



Caring for Health: *Our Shared Endeavor* by Roger A. Willer

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The statement and a study guide can be downloaded at www.elca.org/socialstatements. Single printed copies can be ordered for free by calling 800-638-3522; multiple copies can be ordered for a minimal fee by calling 800-328-4648.

While debate and action about health care reform has been raging in our society, the ELCA has had a social statement—since 2003—to guide Christian thinking about health, medical ethics, and the health care system. It offers a vision for where we as a nation should be heading on these matters, even if it does not presume to know or name exact steps along the way. The issues, as demonstrated by the lengthy debates during passage of the 2010 Health Care Reform Bill, are complicated and challenging and it should not be surprising that *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor* is one of the longer social statements. Instead of trying to introduce every topic covered, this article will mention the statement's major themes and highlight several distinctive and vital perspectives.

Like many ELCA social statements, its reasoning moves from an introduction of the social situation to biblical and theological themes and then on to implications and application to issues. Section one acknowledges both the crisis in health care in the U.S. and our Christian responsibility. Section

two turns to biblical and theological sources to establish basic principles and to help clarify what the ELCA means by key but disputed terms such as the meaning of *healing, cure, and illness*.

The vision of health as a shared endeavor, section three, is grounded in a biblical view that wholeness is a blessing that God intends for all (1 Thessalonians 5:23). In this vision we see that “A ministry of healing is integral to the life and mission of the Church.” Guided by this vision each piece of the health care puzzle (pieces as diverse as congregations and medical research) are then discussed in succession.

Sections four and five spell out more practical matters concerning what the ELCA believes about equitable access to health care for all and setting forth ethical guidance for individuals and families.

The major theme of the statement is captured nicely by the title, that is, caring for health is a shared endeavor that requires sustained and determined effort by all parties in our society. Those responsible include individuals, families, the church in its various expressions, and the larger society in its various expressions: local communities,

health care providers, employers, volunteer organizations, and government at all levels.

THE BIBLICAL VISION

There is an important theme in the statement: individuals cannot be healthy by themselves. Each of us bears some responsibility for our own health and at the same time health and health care depend upon other people and upon conditions and actions in the wider society. The biblical vision and the beliefs that flow from it lead to perspectives and convictions within the statement that distinguish what our church believes from what many others in this extremely individualistic society believe about caring for health.

First, this vision challenges the belief that illness is equal to disease and health is equal to cure. Those equations miss the deeper dimensions of healing that depend upon restoration to God and miss the nature of life within a community of relationships. Moreover, the common equation of being well with perfect health is impossible to achieve. “‘Being well’ for Christians does not mean we are untouched by pain and suffering. Human beings

are finite and vulnerable, and so we recognize limits on what health and health care means.” Being well for Christians means we are able to participate in Christ’s love by giving ourselves for others and sharing their suffering in response to Christ who bore the suffering of all.

Second, the statement’s vision counters the belief that health care should be organized primarily according to the profit motive:

“The United States does not currently have a health care system that is capable of care for all people. Significant changes in financing and structure are therefore required.”

“Although health care goods and services may be bought and sold, health care is above all an activity of caring that grows out of relationships of mutual responsibility, concern, and trust—and that cannot be reduced to a commodity.” Indeed

it concludes, "...health care is the kind of good most appropriately given on the basis of need.

The statement holds that the ideal system of health care in society would provide a comprehensive and coherent set of services of good quality throughout life for all people. Realistically, it insists, "At a minimum, each person should have ready access to basic health care services that include preventive, acute, and chronic physical and mental health care at an affordable cost."

As a challenge to those who think solely in terms of privatization, health as a shared endeavor also "makes public health services, which focus on the population as a whole, the foundation for any health-care system."

Third, since the vision encompasses the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of people's lives, our church believes healthy activity does not involve just doctors, nurses, and hospitals. It believes each person and each congregation is, in one sense, in the health care business. The concern for well-being is part of our baptismal calling.

Each of us has responsibility "to be a good steward of his or her own health out of thankfulness for the gift of life and in order to serve God and the neighbor." This involves practicing healthy habits and participating in preventive health care. It entails more, though.

It entails attention to spiritual exercises because they contribute to our healing. It also entails action in our callings as citizens, because health is a *shared* endeavor and my health is connected to yours.

THE CHURCH'S CALLING

Congregations are in the health care "business" insofar as they are centered in Word and Sacrament ministry, which offers *salvation* (*salvation* is from the Latin word for *healing* or *wholeness*). Congregations are called to encourage healing through vibrant prayer, services of healing, pastoral care, and congregational health ministries.

The statement also recognizes and celebrates the many contributions that ELCA social ministry organizations make by "respectful and equitable attention to the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of those persons served."

The vision of the shared endeavor means that the church is called to be an active participant in fashioning a just and effective health care system. The primary concern of the statement is for achieving equitable access to basic health care for all. The statement recognizes that this is a major social challenge but the statement calls the whole ELCA to commit itself to working with all members and groups of society in thoughtful engagement in order to attain this goal. The ethical prin-

ciples of *agape* love and justice are to guide that participation.

In 2003, the statement called for reform of the U.S. health care system: "The United States does not currently have a health care system that is capable of care for all people. Significant changes in financing and structure are therefore required." The statement did not specify any particular system for achieving that reform but rather concluded: "Our obligation could be met through any one of several combinations of personal, market, and governmental means, although none of these means alone can provide equitable access to health care." The point was to look for a mix of means that would make equitable access available for all.

Did the 2010 Health Care Reform Bill match the statement's vision? That question is one good reason to read the ELCA statement, but not the only one. The statement reminds us: "The Gospel offers the world the hope of abundant and everlasting life, that liberates us from idolatry of health and fear of death. Out of this freedom, Christians can accept the limits of this life and seek to realize a vision of health care for all people as a shared endeavor." 🌸

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