



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Thinking About WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

"The Church is the school of the Holy Spirit, who molds and equips us to be peacemakers," states the ELCA social statement *For Peace in God's World* (p. 4). Our identity as followers of the Prince of Peace runs deep in our lives as individuals, congregations and a denomination. The social statement calls this church to fulfill its divine purpose of proclaiming the gospel of peace in word and deed, to be active in seeking just peace, to be guided by biblical insight to seek earthly peace, and to be present to a sinful world.

The capacity of nation-states to cause mass destruction in armed conflict brings with it the grave responsibility of engaging in moral deliberation.

What is God's intention for us in a broken world? What is our responsibility to our fellow citizens? To our neighbor? To our "enemy"? To the planet?

These questions require Christians to think prayerfully and critically. As citizens of a democracy, we must take responsibility for our responses, examine actions taken by elected officials and seek to influence our nation's decisions toward peace among nations (see *For Peace in God's World*, p. 6).

This resource gathers up ELCA teaching that can contribute to the moral deliberation of people of peace in our interconnected world.

ELCA TEACHING ON ARMED CONFLICT

Lutherans are not new to examining their stance toward the human potential for mass destruction. The primary source of ELCA social teaching on armed conflict is the social statement *For Peace in God's World* (1995). An ELCA social statement is a starting point for individuals to reflect and the church to consider action. In the statement on peace, the ELCA commits to seeking earthly peace while recognizing that it is "not the same as the promised peace of God's present and future eternal reign" (p. 8).

The study guide "[Using the ELCA's Social Statement *For Peace in God's World* in Your Congregation](#)" offers sessions and activities to explore the social statement in depth, but the following themes are particularly connected to thinking about weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Our Role as Citizens

The ELCA's social statement commits us to fulfill our responsibility as citizens in deliberating about war.

Governments

Building from Lutheran understanding of government, the social statement affirms that governments "may legitimately employ....such measures as law and its enforcement, police protection, provisions for the common defense, and resistance to aggression" (p. 10). All

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ELCA TEACHING ON ARMED CONFLICT continued...

employable measures, however, are not regarded the same way. The social statement affirms “that governments should vigorously pursue less coercive measures over more coercive ones” (p. 10).

International Agreements

The social statement urges that high priority be given to international agreements to accomplish arms control and reduction, seeking “arms control agreements that are substantial, equitable, verifiable, and progressive” (p. 18).

Just War

In world events, we must discern whether military action is necessary and even proper in order to protect our neighbor. When we encounter situations that seem ambiguous, ELCA teaching is guided by the “just war” tradition (p. 11). This tradition lays out principles to be used in deciding whether to enter into military conflict and also lays out guidance for the conduct of war once it has begun. The “Just War Criteria” handout of the study guide (study guide [pg. 25](#)) explains the principles of just war theory, consisting of “criteria for resorting to warfare” and “just war criteria for conducting war.” Particularly impacting our thinking about WMDs are two of these principles:

1. Proportionality in deciding whether to go to war. To deploy a weapon of mass destruction

first, in order to initiate military conflict, violates the principle of proportionality. Proportionality means that the destruction caused by the war can’t outweigh the possible good that arises from victory.

2. Discrimination, or noncombatant immunity in the conduct of war. Civilians are not to be targeted. To deploy any WMD could be considered a violation of this principle. By their very nature, WMDs do not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants.

The social statement affirms that just war principles “are important in international law and in military codes of conduct” (social statement p. 12). The rules of war, or **international humanitarian law** (IHL), are not specifically referenced in the social teaching but offer insight into the conduct of war. IHL is defined by the International Committee of the Red Cross through an international set of rules specifying what can and cannot be done during an armed conflict (learn more from icrc.org). The Geneva Conventions are a core element of IHL.

Clear commitments

For Peace in God’s World reminds us of the church’s calling to be a peacemakers and to explore what international peace means. Rejecting nuclear war unequivocally (p. 12), it calls for international agreements to reduce and work toward the elimination of nuclear stockpiles, and to ban outright all land mines and chemical or biological weapons (p. 18).

REFLECTED IN OUR ACTIONS

There are many ways the ELCA’s moral deliberation results in collective action. Through churchwide assemblies, for example, the ELCA has made public commitments related to WMDs. In 1997, we adopted the social policy resolution committing the church to advocate for a ban of [landmines](#). An adopted social policy resolution in 1999 called for curtailing [military expenditures](#).

Extending on such commitments, the ELCA as a denomination has participated in the [United States Campaign to Ban Landmines](#). In 1997, 56,000 Lutherans signed a petition, [delivered](#) on Capitol Hill, that called for an immediate ban on the manufacture, sale and use of antipersonnel land mines. More recently, after the Trump administration reversed the existing ban, our denomination asked U.S. federal lawmakers to reinstate it (see [2/20/20 joint statement](#) and [1/31/22 letter](#) to President Biden).

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Our Role as Citizens

In 2014, using the [ELCA Corporate Social Responsibility](#) program, the church adopted a [“Military Weapons” Social Criteria Investment Screen](#), declining to invest in firms that contribute to research and development of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons (or certain conventional weapons deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects), or that produce key components of such weapons or manage U.S. government-owned facilities for such weapons.



BROUGHT NEAR TO ONE ANOTHER

God’s steadfast resolve for peace encompasses our time as it does all times, the social statement reminds us (p. 3). In our time we must still reflect on our capacity for mass destruction, but we need not despair. We claim and live into relationship with Jesus Christ as described in the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us (2:13-14).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (JLE), a publication of the ELCA, maintains an online [collection of articles on the military, war and armed conflict](#) that are grounded in Lutheran ethical thought. Related JLE articles include:
 - Stewart Herman’s [“Is Just-War Reasoning a Helpful Tool for Evaluating Bush’ Bluff \(?\) Towards Iraq?”](#) (January 2003).
 - David Perry’s [“Just War Criteria and the War in Iraq”](#) (April 2003).
 - Edward Schneider’s [“War and Peace: A Review of Relevant Statements by Church Bodies Which Preceded the Founding of the \[ELCA\]”](#) (October 2001).
 - Martha E. Stortz’s [“Thinking the Unthinkable: Just Deliberation on War”](#) (October 2002).
- Through [ELCA Federal Chaplaincy Ministries](#), ELCA chaplains work with and minister to people of all ages who serve in the U.S. military and other federal agencies and institutions. Check out its [resources](#), offering information, worship materials and support.
- [Lutheran Peace Fellowship](#), an independent community of Lutherans across the United States, links to [over 100 resources](#) “that anyone can use to create Shalom, a world with peace and justice.”
- **Non-Lutheran sources** to inform your reflection:
 - [“Humanitarian Impacts and Risks of Use of Nuclear Weapons,”](#) International Committee of the Red Cross, (8/29/20).
 - [“Viewing Nuclear Weapons Through a Humanitarian Lens,”](#) United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, (1/16/13).
 - [“War Crimes: A Primer,”](#) Congressional Research Service (3/15/22).
 - [“Weapons: Statement of the ICRC to the United Nations, 2018,”](#) International Committee of the Red Cross (10/17/18).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What actions would violate the principle of proportionality? Why do you think this principle exists?*
2. *What does the principle of noncombatant immunity accomplish? What happens when noncombatant immunity is violated? What are some historical examples of the violation of noncombatant immunity?*
3. *What public positions is the ELCA being called to take today on the basis of its social teaching?*
4. *Bearing in mind the social statement, how might you advocate for the elimination of WMDs?*