

# Introduction

Peace is the will of God. So the church confesses in every time and place, and so it prays: “For the peace from above . . . for the peace of the whole world, . . . and for the unity of all . . .”<sup>1</sup>

This church, in its present form and in the testimony of its predecessor churches, teaches that peace is a gift of the gospel and the task of the church. The church of Christ has been commissioned with the task of being peacemakers in a world of suffering and hopelessness.<sup>2</sup> This commitment to peace is grounded in scripture and the historical teachings of the church. As rational human beings, we acknowledge the fact that war is a horrendous activity and that it must be avoided at all costs, particularly in light of the atrocities of

two world wars and a “tumultuous and violent century” (1). As people motivated by a deep faith-commitment to peace, we recognize that war and conflict contradict foundational ethical and theological principles such as love, peace, compassion, forgiveness, and justice. As a church and as people of faith who recognize that “God’s final peace” (1) cannot be fully realized in the present, we strive for the culmination of that ideal that Jesus has initiated. “The gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15) not only compels us as an ideal to strive for; it also promises to heal broken relationships, break down walls of hostility, and facilitate reconciliation (3). The church is called to incarnate, proclaim, abide, sustain, and celebrate this gospel of peace.

In 1987, the Constituting Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), in a resolution on the creation of social statements, empowered and granted the Commission for Church in Society (CCS) to “set priorities in regard to the issues to be studied.”<sup>3</sup> Even though social statements from predecessor churches existed, these older documents were not binding on the newly formed ELCA. In October 1988, a study was presented to the CCS regarding the issues to be studied within a six-year time span; one of these topics centered on international peace. This was followed up by a 1989 report to the Churchwide Assembly. A task force was empaneled in 1991 and began working in February 1992. After consultation and study, in

1993 the task force produced a draft (“Peace: God’s Gift, Our Task”) for comments and responses, which were incorporated the following year. The social statement “For Peace in God’s World” was adopted on August 20, 1995, at the fourth Churchwide Assembly at Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The generally optimistic tone of the statement was influenced by the socio-historical context of the time. The statement was produced in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union and the culmination of the Cold War, and on the cusp of a “New World Order”<sup>4</sup> facing “new threats and opportunities of a changing time” (1). John Stumme, Director for Studies in the Division of Church in Society, recalls the hopefulness of new possibilities not only rendered by the post–Cold War period but also encouraged by the Clinton presidency and a doctrine of humanitarian intervention, the potential for “peace dividends,” pre–NAFTA economic globalization, optimism about democracy and human rights, and Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis.<sup>5</sup>

We will return to this optimism, as well as to the themes of the social statement, in our subsequent discussion of the document. Suffice it to say, “For Peace in God’s World” was prescient, has withstood the test of time, and serves as an enduring and inspirational guide for faithfully living the gospel of peace in a world marked by conflict, hostility, and political/economic oppression. It demands that Lutherans be active peace-seekers, peace-builders, and peacemakers,

rooted in a deep scriptural and theological commitment to human dignity, economic justice, the freedom to dissent, and democratic ideals.

In part I of this book, we discuss the context and content of the social statement in the hopes of exploring what this gospel of peace meant historically. Chapter 1 discusses the historical context of doctrines relating to war and peace. Chapter 2 examines the principles of “just war” and “just peace” theory expressed in the social statement. These two chapters may appear to sanction or promote the use of force, but in fact they point to the sad reality that the consequences of human sin and the concepts of war and peace are inseparable and inextricably connected. One cannot speak of one without addressing the other. Chapter 3 compares Lutheran antecedents to “For Peace in God’s World.” We explore key political, moral, theological, philosophical, and legal concepts that influenced the ELCA social statement on peace. Part II discusses what this gospel of peace means for the church today. It explores the prominent themes and concerns of the document, as well as the social statement’s lasting impact. Chapter 4 addresses the prominent theological themes and issues, while chapter 5 discusses the strengths and limitations (including critiques) of the social statement. The conclusion discusses issues moving forward as we celebrate the statement’s timelessness and the never-ending challenges to peace. Our hope is that

we can reengage the statement constructively and speak to its relevance in contemporary and future debates about war and peace.