Social Statements
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

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War and military service are and always have been a cause of division among people of conscience. Many choose to bear arms, recognizing that in a sinful world force is often required to restrain the evil. Others, unable to reconcile the inhumanity of war with the demands of love and justice, refuse to participate in particular wars or in any armed conflict. Still others either enter the military or seek deferred status without having resolved the basic ethical dilemmas facing them.

Lutheran teaching, while rejecting conscientious objection as ethically normative, requires that ethical decisions in political matters be made in the context of the competing claims of peace, justice, and freedom. Consequently, one need not be opposed to participating in all forms of violent conflict in order to be considered a bona fide conscientious objector. It is in responsible grappling with these competing claims that a person should consider participation or nonparticipation in the military.

Consistent with this, the responsible, conscientious choice of the individual to participate or not to participate in military service or in a particular war should be upheld and protected. The office of soldier, like all other temporal offices, is to be held in esteem by all. At the same time, the conscientious objector should be accorded respect and such freedom as is consistent with the requirements of civil order.

Governments have rightly seen fit to provide legal status for conscientious objectors, allowing them the privilege of performing alternative service in lieu of military duty. In granting such status, governments recognize that conscientious objectors may make a more valuable contribution to their nation in alternative service than they would if imprisoned or otherwise penalized.

Furthermore, the moral considerations which underlie the stand of the conscientious objector can have a salutary influence upon a nation. The ethical sensitivity and human concern represented in conscientious objection have a value that far outweighs any potential risk to security involved in granting legal exemption. It is better for the general well-being that the

conscientious objector be given more than the stark choice between compromised integrity and imprisonment.

However, legal exemption for the conscientious objector is a privilege, not a right, which a just government grants in the interest of the civil good. This does not imply that governments are required to exempt persons from any legal obligation. Governments must reserve the right not to grant, or to revoke, the privilege of legal exemption in situations of clear danger to the public order.

The fact that some persons may falsely exploit conscience to defend irresponsible disregard for the obligations of citizenship does not excuse the church from its responsibility of defending the bona fide conscientious objector. The church must exercise special care in judging the spirit and motives of those who may call upon the church for safeguarding in such a position.

Recognizing both the heart-searching of many persons confronted with the possibility of military conscription and the broader considerations of justice and public order, the Lutheran Church in America adopts the following affirmations:

1. This church recognizes its responsibility of assisting its members in the development of mature, enlightened and discerning consciences. It calls upon its pastors and agencies of Christian education and social ministry to continue in their efforts to cultivate sensitive persons who can act responsibly amid the complexities of the present day.

2. This church stands by and upholds those of its members who conscientiously object to military service as well as those who in conscience choose to serve in the military. This church further affirms that the individual who, for reasons of conscience, objects to participation in a particular war is acting in harmony with Lutheran teaching.

3. Governments have wisely provided legal exemption for conscientious objectors, allowing such persons to do other work of benefit to the community. While such exemption is in the public interest, the granting of it does not imply an obligation on the part of government to provide legal exemption to anyone who finds a law to be burdensome.

4. In the best interest of the civil community, conscientious objectors to particular wars, as well as conscientious objectors to all wars, ought to be granted exemption from military duty and opportunity should be provided them for alternative service, and until such time as these exemptions are so provided, persons who conscientiously object to a particular war are reminded that they must be willing to accept applicable civil or criminal penalties for their action.

5. All conscientious objectors should be accorded equal treatment before the law, whether the basis of their stand is specifically religious or not. It is contrary to biblical teaching (cf. Romans 2:15f) for the church to expect special status for the Christian or religious objector.

6. This church approves provisions whereby persons in the military who become conscientious objectors are permitted reclassification and reassignment. This church urges that these provisions also be extended to the conscientious objector to a particular war.

Consistent with these affirmations, the Lutheran Church in America directs a member who is a conscientious objector to send a written statement of those convictions to the member's pastor, to the synod bishop and the secretary of the church. Pastors of the church are directed to minister to all in their care who are conscientious objectors.