

Draft Social Statement on Genetics Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Executive Summary

The ELCA Task Force on Genetics has written the Draft as one of the steps toward the development of a social statement that will be considered by the 2011 Churchwide Assembly. Drafts have no official standing as statements of the ELCA. They are a means to invite participation by all in the process toward the creation of a statement.

ELCA social statements are theological and teaching documents. They assist the ELCA and its members to reach informed judgments on social issues from a perspective of faith. They are intended to cultivate individual and community deliberation as well as to guide moral formation. They govern this church's institutional policy in terms of its social witness and guide its work as a public church. Social statements are developed through an extensive process of deliberation involving the whole church and are adopted by a two-thirds majority of a churchwide assembly.

In order to understand this draft social statement it is necessary to note several basic convictions that undergird the text:

- The Draft is written in six sections themed by the commitment that Lutheran Christians view the unprecedented potential in genetic research and its application with both promise and caution and the belief that we are accountable to God who is both creative and steadfast.
- It teaches from Scripture that human beings are responsible as “imaginative stewards” who are called to dedicate themselves to the flourishing of life. It also teaches from Scripture that sin (human fault) troubles all human efforts and must be acknowledged and taken into account as decisions are rendered regarding research and application of genetic knowledge.
- Given the scope of both promise and peril, the moral imperative to guide the use of genetic knowledge in medicine, agriculture and other arenas should be “to respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom.”
- Genetic developments dramatically affect nature and human society and the ELCA is called to take up its responsibility to encourage and advocate for the use of genetic knowledge according to that imperative. It also is called to practice respect and care for all people affected by the personal and policy decisions that must be made.
- Toward those ends, the Draft provides a framework to guide reflection, deliberation and action.

The following summarize key themes in each section:

I Introduction

- The advances of genetics illustrate an unprecedented and qualitative change in human powers in recent times.
- Such powers invoke a greater level of human accountability for the future of society and nature.

- The ELCA believes that the gracious God who creates, redeems and will fulfill creation has also granted human beings access to discernment and insight, which must govern our use of the gifts of science and commerce.

II Faith Affirmations

- Scripture does not speak about “genetics” but it remains the source and norm for faith and life through the critical light it offers in its insights, patterns and convictions.
- God’s goodness and care orchestrate creation toward an overall abundance and life; each participant has a relationship to God, a created integrity and a vocation.
- The human vocation is to be an “imaginative steward,” that is, the purpose of human beings as a member of God’s creation is to help order and promote the flourishing of the whole.
- Sin is evident in both exalted pride and in negligence; it is both personal and structural.
- The Christian “vantage point” on cultural developments, such as genetics, is provided by God’s self-revelation in Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection; we live between the *already* of God’s present work and the *not yet* of present fault, error and limitation.

III Social Context

- A salutary conversation about genetic developments requires knowledge and insights from both “secular” and faith-informed sources.
- The ELCA values the genetic sciences and acknowledges the theoretical insights on which they rest; it also recognizes that genetic developments occur rapidly, limiting our capacity for deliberating the moral and social implications.
- The global context of genetic research and application is one of extreme interdependence, economic and power inequality, and the consolidation of power in small networks of key-decision makers.
- The ELCA affirms that genetic research and application can be social instruments that contribute significantly to the human vocation and thereby bring much good into the world; yet the ELCA is concerned, given the far-reaching power and the global context of genetic research and applications, about the potential harm to the community of life when such power is placed in imperfect human hands—this misuse or abuse can occur through exalted pride or negligence.
- The confidence to act in the face of both the promise and the peril arise from trust in God, fed and informed by the cross and resurrection; the necessity to deliberate, act and evaluate genetic developments on their merits leads to the need for a common understanding of values and directives, that is, an ethical framework.

IV An Ethical Framework

- The ethical imperative in an age of unprecedented power is to *respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom*—each term arising from the theology and basic ethical commitments already set forth in the statement; in one sense this imperative is simply a contemporary restatement of the golden rule to “do until to others as you would have them do unto you.”

- Each sub-section explores the meaning and moral implications of a key term of this ethical framework:
 - the good of the *community of life* is the value which all research and application should seek to advance; this registers a concern not only for human good but, in some measure, a concern for the biosphere and future generations;
 - the principle *respect* has priority over the principle *promote*; this ethical framework offers a cautious approach that respects the priority of species and natural processes as they currently exist, but does not in principle object to imagination and innovation when science, commerce or public policy can demonstrate a contribution to the good of all;
 - the meaning of *justice* is specified through four principles: sufficient, sustainable, solidarity and participation; the best uses of genetic knowledge will be those that can demonstrate how they contribute to the growth of sufficiency, sustainability, solidarity and participation in human society and within the wider order of all of creation;
 - the meaning of *wisdom* in the contemporary context invokes duty to use “expert knowledge” for the good of all, to exercise humility and, on occasion, the need to invoke the precautionary principle.
- Convictions of two kinds are offered in section four:
 - a limited number of specific convictions illustrate the import of key principles such as respect or the principles of justice on selected “topics” such as reproductive cloning, human embryonic stem cells, research priorities and regulatory policy.
 - a collection of general convictions are offered in sub-section 4.7; these are divided among affirmative, negative and “mixed” concerns that prompt “sharp” questions.

V Challenges for a Community in Christ

- The foreseeable future indicates a tremendous increase in range and scope of ambiguous promise and in complex, dynamic and sometimes anguishing situations. In such times the ELCA is called to live into its identity as *koinonia*, that is, a “deep mutuality in Christ.”
- This entails:
 - congregations and other ministry sites becoming places of welcome of difference and giving special attention to being safe places for common reflection, deliberation, discernment and acceptance;
 - leaders educated with a working knowledge of these matters including a deepened understanding of *koinonia*, vocation, moral formation and deliberation;
 - lay leaders living out their daily callings in light of their faith, with a special concern for enhanced dialogue among scientists and congregational members and pastors;
 - being a public church;
 - proposing this ethical framework for use in the public square—it provides essential criteria and common ground for guiding commercial and social policy.

VI Power, Choice and Responsibility

- The terms power, choice and responsibility summarize convictions of the statement about the nature of society in these times and invoke a call to wise use of genetic knowledge.
- The statement concludes with the theme that Christian confidence to live boldly in complex and ambiguous times is possible because of the steadfastness of the Triune God.