



GENETICS

Issue Paper

BACKGROUND

The dawn of a new millennium has brought advances in scientific knowledge on many fronts, including the field of genetics. In 2003 the [Human Genome Project](#) was completed, and the [International Declaration on Human Genetic Data](#) and [Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights](#) were adopted. These stand as international points of reference in the field. In 2017 the technology for “editing” of germ cells became available.¹

These advances in science and technology impact the corporate community on issues of bioethics, patents and licensing, germline editing technology, appropriate use of genetic data, individual choice and respect for diversity, to name a few.²

ELCA SOCIAL POLICY

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) believes in one God, who created in the beginning, who creates now, and in whom all things, visible and invisible, hold together (Colossians 1:3-20). We confess that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will redeem all that has been, is and will be — including human choices involving genetic knowledge and its application” (*Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility*, p. 5). These choices create issues regarding the relationships between human power and life on this planet and call for discernment of God’s will with respect to genetic developments. The ethic of respecting and promoting the community of life with justice and wisdom in the pursuit of genetic knowledge and its use is essential if the web of life on earth is to flourish. In terms of regulation and best practices, the social statement *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility* (adopted by the Churchwide Assembly in August 2011) calls for development and implementation of protocols for assessing long-term, ecological, social and economic impact studies (sections 4.5 and 4.7). The statement encourages the exploration of new technologies but also “calls for wise care and restraint in response to extraordinary uncertainty, speed

1 “There are two different categories of gene therapies: germline therapy and somatic therapy. Germline therapies change DNA in reproductive cells (like sperm and eggs). Changes to the DNA of reproductive cells are passed down from generation to generation. Somatic therapies, on the other hand, target non-reproductive cells, and changes made in these cells affect only the person who receives the gene therapy.” This quote and more information are available at the website of the [National Human Genome Research Institute](#).

2 <https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/policy-issues> is a good place to start reading about these issues.

Corporate Social Responsibility in the ELCA uses the tools of screening of investments, shareholder advocacy and community investing to work with corporations, calling them to ensure that people are treated fairly and with dignity and to create sustainable communities.

More at ELCA.org/CSR.

and potential harm due to technological innovation” (p. 28).

In addition, the 12th Churchwide Assembly in 2011 reaffirmed the commitment of this church to the social policy resolution “[Genetically Modified Organisms in the Food Supply](#)” (ELCA Church Council action CC04.11.57). This resolution coheres with the call for using the social statement’s deliberative framework, lifting up justice principles such as sufficiency and sustainability, and themes such as stewardship and livelihood for all, as guidance.

CORPORATE RESPONSE

The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, with participation from the faith and the socially responsible investing communities, has been addressing multinational corporations concerning genetic issues. Groups have sought transparency through reports on the impacts on people in least-developed countries where genetic research, knowledge and technology are employed. Good corporate stewardship in this area begins with disclosure that articulates a vision, outlines policies and provides measurement of impact for efforts in the field of genetics.

SOCIAL CRITERIA INVESTMENT SCREENS

No social criteria investment screens currently apply to this paper. If social criteria investment screens related to genetics are developed in the future, they should take account of germline manipulation and human reproductive cloning.

ISSUE-SPECIFIC RESOLUTION GUIDELINES FOR ELCA³

1. We support reports reviewing a company’s policies for food products containing genetically engineered ingredients.
2. We support reports asking a company to identify the risks, financial costs (Including opportunity costs) and benefits, as well as environmental impact, of the use of genetically engineered food products it sells or manufactures.
3. We support reports on a company’s internal controls related to potential adverse impacts associated with genetically engineered organisms, including post-marketing monitoring, removing seed from the ecosystem and risk management for different geographical environments.
4. We support reports on the adequacy of corporate policy, plans and strategies to address changes in consumer attitudes toward nutrition, quality and safety of genetically engineered foods.
5. We support reports providing evidence of independent long-term safety testing that demonstrates genetically engineered crops are safe for humans, animals and the environment.

³ These guidelines may be used in proxy voting as well as to help determine resolutions to file and dialogues to support. Each resolution guideline should be looked at within the context of the entire resolution language and specific company situation.

ADOPTED by Church Council, April 2012 [CC12.04.09]

APPROVED by Church Council, November 2016 [CC16.11.46n]

UPDATED by Review Team, Nov. 7, 2022

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6. We support reports on the impact of genetically modified food on least-developed economies and their food resources.
7. We support calls to a corporation to discontinue any research into human reproductive cloning.
8. We support reports requesting a comprehensive monitoring of herbicide utilization and grower compliance with best practices and adherence to “technology use agreements” with its seed products due to the use of herbicide-resistant seeds.
9. We support reports on the use of nanomaterials and neonicotinoids in products and in the supply chain.
10. We support requests for an independent ethics committee to advise the board of directors on genetically modified products.
11. We support reports on the potential use of gene-editing technology in products, as well as reports on potential drawbacks of the use of this technology.

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GENERAL RESOLUTION GUIDELINES FOR THE ELCA⁴

1. We support a company having an independent chair or independent lead director.
2. We support reports on policies and procedures for political contributions and expenditures (both direct and indirect) made with corporate funds.
3. We support reports on any portion of any dues or similar payments made to any tax-exempt organization that is used for an expenditure or contribution that might be deemed political.
4. We support guidelines or policies governing a company’s political contributions and expenditures.
5. We support reports on diversity for corporate boards and upper-level management.⁵

⁴ These guidelines may be used in proxy voting as well as to help determine resolutions to file and dialogues to support. Each resolution guideline should be looked at within the context of the entire resolution language and specific company situation.

⁵ https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Non_Discrimination_In_Business_Activities_Issue_Paper_2020.pdf?_ga=2.233911134.1591617596.1657212248-1480364168.1651691194