socialstatements. You can order a free printed copy online at that address or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2996. Multiple copies can be ordered for a small cost from Augsburg Fortress by calling 800-328-4648 or go to www.augsburgfortress.org. (Item #69-2102)

My mother used to talk about a good Lutheran boy she knew while growing up who had “can you believe it, gone into politics?!” When I asked her why that was hard to believe, she said that she had been taught in church that it was misguided, even shocking, that Lutherans would get involved in that “messy” business. It was part of a “kingdom” with which Christians should have little to do. (The reference to kingdom is from the Lutheran idea that God governs the world through two different “kingdoms” or governances. The first is the kingdom of Christ while the second is the kingdom of the civil realm. God governs both, but in different ways.)

This leads to a question: What *is* the appropriate way for Lutheran Christians to be active in society? Why and how should each individual, congregation, synod, leader, and the churchwide expression operate in the public arena?

The very first social statement adopted by the ELCA provides

Over the next few months, Lutheran Woman Today will highlight the 10 social statements adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since 1991. Social statements are social teaching and policy documents, adopted by a churchwide assembly in accordance with ELCA policies and procedures.

answers. (For a review of what social statements are and how they come about, see “Being a Public Church” in *LWT*, September 2009.)

CALLED BY GOD

The accompanying box (at left) outlines the headings in the statement and provides clues to the points it makes. The first concerns our motivation: Because the Gospel of Jesus Christ liberates us from sin, death, and evil, the church as the body of Christ is freed to “love the neighbor” (Matthew 22:36). This includes all of us because *all* of the baptized are the church.

The statement goes on to say that the church’s identity is to confess and teach both law and gospel as the living word of the triune God. Therefore it is God’s activity in the world that inevitably leads us to “participation in society and care of the earth with all its creatures.” The statement stresses that this participation involves a commitment to justice (Amos 5:24).

The statement highlights the Lutheran teaching that God is at work in the civil realm primarily through the activity of the law. Family, education, economy, government, and other social structures

are the ways God restrains evil, protects from harm, and encourages the common good. Christians are to respect the God-given integrity and tasks of these structures. Yet, since sin permeates them, too, they fall short of God’s intention for justice, peace, and care of creation.

In relation to the world, Lutheran Christians understand that the church (the body of Christ) is *in*, but not *from* the world. The church through faith (we are the church!) already takes part in the healing activity of God announced and embodied in Jesus. Yet it awaits the fulfillment of the whole creation and so lives in a tension between two ages—the present age and the age to come. Christians share a common destiny with the whole world in the coming reign of God and yet can never be fully at home in the world as it is. Christians must always be restless.

THE COMMON GOOD

God’s restless church is called to serve and advocate (speak on behalf of and with those in need) in responding to particular social situations. Such situations are diverse. They include disasters, poverty, various forms of discrimination,

social policies, economic arrangements, and more.

The statement says the church should keep enough critical distance from the society to act, when appropriate, like the prophets of Scripture. The prophets challenged the culture, exposed the power of sin and idolatry, and spoke out on behalf of the poor and powerless. Christians are committed to society for the sake of the common good and this means they must be ready to speak for change.

“It is through a public process guided by the Holy Spirit that Christians come to discern what action should be taken when they are dealing with complicated issues.”

As organizations and institutions that live in these two ages the congregations, synods, Women of the ELCA, social ministry organizations, and churchwide expression all have particular roles in addressing society.

The churchwide expression through the Church in Society unit, for instance, is charged with bring-

ing together a task force to lead the participatory process of creating social statements. Yet the statement is quite clear that *the number one way* the church (we are the church!) carries out its responsibility in the world is through the everyday life of ordinary Christians.

COMPLICATED ISSUES

The statement explains that the baptismal vocation of every Christian is to participate in society by doing good in our places of responsibility—marriage, family, work, school, volunteer associations, community organizations, political parties, and so forth. It affirms that this is the number one way that God works through the church in the public arena. For this reason, congregations and other places of ministry are to be committed to sustaining the baptismal vocation of ELCA members.

But how will we know what is good or right in the complex issues of today? Here the statement puts forward what was a very new idea in 1991. Part of the ELCA's identity and task is to be a "community of moral deliberation." This community looks together to Scripture as the normative source and to the best knowledge available in the secular realm when it deliberates toward good actions and policies.

Christians fulfill their vocation diversely and have many different gifts, so they will often disagree passionately on the kind of responses they make to social questions. Lutheran congregations, campus ministries, synods, and the church-wide expression are united with Christ so that they can celebrate this diversity and are free to be particular places of lively deliberation. It is through a public process guided by the Holy Spirit that Christians come to discern what action should be taken when they are dealing with complicated issues.

MORAL DELIBERATION

The statement prescribes that the way we talk and with whom we talk is critical. Deliberation means reading Scripture for its wisdom and it means considering facts together, but especially with those who may disagree. The statement specifies that deliberation should include the voices of those who have particular interests at stake or who suffer from the consequences. For instance, this commits our church to seeking out people of diverse and differing perspectives, experiences, and competencies when we compose a social statement task force or when congregations hold forums and discussions. Communities of deliberation

should be lively places! This is how the Holy Spirit comes to be heard.

The year this statement was adopted, 1991, was very early in the life of the ELCA. The passage of *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* responded to the need for a foundational statement about how ELCA Christians could participate in society from a Lutheran theological base. Its affirmations and commitments have guided the ELCA into becoming a more public church. Yet the aspirations expressed in the statement beckon us to strive always to live *more faithfully* into its vision of faith active in love seeking justice in society. 🌿

The Rev. Dr. Roger A. Willer is director for the Department for Studies in ELCA Church in Society.

ELCA SOCIAL STATEMENTS

- Abortion (1991)
- Church in Society (1991)
- Death Penalty (1991)
- Economic Life (1999)
- Education (2007)
- Environment (1993)
- Health and Health Care (2003)
- Peace (1995)
- Race, Ethnicity & Culture (1993)
- Sexuality (2009)