

Introduction to the Statement

Social statements adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are written and approved in order to be useful. They are an expression of a church that is engaged in the world, living out the gospel imperative to serve the neighbor. As work in and by a church that is always reforming, social statements also invite fresh engagement by subsequent generations.

Three decades was already a significant-enough passage of time calling for a reengagement with the 1991 document “A Social Statement on Abortion.” Then, in June 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States issued a ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* that overturned five decades of recognition of a constitutional right to privacy that ensured access to abortion. This right, and the reality of safe and legal abortion, was a fundamental,

indeed wholly unspoken assumption of the ELCA's social statement. Now, it no longer exists.

What does this mean?

Perhaps like no other social statement in the ELCA's history, "A Social Statement on Abortion" needs to be read, engaged, and reframed so that it can be useful to a new generation navigating new challenges. The ELCA's vocation today is different amid these legal changes: The 1991 statement came to be in a world where abortion was generally safe and legal, and this church sought to provide guidance for exercising that right. Today, abortion is the most inaccessible it has been since before *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973, creating unsafe conditions for pregnant people and families; thus, the church is called to be a compassionate community in a new way.

In this volume, I begin by engaging the statement as a product of its historical, cultural, and ecclesial context. The early 1990s saw a very different church and society than those that exist in the mid-2020s. This history grounds a discussion of the content of the statement itself: its central arguments, issues, and themes. That leads us to a substantive discussion of what all of this means for Lutheran Christians today, when laws vary wildly across state lines, language has evolved, medical science has advanced, sociology and biology afford renewed insights for ethical questions around

gender and sexuality, and specific laws and policies that the ELCA opposed are now reality.

I do this as a teaching theologian of the ELCA—one who was baptized, educated, confirmed, and married in the same Midwestern Lutheran congregation; who earned degrees at one of its colleges and one of its seminaries; who was a postdoctoral teaching fellow at another Lutheran university; who now holds an endowed faculty chair in Lutheran heritage and mission at yet another of the ELCA's colleges. Rostered leaders of this church are among my dearest friends, closest colleagues, and former students. For more than two decades, I have spent the bulk of my time in the college classroom, educating young people about religion. This includes empowering them to read carefully, think deeply, ask questions, explore others' answers, and formulate their own sense of what it means to live and perhaps flourish in this world. It is that spirit of invitation and education that I bring to this work.

How to Use This Book

This book is best read in conversation with the social statement itself, available as a free download from the ELCA website.¹ It will be useful for study groups in classrooms, congregations, synod gatherings, and living rooms. It may be useful for people facing personal decisions around

pregnancy, though I doubt that reading a book about the ELCA's moral discernment would be a pregnant person's first choice.² It will be useful for anyone who loves someone facing decisions about continuing a pregnancy. It will be useful for Lutherans considering how to best engage in advocacy work going forward.

Maybe you are a pastor living in a state where abortion is now banned, providing pastoral care to families facing complicated decisions. Maybe you are a person of faith trying to understand what to do now that the entire landscape of reproductive health care has changed for the worse. Maybe you are a bishop seeking to offer hospitality to your neighbors and care for your siblings. Maybe you are a health care provider trying to care for your patients first, trying to understand what your church has to say about this issue. Maybe you are pregnant and do not want to be. Maybe your pregnancy is medically complicated, and abortion is the safest option.

You are not alone.

Let's try to understand the ELCA social statement on abortion together, and then think about what Lutheran Christians today might be called to do.