



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns

The 1997 Churchwide Assembly affirmed the adoption by the ELCA Church Council of “Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns” as a substantial modification of its predecessor, “Social Statements in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Principles and Procedures” (adopted by the 1989 assembly). The 1997 assembly also authorized the ELCA Church Council to make appropriate adjustments in these policies and procedures as further experience of this church would indicate (CA97.5.21). Adjustments were made in 2006, titles were updated in 2011. This revision was approved by the Church Council at its meeting Nov. 11, 2018, and titles and constitutional references were updated in 2022.

I. PURPOSE AND CONTENT OF THIS DOCUMENT

Purpose

Faithful participation in society is integral and vital to the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to serve the triune God revealed in the Scriptures. As individual members, congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, and across the many connections in Christ, this church lives out Christian faith as a publicly engaged church. It is a church that seeks to exercise responsibility in and witness to God’s just and loving intention for all of creation. The call to God’s people to care for human society is unmistakable in the Christian Scriptures (Amos 5:22-24; Luke 4:16-22) and is given direction in the ELCA constitution.

The ELCA’s first social statement, “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective,” formulates this responsibility and witness in three overarching commitments:¹

- “To sustain and support its members in their baptismal vocation to serve God and neighbor in daily life” (6).
- “To serve God and neighbor in its life and work as an institution” (7).
- “To foster moral deliberation on social questions” (7).

Practically speaking, these commitments are woven on the frame of four distinct but interrelated spheres of activity:²

1. Nurturing and Equipping Members.
2. Encouraging Learning, Conversation and Discernment.
3. Developing and Enacting Social Teaching and Policy.
4. Interpreting and Applying.

Attentive to these commitments and within these spheres, this document sets forth the policies and procedures of the ELCA for addressing social concerns. It gives extended attention to the procedural elements of “Sphere Three” even while charting the multiple means through which we together as a church carry out this calling in responsibility and witness. The rationale and procedural description established here are intended to clarify, order and facilitate the life and mission of the ELCA as a networked church.

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II. GOD'S CALL TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WITNESS IN SOCIETY: CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES AND THE ELCA CONSTITUTION

1. The ELCA is called to address social concerns

The ELCA addresses social concerns as a public church in grateful response to God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. Through faith in the gospel, Christ's church is freed to love the neighbor and seek justice in society, as it hopes and prays for "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). While this world is corrupted by sin, it also belongs to the triune God, who promises ultimate fulfillment of purpose and continues to sustain it. In this world, the church is called to live its faith, love and hope by caring for and transforming the structures of society, working for justice and preserving the earth. For "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

This recognition of God's call is expressed clearly in the constitution of the ELCA. Fundamentally, it confesses the gospel to be "the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world" (ELCA 2.07.).³

Likewise, it signifies that this church shall:

- Serve in response to God's love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity,

justice, and equity for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, caring for the marginalized, embracing and welcoming racially and ethnically diverse populations, and standing in solidarity with the poor and oppressed and committing itself to their needs.

(ELCA 4.02.c.).

- Nurture its members in the Word of God so as to grow in faith and hope and love, to see daily life as the primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and for their calling in the world (ELCA 4.02.e.).

To fulfill these purposes, this church shall:

- Encourage and equip all members to worship, learn, serve and witness; to fulfill their calling to serve God in the world; and to be stewards of the earth, their lives, and the Gospel (ELCA 4.03.b.).
- Lift its voice in concord and work in concert with forces for good, to serve humanity, cooperating with church and other groups participating in activities that promote justice, relieve misery, and reconcile the estranged (ELCA 4.03.g.).
- Study social issues and trends, work to discover the causes of oppression and injustice, and develop programs of ministry and advocacy to further human dignity, freedom, justice, and peace in the world (ELCA 4.03.l.).
- Work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction (ELCA 4.03.n.).

2. Constitutional directives

The constitution articulates that:

- The congregations, synods and churchwide organization of this church are interdependent expressions sharing responsibly in God's mission. In an interdependent relationship, primary responsibility for particular functions will vary among the expressions (ELCA 5.01.c.).
- This church shall seek to function as people of God through

congregations, synods and the churchwide organization, all of which shall be interdependent. Each part, while fully the church, recognizes that it is not the whole church and therefore lives in an interdependent relationship with the others (ELCA 8.11.).

- This church shall seek to meet human needs through encouragement of its people to individual and corporate action, and through establishing, developing, recognizing, and supporting institutions and agencies that minister to people in their spiritual and temporal needs (ELCA 8.23.).

In fulfillment of the purposes of this church, the churchwide organization shall:

- Provide resources to equip members to worship, learn, serve, and witness in their ministry in daily life (ELCA 11.21.b.). Witness to the Word of God in Christ by united efforts in proclaiming the Gospel, responding to human need, caring for the sick and suffering, working for justice and peace, and providing guidance to members on social matters (ELCA 11.21.d.). Develop and administer policies for this church's relationship to social ministry organizations and cooperate with public and private agencies that enhance human dignity and justice (ELCA 11.21.i.). Determine and implement policy for this church's relationship to governments (ELCA 11.21.j.).
- The Office of the Presiding Bishop shall “serve the Church's theological work by promoting, coordinating, and facilitating theological discernment of the Church's message and its theological foundations in collaboration with all who share in the responsibilities to be teachers of the faith in the Church” (ELCA 15.12.D21.).
- The Service and Justice unit shall use this church's foundational and theological statements and messages to “engage with communities, coalitions and networks, congregations, and synods in service and justice work” and “provide guidance to [ELCA] members on matters of social justice.” (ELCA 16.12.D21.).

In fulfillment of that same purpose, each synod, as an interdependent expression of this church, has responsibilities.

- In planning for, facilitating, and nurturing the mission of this church through congregations, synods shall:
 - a. Assist members of its congregations in carrying out their ministries in the world.
 - b. Encourage congregations to respond to human need, work for justice and peace, care for the sick and the suffering, and participate responsibly in society.
 - c. Provide resources for congregational life (ELCA 10.21.02.).
- In interpreting the work of this church on the territory of the synod, synods shall:
 - a. Interpret social statements in a manner consistent with the interpretation given by the churchwide unit or office which assisted in the development of the statement, and suggestion of social study issues (ELCA 10.21.04.).

Among its purposes, the congregation shall:

- Respond to human need, work for justice and peace, care for the sick and the suffering, and participate responsibly in society (ELCA 9.41.f.).

The ELCA's identity, expressed through the three commitments and the activity in the four spheres as described in this document, is to be consistent with these directives of the "Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America."

III. FOUR INTERRELATED SPHERES IN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WITNESS

The framework expressed through these four interrelated spheres of activity signify a comprehensive approach to social responsibility and witness. Each sphere of activity contains distinct initiatives and varied responsibilities or procedures for the three expressions of a networked church serving together to address social concerns. Each sphere is necessary and depends on the others if the ELCA is to make a robust witness in society. The initiatives and responsibilities, especially in spheres One and Two, represent challenging ideals to achieve within the expressions of this church. While challenging, they do express this church's salutary aspirations for living faithfully into the identity it has accepted in response to God's call.



1. Sphere One: Nurturing and Equipping Members

Description

The first sphere of activity involves nurturing and equipping members in the covenant God makes in baptism with each person, a covenant that is lived out in everyday callings as part of different communities. All expressions and ministries of this church participate in this ongoing task to form faithful individuals and communities of disciples for daily life in society. This sphere of activity is rooted in and expands the catechetical work of this church.

The development of capacity for faithful daily life and social responsibility requires constant attentiveness to the Scriptures and effective familiarity with the Lutheran Confessions. It requires nurturing of attitudes and values, behaviors and practices that foster good character and conscience. Such nurturing also includes attention to the meaning of discipleship, the place of

experience and reason in moral decision-making, and skills for moral discernment and deliberation. Equipping and nurturing is a long-term task that involves all expressions of the ELCA.

Initiatives and responsibilities

1. Ultimately, the equipping and nurturing of God's people for their callings in the world are grounded in word and sacrament and centered typically in the activity of the worshiping community. The moral formation of disciples requires intentional resources – preaching and teaching, practices and conversation – directed toward that purpose.
2. Synod attention to matters of formation and discipleship aid vitality in this sphere through collaborative efforts that may be synod-wide or occur among networks of congregations. The Christian Community and Leadership unit of the churchwide organization, in collaboration with the Office of the Presiding Bishop and other appropriate churchwide unit(s), has primary responsibility for coordinating churchwide resources in support of this sphere of activity.

2. Sphere Two: Encouraging Learning, Conversation and Discernment

Description

The second sphere of activity encourages learning and conversation among members around social concerns. The ELCA's identity as a community of moral deliberation is much broader and deeper than the ELCA-wide deliberation that results in social documents adopted by legislative bodies of the ELCA. This sphere of activity seeks open-ended learning and discernment of the mind of Christ (Romans 12:2) on specific contemporary social concerns without the pressure of legislative decisions or community consensus.⁴ Routine practices in moral reflection, conversation and discernment within congregations, homes, campus ministries, social ministry organizations and other settings build the content and context for when this church discerns a need to deliberate toward normative corporate conclusions.

Activity in this sphere is rooted in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and draws upon the rich Lutheran theological

heritage. It also uses resources that encompass analysis of particular social concerns within the framework of basic Christian theology and morality. It includes educational resources of many types, as well as the development of models for and networks of resource people to support conversation and discernment. The needs and approach will vary from issue to issue and group to group, but all approaches shall aim to encourage an inclusive, in-depth process of learning and reflection.

Activity in this sphere registers the importance of the ELCA's official social teaching even as it employs multiple types of educational materials, exploratory studies, continuing education events, conferences and conversation experiences. Resources for this sphere of activity should be regularly under development for widespread use throughout this church.

Initiatives and responsibilities

1. Attention to learning, moral conversation, and discernment about social concerns within congregations and synod settings need to be integrated with other activities such as the study of the Scriptures or practical decision-making. At the same time, this sphere depends on resources dedicated to social questions. Media and written resources here should seek to nurture lively conversation and consideration from a diversity of perspectives. Efforts should be made to frame and foster discussion using ELCA social teaching whenever relevant.
2. Synods and other church-related entities, such as seminaries and church-related colleges, may support efforts in this sphere by providing resource materials, leadership, or networks dedicated to learning and conversation.
3. The Office of the Presiding Bishop, because of its responsibility for this church's teaching office, shall have oversight for churchwide activities in collaboration with appropriate churchwide units. However, it often will be the case that units will take the lead for developing resources and carrying out activities in accord with the principle of interdependence.

4. In developing resources or establishing conversational groups, efforts should be made to draw upon the wealth of expertise and interest throughout this church and to develop materials and programs through wide-ranging consultation with relevant members and groups. Churchwide efforts are expected to bring together people from congregations, synods, institutions and agencies of this church in accord with this church's principles of representation.

3. Sphere Three: Developing and Enacting Social Teaching and Policy

Description

The third sphere of activity comprises procedures for developing official documents that articulate this church's teaching and policy. Both social statements and social messages serve as teaching documents, although statements are primary, and messages may have a more deliberative character. ELCA social policy resolutions set focused and explicit directives and so serve as the main form of policy expression, although teaching documents often carry policy implications.

In these three documents, the ELCA's activity in spheres One and Two become the context for bringing Lutheran theology into conversation with broad social institutions and concerns or specific topics seeking corporate conclusions. These conclusions always are open to further testing in the Spirit, but they set forth this church's theological and ethical understanding and establish policy regarding individual and corporate Christian responsibility in the world. Together, they articulate church teaching, govern institutional action, provide for communal and personal discernment, and project moral vision.

Guiding perspectives for social teaching and policy

The perspectives outlined below summarize key elements for the ELCA's understanding, development, consideration and use of these documents.

1. Social teaching is theological. ELCA social teaching and policy arise from and address the changing circumstances of the world in light of God's living word of law and gospel. With the aid of

contemporary experience and knowledge, they bring this church's understanding of its faith to bear on social questions. Because they view and express these matters from the perspective of the church's faith, social teaching documents are to be clearly rooted in the biblical and confessional witness of the ELCA. They are subject to the testing of whether they are faithful to the Scriptures as "the authoritative source and norm of [this church's] proclamation, faith, and life" (ELCA 2.03.) and to its creeds and confessions (ELCA 2.04., 2.05., and 2.06.). They themselves are not new creeds or confessions.

2. Social statements and messages are teaching documents. In their preparation, content and use, these teaching documents bring into dialogue the convictions of faith with the realities of the world and the experience of Christians living out their baptismal vocation. They give voice to the prophetic mandate of this church, its calling to care for God's world, and its commitment to reason together on social concerns. In so doing, they inform, guide and challenge this church and its members. They present teaching intended "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12).

Church members are called on to give the ELCA's social teaching careful consideration as they form their own judgments. Their teaching function, however, is persuasive rather than coercive, building upon and seeking to nurture the freedom of Christians to discern and act responsibly. Social teaching helps shape moral vision and the conscience of Christians by appealing to faith, character, moral convictions and reason. The respect they evoke comes from the truth and wisdom they embody, which has been subject to widespread assessment by various forums within this church during their development. Their effective teaching significance is determined by the intrinsic quality of their content and by their use in this church.

3. Social teaching involves this church in the ongoing task of theological ethics. In these teaching documents, this church addresses the question: "What ought we as Christians and the church think and do about this social question?" Social teaching documents seek to discern God's will for today, offering insight

and direction on how people should view an issue and act justly in relation to it. Their focus is most commonly on ethical material that mediate between broad moral principles and detailed reasoning in a particular situation.

Social teaching documents seek to reflect the qualities of a community of forgiven sinners called to do God's will. They probe for shared convictions and the boundaries of faithful action; within this framework, they acknowledge diversity. These documents recognize the complexity of society and the power of sin, as well as the calling of this church to speak and to act with hope and boldness. They appeal to theology, ethics, secular knowledge and analysis, history, and contemporary experience to offer coherent and plausible reasons for their judgments. As the work of a community that stands under God's judgment and grace, social teaching exhibits openness to the Holy Spirit's further guidance.

They are meant to raise a moral vision for discipleship and to frame and foster the art of moral conversation and discernment in congregations and other expressions of this church. As a body, they chart connections across ELCA social thinking, especially in a time of cultural upheaval and moral quandary. Their use both depends on and expresses the identity of the church as a community of moral deliberation in which serious communication on matters of society and faith is vital to its being. United in baptism, members are free to discuss and disagree, knowing that they are ultimately bound together in the body of Christ by the gospel and not by their moral judgments.

4. Social teaching and policy result from extensive, inclusive, and accepted processes of deliberation throughout this church.

Social teaching and policy documents are shaped by careful and critical listening to this church and to society, as well as to other church bodies and ecumenical organizations in this country and around the world. The development of social teaching embodies the justice principle of participation⁵ and is guided by the constitutional mandate to "provide structures and decision-making processes for this church that foster mutuality and interdependence and that involve people in making decisions that affect them" (ELCA 4.03.o).

The theological ethics portfolio within the Theological Discernment Team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop has lead responsibility here as a function of the teaching office of this church. The processes of development, however, call on those with specialized knowledge, representative concerns and diverse experiences through robust research, study and deliberation. Broad participation by congregations and synods, as well as by other churchwide units, is to be encouraged and facilitated. The Church Council and the Conference of Bishops (ELCA 10.81.A16.f.) provide essential forums.

5. Social teaching and policy documents govern the institutional life of this church. They set forth the principles, parameters and directives that the ELCA considers necessary to govern the internal and external policy and practices of its social responsibility in accordance with its understanding of God's will. They express mutual expectations and provide for mutual accountability in this church.

Social teaching governs the establishment of policy and directions for the ELCA's work in the areas of advocacy and corporate social responsibility (ELCA 11.21.i. and j; ELCA 14.21.14.), enabling, limiting, and directing these activities. It is expected that ELCA-affiliated agencies and institutions will develop policies and practices consistent with the principles and directives of ELCA social teaching.

Social teaching also establishes the stance of ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-religious Relations. Teaching documents represent an ecumenical contribution to the body of Christ, which has ongoing responsibility to discern on pressing social matters. They undergird the means for common decision-making on critical issues of faith and life, especially with regard to our full communion partners. They are a primary means to aid all our partners in understanding us, holding us accountable, and identifying possible areas of collaboration and joint advocacy.

Those on the rosters of public ministry are expected to present the teaching and policy positions as those of the ELCA. This expectation recognizes their freedom to disagree with these positions in their personal convictions.

6. Social teaching documents are intended to be used widely in the life and mission of this church and to reflect awareness of the various audiences and ministries that they are to serve.

They are informed by expertise and data as they address the broader society in ways fitting for public discussion of and speaking to social questions. They are critical resources for bishops, rostered ministers, teaching theologians, and other teachers and leaders in this church. To help stimulate consideration of social issues in congregations, their language is to be clear and appropriate for congregational life. Social teaching documents offer individual members guidance and support for their callings and participation in society.

A. SOCIAL STATEMENTS

Description

Social statements are the ELCA's primary teaching documents; they bring the Christian Scriptures and Lutheran theology into dialogue with social analysis regarding broad social institutions and questions or the most controversial social topics. Typically, they provide analysis, set forth basic theological and ethical perspectives, offer vocational insight, and provide guidance for the corporate witness of the ELCA and its members.

Social statements are documents of the highest quality even as they vary in scope, length, frequency and form of moral discourse, according to the needs of their subject matter. In all cases, social statements are the product of the most extensive, participatory and inclusive discernment and deliberation within this church, using procedures that are an integral part of their educational and formative purpose. They require adoption at a churchwide assembly by a two-thirds vote.

This church invests this considerable rigor and the necessary resources in their development because social statements represent the most authoritative form of articulated social teaching and policy. In questions of a conflict of interpretation or application, social statements have priority.

Procedures

Selection and oversight

1. Synods may propose the need for development of a social statement “through (a) Synod Assembly memorials to the Churchwide Assembly or (b) resolutions for referral from the Synod Assembly through the Synod Council to the Church Council and (c) Synod Council resolutions addressed to the Church Council” (CC88.11.124). The Church Council may recommend topics for social statement development to a churchwide assembly.
2. A churchwide assembly shall approve issues for development.
3. The Church Council shall exercise oversight of the development process, in consultation with the Office of the Presiding Bishop. This oversight includes the capacity to authorize when a social statement process should begin and when hiatus is warranted. It also includes the capacity to determine that an issue would be handled more appropriately through a social message process rather than one of social statement development. Examples of need for wise management or for use of the social message process include matters of churchwide staff capacity, subject content overlap with existing social teaching, budgetary concerns, and ELCA-wide capacity for the intensive process of social statement development. Such matters cannot be assessed adequately during a churchwide assembly but need thorough consideration.

Development

1. The Theological Discernment Team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop, in consultation with the Church Council, shall direct the processes of social statement development in accordance with the principle of interdependence. The process shall ensure that:
 - A task force is identified to develop a proposed social statement that includes members with specialized knowledge and those directly affected

by the issue. Membership in the task force is approved by the Church Council or its Executive Committee.

- Ways are found to encourage broad participation throughout the whole church.
 - The development of a social statement includes preparation of preliminary resources as appropriate and shall be preceded by the issuance of a draft. Decisions about preliminary documents shall be made on a case-by-case basis according to the scope of concerns that the proposed social statement involves and the extent of this church's previous engagement with the questions. A draft, with a format designed for response, shall be available at least 18 months before a proposed social statement is to be considered at a churchwide assembly.
2. Synods and congregations shall receive multiple announcements about and means to participate in learning, discussion and discernment using preliminary studies and drafts. Synods shall cooperate in the discernment around social statements by encouraging study of and response to preliminary documents by congregations, individuals and synod committees, and through synod forums or hearings.
 3. The Church Council and the Conference of Bishops shall be consulted as forums for review and discernment regarding drafts.
 4. The ELCA task force responsible for developing a proposed statement (see No. 1 above) also may develop a proposed set of implementing resolutions to accompany the statement. If developed, these indicate how basic principles and policy direction shall or may be carried out by various expressions of this church. Extreme care should be exercised in their development, a care sensitive to realistic capacity and financial implications. Aspirational resolutions should be clearly indicated in contrast to directives. Implementing

resolutions, if any, accompany the proposed statement but are considered independently for adoption.

Adoption

1. The Church Council shall receive a proposed social statement, and any implementing resolutions, from the statement's task force through the Theological Discernment Team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop. The Conference of Bishops shall review and may offer recommendations to the Church Council. By a reasonable and announced date prior to a meeting of the Church Council, any bishop or voting member of the council may submit suggestions for amendments to the director for theological ethics. A collected list of proposed amendments, with recommendation by the director, shall be discussed by the council's Faith, Society, and Innovation Committee. The Faith, Society, and Innovation Committee shall share its recommended textual changes with the Church Council during plenary consideration. The Church Council shall send a recommended proposed social statement to a churchwide assembly (ELCA 12.12.01.). A set of recommended implementing resolutions may accompany it.
2. The text of the recommended proposed social statement and accompanying implementing resolutions shall be posted within 10 days after action by the Church Council. Synod assemblies may act to memorialize their support, concern or objection to the whole or to certain portions of the recommended documents.
3. Only a churchwide assembly shall adopt ELCA social statements (ELCA 12.21.d.).
 - a. Amendments offered at a churchwide assembly to the recommended proposed social statement or the accompanying implementing resolutions must be submitted in writing to the secretary of this church prior to a published deadline.

- b. An ad hoc committee shall be seated by the chair, with the consent of the assembly, for the express task of providing recommendations to the assembly regarding proposed amendments. The ad hoc committee shall be chaired by a member(s) of the Church Council and be composed of the chair(s) of the task force, the bishop(s) from the task force, the director for theological ethics and the assistant to the presiding bishop for theological discernment. Other individuals may be appointed by the chair of the assembly if appropriate, but additional individuals normally are invited as consultants, without vote, to support the work of the ad hoc committee.

Voting members who submit amendments may be requested to meet with this committee. If a voting member wishes to offer an amendment that was not submitted prior to the deadline or was not recommended by the ad hoc committee, the assembly, by a majority vote, may consent to the consideration of such an amendment (adapted from Churchwide Assembly “Rules of Organization and Procedure,” Part Ten).

- c. “A proposed social statement shall require for adoption a vote of two-thirds of those voting members present and voting in a Churchwide Assembly” (ELCA 12.12.01.); the vote tally shall be recorded on the printed statement.
- d. An addendum of amendments that elicited significant division in a churchwide assembly shall be included in the statement’s published forms.
- e. Implementing resolutions also shall be adopted by a two-thirds vote and shall be printed within the social statement document.⁶

Use

1. All expressions of this church are expected to encourage use of social statements and implement the resolutions as appropriate. The Office of the Presiding Bishop, through the Theological Discernment Team, shall provide counsel when questions of interpretation or application arise.
2. The Office of the Presiding Bishop, through the Theological Discernment Team, shall cooperate with other churchwide units and synods to develop accompanying resources (e.g., study guides, short videos, case studies, “tool kits,” etc.) and encourage the use of social statements in this church.
3. Synods shall interpret social statements in a manner consistent with the interpretation of the Office of the Presiding Bishop (ELCA 10.21.04.c.), including those resolutions adopted by a synod assembly that address social issues raised on the territory of the synod.
4. The Office of the Presiding Bishop or other churchwide offices and units shall provide reports upon request to the Church Council on the use and implementation of social teaching.

Reconsideration

1. Churchwide assemblies may authorize reconsideration of previously adopted social statements by a two-thirds vote.

2. As the interim legislative body, the Church Council also may authorize a provisional process to begin reconsideration of an existing social statement. If so authorized, reconsideration procedures may begin, but the question shall be added to the agenda of the subsequent churchwide assembly. Provisional authorization becomes final when supported by a two-thirds vote. If not sustained by the assembly, the process shall be terminated.
3. Alternately, the Church Council by a majority vote may place on a churchwide assembly agenda the question of reconsideration.
4. Forms of reconsideration include:
 - a. *Edit*, the update of particular wording for the sake of accuracy and relevance to a contemporary social context but involving no change in substantive meaning.
 - b. *Revise*, changes to designated portions of a statement involving substantive change.
 - c. *Archive*, assigning the whole to the category of historical documents as an archive of the ELCA.

Reconsideration procedures

1. The action of a churchwide assembly for – or of a Church Council for provisional initiation of – reconsideration of a social statement shall specify which of the three are indicated. In the case of an edit, this requires designation of which wording would be reconsidered. In the case of a revision, this requires designation of which paragraphs or sections would be reconsidered. A resolution to archive shall not be combined with the other two.
2. When reconsideration, or provisional reconsideration, is authorized, notice shall be referred to the Office of the Presiding Bishop to form a task force to re-study and address the specific concerns indicated.
3. The reconsideration cycle shall reflect standard protocol for the development of a social statement, including

commitments such as the presence on the task force of diverse perspectives and review by the Conference of Bishops. The listening and study phases necessarily will be constrained by time, but the process shall include at least a brief period of public comment on a draft of any proposed changes or on the recommendation to archive. In the case of revision or archive, the period of public comment shall begin no later than 15 months before the churchwide assembly at which recommended changes to the social statement will be considered.

4. When the proposed changes involve matters of editing alone, the ELCA Church Council, as the interim governing body, may choose to act upon the recommendation of the task force and finalize them. Adoption of editorial amendments shall require two-thirds support. If two-thirds is not received, or if the Church Council considers it wise, recommended edits shall be referred to the subsequent churchwide assembly.
5. Recommended proposed revisions adopted by the Church Council or its recommendation for archive shall be posted within 10 days following the Church Council meeting. Official notice of proposed actions shall be sent to the synods by the secretary of this church.
6. A two-thirds vote of an assembly shall be required to edit, revise or archive a social statement.

B. SOCIAL MESSAGES⁷

Description

Social messages are teaching documents that address social topics narrower in scope and complexity or of less controversy than social statements and are, therefore, generally briefer. Like social statements, messages address the contemporary situation in light of the prophetic and compassionate traditions of the Scriptures. They point to human suffering, grave injustice, pending danger, social perplexity or hopeful developments, and urge that evil be resisted, justice done, and commitment renewed.⁸ They provide this church flexibility

to respond to pressing questions that arise from the ELCA's mission in the world.

Social messages are secondary teaching documents in the sense that they depend on and are to be consistent with this church's social statements. They also may be more deliberative in character, calling the church to additional discernment about specific aspects of a topic. In the case of conflict, social statement teaching shall prevail. Insofar as they are not inconsistent with social statements, messages do provide institutional rationale and policy direction for their topic within the corporate body, especially in the areas of advocacy and corporate social responsibility. As social teaching their authority for the conscience of members is persuasive, not coercive.

Social messages provide this church the opportunity to expand theological and pastoral address and analysis. The development of social messages shall reflect the participatory principles undergirding social statement development, but the process is intended to provide a timely response and involve significantly fewer resources. As such, social messages normally are adopted by the Church Council.

Procedures

Selection

1. The procedures for receiving proposals for a social message reflect those for social statements, but a churchwide assembly, the Conference of Bishops or churchwide units may submit requests to the Church Council to consider authorizing development of a social message. The Church Council shall ask the Theological Discernment Team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop to review all proposals and bring a recommendation on how to address the social questions entailed in these requests. This review shall consider financial implications and alternative means for addressing the social topic, such as development of a study resource, yearlong ELCA-wide emphasis or others.
2. The Office of the Presiding Bishop shall be guided by the following criteria in its recommendations:

- a. Relevance and implications for this church's ongoing mission.
 - b. Significance in society.
 - c. Timeliness and urgency.
 - d. Need for address in light of existing social teaching or policy.
 - e. Capacity issues affecting adequate address including ELCA-wide constraints, churchwide staff and finances.
3. The authorization of a message process, normally, rests with the Church Council. Normally, no more than one message shall be considered in each meeting.

Development

1. The Theological Discernment Team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop shall direct the development and implementation of social messages in accordance with the principle of interdependence. The process elements reflect those of social statement development, but under normal circumstances should require nor more than a year from authorization to adoption. The process shall ensure that:
 - An appropriate team of consultants be identified to aid staff in development.
 - A draft shall be made available (typically online) during a public comment period.
 - The Church Council and the Conference of Bishops are forums for review and discernment regarding drafts.
 - Means for communication to and participation by congregations, ELCA-related institutions and members of this church are considered.
2. After a comment period on a draft, the director for theological discernment shall bring a proposed social message to the Church Council for final consideration. Under unusual circumstances, the Church Council may refer a proposed message to a churchwide assembly for

its adoption. This referral shall carry the Church Council's recommendation for or against adoption.

3. Because messages depend on social statements and are adopted by a Church Council, social messages shall not be accompanied by a set of implementing resolutions.⁹
4. Under extraordinary circumstances, the Theological Discernment Team, at the direction of the Church Council, may abbreviate the procedural cycle to respond to an especially urgent situation.
5. The titles of social messages shall indicate the topics they address.

Adoption

1. The Church Council shall act upon the recommendations from the Office of the Presiding Bishop regarding adopting a proposed social message as a teaching document of the ELCA.
2. Social messages shall be adopted by a two-thirds vote.

Use

The use of social messages as teaching documents of this church reflect what is said about social teaching above.

Reconsideration

1. The Church Council, by a two-thirds vote, may call for reconsideration of an existing social message.
2. Such a call may request one of the following actions:
 - a. *Edit*, the update of particular wording for the sake of accuracy and relevance to the contemporary social context involving no change in substantive meaning.
 - b. *Revise*, changes to designated paragraphs or sections of a message involving substantive alteration.
 - c. *Archive*, assigning the whole to the category of historical documents as an archive of the ELCA.

Reconsideration procedures:

1. After authorization by the Church Council, the action for reconsideration shall be referred to the Office of the Presiding Bishop for attention through a cycle not to exceed the next Church Council meeting in the case of an edit, or one year in other cases. Revision or archival consideration shall include a reasonable period for public comment.
2. The proposed revision or archive, along with the reasons for the proposed action, shall be reviewed by the Conference of Bishops prior to the subsequent Church Council meeting at which a vote to edit, revise or archive is to be taken.
3. A two-thirds vote of the Church Council shall be required to edit, revise or archive the social message.
4. In the case of reconsideration for an edit only, the Church Council shall have the prerogative to receive recommendations for update from the Office of the Bishop and to act at that same meeting. If the Church Council determines that the request is a matter of substance rather than an edit, appropriate reconsideration procedures shall be followed.

C. SOCIAL POLICY RESOLUTIONS

Description

Social policy resolutions refer to actions, other than social statements or messages, of a churchwide assembly or Church Council that establish specific policy-related directives on matters of social concern. Normally, social policy resolutions shall rely on or be consistent with the teachings of this church expressed in statements and messages.

Procedures

Proposal and adoption

1. The Church Council, synods and voting members of a churchwide assembly may propose the adoption of social policy resolutions. Such proposals shall be managed

according to the established rules and procedures of the Church Council, synods, and churchwide assembly.

2. All social policy resolutions must be approved by a churchwide assembly, or, in the interim, by the Church Council. Normally, a majority vote is sufficient for adoption.
3. In exceptional cases where proposed social policy resolutions are not expressly grounded in existing teaching or other policy and yet are not contradictory, a two-thirds majority of the assembly or council shall be required for adoption. The chair of the voting body, in consultation with the Theological Discernment Team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop, may be called upon to make this determination. The Theological Discernment Team shall have the responsibility to develop rationale and supporting foundational theological material to accompany the proposed resolution.

Review and archive

Social policy resolutions serve as this church's policy directives until a) replaced by subsequent resolutions, b) rendered mute by subsequent social teaching documents, or c) sent to archive by a churchwide assembly. A review for relevance shall be initiated 25 years after adoption. Social policy resolutions are adopted in a particular social context, and this planned review of their continued relevance enables subsequent generations of church leaders to consider whether a resolution should continue to represent the policy of this church.

Review procedure:

1. Approximately a year prior to a churchwide assembly, the director for theological ethics shall compile into one document all resolutions that will be 25 years or older at the time of the next assembly. This list shall be made available for a reasonable period, generally three months, of public comment regarding their continued relevance and suitability as policy directives of the ELCA. Notification regarding the list and request for comment shall be given to churchwide units, the Conference of

Bishops, the Church Council, social ministry organizations and others whose activities or policies are related to the resolutions under review.

2. The director for theological ethics shall bring a recommendation to the Church Council regarding which resolutions should remain in force and those that should be archived in the category of historical documents.

The recommendation should be guided by comments from those consulted and the following criteria:

- Relevance to the ELCA's contemporary mission.
 - Continued significance for society.
 - Congruence with ELCA social teaching.
3. The Church Council shall vote to recommend archive for resolutions it deems no longer of service to this church's mission by a majority vote. Those deemed relevant to the church's continued mission in society shall be reviewed thereafter every 10 years. All social policy resolutions recommended by the Church Council for archive shall be placed on the en bloc agenda of the pending churchwide assembly for final action. Only a majority vote is required.

D. HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

The category of historical documents includes those of the ELCA's predecessor bodies¹⁰ as well as those previously serving as ELCA teaching and social policy that have been archived by vote of a legislative body. As historical documents, they no longer carry institutional authority. The Office of the Presiding Bishop, in cooperation with the Office of the Secretary, will arrange for historical documents to be available for the sake of reference and research.

4. Sphere Four: Interpreting and Applying

Description

The fourth sphere of activity is that of interpreting and applying the social teaching and policy of the ELCA. While distinct in character, scope and longevity, all ELCA teaching and ELCA social

policy documents need careful interpretation and application for the sake of robust social responsibility and witness.

The procedures described here spotlight formalized institutional means of this activity. It should be stressed, however, that lay members, rostered ministers, bishops, leaders of social ministry organizations, ELCA-related entities and others engage in significant and wide-ranging interpretation and application of ELCA social teaching and policy as well. Examples include articles in congregational newsletters, public communications by deacons, the submission of letters to the editor by laypeople, the framing of organizational policies and many more. These are to be encouraged even though not given extensive attention here.

The work of *institutional* interpretation and application typically is expressed in communications and narratives, practices and actions that are expository or directive in nature. These employ ELCA social teaching and policy to illuminate, comment on, critique, and urge action in relation to events and developments in both church and in society.

Procedures

1. The Office of the Presiding Bishop, in collaboration with churchwide units, carries oversight responsibility for churchwide activity in this sphere.
2. The Conference of Bishops, as an essential leadership body of this church, addresses public issues through various means. Procedures for presenting the Conference of Bishops' voice or its individuals' voices are established by that body in its responsibility to assist bishops in their role as teachers of the church (10.81.A16.f.).
3. ELCA advocacy work is governed by this church's social documents as it strives to provide education, generate conversation, encourage networks of advocates, and give voice to public policy consistent with ELCA teaching and policy.
4. The work of Corporate Social Responsibility in the ELCA entails the creation of issue papers and screens and other instruments that provide bridges from teaching and

policy to socially responsible action in economic sectors of society. It facilitates a moral spotlight on investment holdings, corporate dialogue and economic decisions. It is especially significant in connection with Portico's activity that is guided by ELCA teaching and policy.

5. ELCA strategies depend on existing teaching and policy of this church to create comprehensive designs for sustained address to designated crises. They guide churchwide staff in a comprehensive use of resources for education, programmatic action, advocacy and more. Dependent on the commitments and scope entailed, strategies may need churchwide assembly authorization, and, in all cases, the Church Council has oversight responsibility. Strategies shall not establish new ELCA teaching or policy.
6. The employment of social teaching and policy by ELCA-related entities (social ministry organizations, colleges, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, etc.) enable address to social concerns in ways that reach multiple audiences beyond those directly affected by the three expressions of this church.
7. The decisions, most often coordinated by churchwide office units or offices, regarding development of interpretative material (e.g., summaries, video clips, study guides and other educational resources) should be guided by criteria such as timeliness, urgency, expressed need, and relevance for ecumenical or interreligious coalitions.
8. The interpretation and application of this church's teaching and policy advance this church's responsibility for faithfully addressing social concerns. All activity in this sphere may be subject to review by the Office of the Presiding Bishop, with the option for review by the Church Council or, ultimately, a churchwide assembly.

IV. CONCLUSION: ABIDING ATTITUDES AND AIMS

It is in grateful response to God's saving grace in Jesus Christ that the ELCA participates in God's just and loving intention for all

of creation by addressing social concerns. This church sets forth these policies and procedures in order to enable faithful social responsibility and effective social witness. Throughout the four spheres of activity and guided by the three commitments from “Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective,” may God empower this church to instantiate salutary attitudes and aims in which:

- The theological gifts of the Christian church for social life as witnessed in the Lutheran theological heritage are used faithfully.
- Postures are self-critical, modest and authentic.
- Conversations are characterized by accurate information as well as respect for participants and others.
- Discernment and deliberation are based upon careful attention to the Scriptures and social analysis.
- Engagement with complex issues does not simplify those issues or accept easy answers to difficult problems.
- All activity uses the rich resources of members, agencies and institutions, as well as engaging those of other churches and ecumenical bodies.
- This church together lives in the Spirit to “discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

ENDNOTES

1 For more, go to [ELCA.org/socialstatements](https://www.elca.org/socialstatements).

2 These four spheres were first identified in the 1997 document; they are revised here consistent with the experience of this church.

3 All these references are taken from the ELCA constitution as it stands in August 2022.

4 Such conversation and the related practice of discernment is a contemporary expression of the fourth mark of the church: “The mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.” See Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IV, on the Gospel, p. 319.[4:] (*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Fortress Press, 2000).

5 See the social statements *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*, *Sustainable Livelihood for All*, and *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility* ([ELCA.org/socialstatements](https://www.elca.org/socialstatements)).

6 “Significant division” has been interpreted to mean any amendment receiving substantive discussion that was ultimately defeated yet received over 33 percent of assembly support. Each of these, if any, is indicated by a superscripted capital letter inserted at the point of contention in the text and is summarized in full on a list in the addendum.

7 A description of “Messages on Social Issues” was approved initially by the board of the ELCA Commission for Church in Society, Oct. 7, 1989, and adopted by the Church Council, Nov. 19, 1989. However, the character and purpose of social messages as described here adjusts ELCA policies and procedures consistent with the emerging need for social messages as a form of social teaching focused on specific topics.

8 See ELCA 4.03.g, 4.03.l, 11.21.d.

9 It is possible, however, for the Church Council at any time to call for or adopt social policy resolutions that are related to statements and messages.

10 In 1987, the constituting convention of the ELCA resolved to “receive the social statements of the existing churches as historical documents” (ELCA 87.30.13). The board of the Commission for Church in Society in 1987 voted “that the term ‘historical documents’ in the resolution of the constituting convention to the Commission for Church in Society regarding AELC, ALC, and LCA social statements be interpreted to mean that common elements of the former statements be utilized as the interim contextual basis and guiding principles for present advocacy work until such time as the ELCA develops and adopts new social statements” (minutes of Commission for Church in Society board meeting, Sept. 17-19, 1987, [ELCA.org/archives](https://www.elca.org/archives)). Since that time, the ELCA has developed its own relatively comprehensive body of social teaching. Predecessor body documents no longer continue to have this interim status, and the category of historical documents now includes those of the ELCA that have been archived according to the procedures described above.

Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns

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