

A PUBLIC STATEMENT OF PASTORAL CONCERN FOR THOSE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS

The following was adopted by the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada as ***A Public Statement of Pastoral Concern for Those Living with HIV/AIDS*** for distribution to ELCIC Synods and Congregations. This statement can be used in conjunction with St. Luke's Day on October 18, 1998 or the Sunday in advance of World AIDS Day on December 1st.

The Public Statement

Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

As a Gospel community of those forgiven and redeemed by the love of God in Jesus Christ, we wish to proclaim the unconditional love of God for all people in the face of the suffering and horror of the pandemic of HIV infection and AIDS that is affecting so many people and communities in the world.

As a Gospel community, we have an evangelical ministry of love.

- ; God loves all persons. Yet living in a world where people can be alienated from God and from each other, people are often tempted to see illness and suffering as a punishment from God. This is certainly true for those living with HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS is not a punishment from God. While there always remains an element of mystery in human suffering and the experience of illness, the message of the Cross is that God stands in loving solidarity with a word of ultimate hope to all members of the human family facing the forces of darkness and hopelessness. As a Gospel people, we are called to pray for those living with HIV/AIDS and to demonstrate that non-judgmental love of God that we ourselves have received from Christ.

As a Gospel community we are called to promote a ministry of healing and wholeness.

- ; Healing is not merely the elimination of a physical illness but the presence of love, compassion and a certain assurance in which we are as a child of the loving God and a member of the human family. All disease and illness leads to a sense of loneliness and despair. But unlike most other diseases, living with HIV/AIDS can result in a physical, social and spiritual isolation. The message of the Cross is a summons to us to demonstrate the love and compassion of Christ to those suffering regardless of their religion, race, class, age, physical ability, nationality, or sexual orientation. The message of the Cross is that all be included, not excluded from the household of the global human family. As a Gospel people, we are called to welcome into our worship and congregational life those who are living with HIV/AIDS.

As a Gospel community, we have a public witness that God's justice be manifested for all

members of the human family, particularly those who are suffering.

- ; HIV/AIDS is one result of living in a broken and divided world. HIV/AIDS is a symptom of the continuing injustice that plagues our global human family. The causes of this pandemic are not simplistic nor the result of merely personal choices. Economic disparity and poverty are major contributing factors to the spread of AIDS and in posing barriers to treatment. As a Gospel people we are called to a prophetic ministry that works to eliminate poverty, that works to change public attitudes and prejudices, that safeguards the basic rights of those living with HIV/AIDS and other disabilities, that ensures access to necessary health care and social services, and that encourages governments and institutions of society in developing programs and work to address the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

As a Gospel community, we have a ministry of service to those living with HIV/AIDS.

- ; There remains a need for education with accurate and comprehensive information about HIV/AIDS. There is also a need for education about the pastoral care and support that is helpful for those living with HIV/AIDS. There is also a need to undertake and encourage those ministries such as clinics, hospices, and residences that offer support to those living with HIV/AIDS. As a Gospel people, we are called to affirm those ministries of service and to explore new ways to provide support and care.

Background Information

Since the late 1970s, the annual number of people in Canada living with HIV/AIDS has increased dramatically. It is estimated that in Canada, there may be as many as 19,000-20,000 people with AIDS and possibly some 50,000 cases of people diagnosed as HIV+. Globally, estimates are that some 21.8 million people, including 800,000 children, are currently living with HIV/AIDS. Another 5.8 million people have died. HIV/AIDS is clearly a global medical emergency. In the face of this tragic pandemic, we give thanks for the many expert researches, doctors, nurses, counselors and care-providers who are providing important drugs, treatment support and care to those living with this disease. The pandemic of HIV/AIDS is also a spiritual emergency that tests the theological convictions of those living with HIV/AIDS and the Christian community.

Behind these statistics are the faces of people who are loved as brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, cousins, colleagues, neighbours. HIV/AIDS affects an ever-widening community of people. For those living with HIV/AIDS, their lives can be changed very dramatically. This can involve changes in their ability to carry out normal routines. They experience emotional feelings of shock, numbness, hurt, anger, depression, fear and isolation. Often the public perception that it is only “bad people” who get this disease leads to feelings of social alienation but also a spiritual alienation from God as well. In making this public statement, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada needs to unequivocally assure people of the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ. God does not distinguish between the deserving and

the undeserving. As the Apostle Paul pointedly reminds us, *For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....* (Romans 3:23).

If God's love is unconditional, members of the ELCIC are called to demonstrate that unconditional love and compassion to those living with HIV/AIDS. Although attitudes are changing as more becomes known about this disease, HIV/AIDS still results in ostracization from many communities in society including the church. Many in society see health as the absence of a physical illness or disease. But as those with terminal illnesses often report, people in these moments discover a renewed purpose and meaning for their life. Health involves the restoration of this wholeness or completeness. It includes physical, mental, social and spiritual well being. Excluding people — because of their illness — from the community either tacitly or overtly inhibits the development of this sense of wholeness and health. Nonjudgmental pastoral care by the church has an important and unique contribution to make. Like Jesus, we need to respond to those who suffer, restoring them to their rightful participation in communities.

AIDS also raises important and basic questions of justice. Many people living with HIV/AIDS still face public prejudice and bigotry. As well, there remain in Canada places where people's basic rights and civil liberties are not honoured. Ensuring respect for people and these basic rights is an elemental form of justice.

Poverty and economic disparity are a major factor in the spread of this disease. Worldwide, those who are disadvantaged are at greater risk of infection. In Canada, intravenous drug users are the single largest group at risk of contracting HIV. Worldwide, more than 60% of HIV+ people live in Africa; 7 million are women. By the year 2000, it is estimated that some 5 million children in Africa will be AIDS orphans. The number of cases have increased by 1 million during the past year in Asia and over 1.5 million in the Caribbean and Latin America live with HIV/AIDS. There are numerous examples of how poverty places people at greater risk. For example, in Asia where young women are sold into the sex trade, HIV+ infections have increased dramatically. In countries where there are no social supports, women must remain in abusive relationships and infection is passed on to them by their husbands who have multiple partners. In regional conflicts, soldiers using rape as an instrument of war have spread the infection. There is a collective responsibility to address the issue of growing economic disparity in Canada and in the world.

The church has undertaken ministries of service to communities. There are examples where congregations and members have been involved in providing these ministries. The ELCIC applauds those who have been serving in this important work. Nevertheless, more can and needs to be done. Educational programs are important in providing people with comprehensive and accurate information about the infection. There is also a need for services. While the ELCIC may not be able undertake these alone, congregations and synods can support other organizations in society working to provide support and to address some of the broader issues. The social exclusion that can so affect individuals also affects many of the organizations themselves. While there has been some improvement, supporting and encouraging those who are working to address these concerns can make an important difference.

The ELCIC will never be an expert in the medical and social aspects of this pandemic. It can

lend its voice to insure the moral and spiritual impact that accompanies HIV/AIDS is addressed. To this end, the prayers of the community, the proclamation in our preaching, the public witness for justice and our service with others in our community are important places to begin.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Pastor Jon Fogleman - National Church Council

I am not infected with HIV nor do I have AIDS. I know very little about HIV/AIDS even though I was a founding member of our city and County AIDS Committee.

Some of what I do know about AIDS I learned as a volunteer participating in a training program designed to assist people with HIV/AIDS, their families and friends.

As members of congregations, we often have difficulty discussing HIV and AIDS. From time to time at our mid-week Eucharist, we are asked to pray for someone and their family who is living with HIV/AIDS. There are other illnesses whose victims receive pastoral support and personal care from all of our congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). But few diseases carry such a social stigma of suspicion that results in a terrible feeling of rejection as does infection with HIV or developing AIDS. Like leprosy, AIDS patients, their family and their friends can experience ostracization at a time when caring friendship and congregational support are desperately needed.

Congregations of the ELCIC are faith communities known for their friendship and support. We welcome everyone to the Lord's table and into our congregational life. God's Word is proclaimed as a Word of Grace, a Word of Love, A Word of Faith and a Word of Hope for all of us.

As we live together in faith, let us be aware of the importance in the lives of all people of our love and support, especially those suffering the social rejection and ostracization of living with HIV/AIDS. World AIDS Day is observed on December 1st. For Christians it is during Advent, a time of hopeful preparing once again for the birth of Christ. May it also be a time when we once again prepare to be a people of faith, hope, and love ensuring that our congregations are places of hospitality and care.

God, help us to be more caring as you cared for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Approved by National Church Council
September 19, 1998