

# **Stewards of Creation: Respect for Human Life Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada Position on Abortion**

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## **Preamble**

1. As a church we believe God intends all people to live in life enhancing and nourishing relationships and sexuality to be part of a relationship of trust and love. God intends all children to be welcomed and nurtured. The reality of sin, however, distorts creation, destroys relationships, breaks trust, and causes us to turn away from each other.

- As a church we acknowledge that we have not always loved as we ought.
- We have often rejected those whose pregnancies affront us.
- We have frequently dismissed the feelings or needs of those with unintended or problem pregnancies.
- We have often refused to admit that poverty and abuse are factors which affect both conception and abortion.
- We have tended to abandon individuals and families who struggle with difficult life choices.
- We share in the brokenness that makes abortion appear to be an easy solution.

2. Called by Christ to live in forgiveness in the midst of our brokenness, we affirm our desire to reach out pastorally with compassion to those affected by abortion.

## **Social Analysis**

3. Abortion is not an isolated issue. The choice to seek an abortion occurs in Canada as part of a whole social system and is made by people who are responding to both societal and personal pressures. In addressing the issue of abortion, this church must take into account the whole social system as well as the whole person. A systemic approach moves beyond the individualistic perspectives often presented. The whole issue of abortion needs to be addressed in the context of other pressing issues.

4. In recent decades, the absolute number of reported therapeutic abortions in Canada has increased. The abortion rate (number of abortions per live births) has remained relatively constant in the last decade. Of the persons seeking abortion, 68% cite economic pressure as a primary reason (Family Planning Perspective, July, 1989). Our society does not provide adequate child care resources for the "working poor". Men are not always held responsible for the children they father. Until these systemic problems are dealt with, people will continue to decide that abortion is the least difficult of disturbing options. The economic system will need to be changed so as to encourage and support the choice not to abort.

5. In addition to examining the connection of abortion to the economic structures of our society we also need to inquire about the connection of abortion with the value placed on life in general in Canada today. How is abortion connected with violence in society? With Canada's role in the world-wide arms race? With war around the world with the spending priorities of federal,

provincial, and municipal governments? We need to develop a society which consistently views life as a gift to be valued and a sacred trust in the true and complete sense. Abortion must be addressed in the context of all devaluation of human life.

6. Abortion is very much connected to the place and role of women in Canadian society. The 1989 massacre of fourteen women in Montreal forcefully reminded us how often women are victims of violence. Women continue to be paid less for equal work and are restricted in greater proportion to jobs that pay less. Even in the church, women are not yet considered full and equal partners. Such continuing violence and restriction against women devalue life and create a climate in which abortion is seen as an option. Changing the situation of women for the better is a necessary condition to decrease the number of abortions in Canada.

7. The question of abortion is also related to the role of children in our society. Traditionally children were viewed as the property of parents. In recent years children are sometimes viewed as an economic liability to parents. These and other factors have contributed to the problem of the abuse of children, to questions about the rights of children, and to a child welfare system that does not always serve the needs of the children of Canada. Today, the majority of Canada's poor are children. The abortion debate cannot be separated from the treatment of children and situation of children.

8. The matter of abortion is also related to our attitudes toward parenthood. The responsibility for nurturing children primarily falls on the mother. Fathers often have little interaction with their children. The number of single-parent households is increasing. This means that in the case of an unintended pregnancy the weight of responsibility will likely fall on the mother rather than the father. This unequal distribution of responsibility contributes to the felt need for abortion.

9. Abortion is closely connected to our culture's approach to the expression of sexuality. We live in a society which uses sex to sell products, turning sexuality itself into a commodity. The mass media often support the basic message of the advertisers. The commercialization of sex encourages people to think that their needs for love and affirmation can be met by "having sex." The market place, rather than Christian values, tends to set the agenda for sexual ethics.

10. Our consideration of abortion is placed in the global context of a world that faces destruction because of nuclear weapons and pollution and where millions of people are oppressed and malnourished. Statistics Canada reports that the rate of abortions is lower in Canada than in most other industrialized countries (Canadian Social Trends, Spring, 1988, p. 3).

11. Our understanding of abortion also takes place in the context of an emerging world of biotechnology. Medicine has provided us an increasing ability to serve and support one another through new medical techniques, both for the born and the unborn. This capacity needs to be made equally available for all persons who face the question of abortion. Our sense of stewardship toward the well being of the born and unborn must grow as we serve and support one another through these new medical techniques. Our failure to model, promote and facilitate this stewardship will give the felt need for abortion tragic credibility.

12. Because our attitude towards abortion is a sign of the value we place on fulfilled human life, and because the person who is confronted with the decision to abort or not to abort is facing a significant crisis, we must reflect theologically in order to speak pastorally and ethically to the issue.

## **Our Theological Reflection**

### **A. The Basis for Our Deliberations**

13. Lutherans affirm that the Bible, as interpreted with the help of the Creeds and confessional writings of the church, is the foundational document for Christian faith and action (ELCIC Constitution II.3; Formula of Concord I:1). Through it our moral reflection is to be shaped and informed.

14. Over the years Lutherans have struggled with a number of moral issues. Through this process there has emerged a body of guiding emphases some of which can help shed light on the matter of abortion. Following is a brief description of these selected emphases.

### **B. Some Recurring Lutheran Emphases**

15. As Lutheran Christians we always begin our theology from the assumption that God has acted to affirm and accept all people unconditionally in Christ (Augsburg Confession, Article IV). As implications of this promise of the Gospel, the following emphases have guided Lutheran thinking about the meaning and value of human life.

#### **The Church as the Body of Christ:**

16. The Dominion of God is a gift which Christ comes to announce and to embody for all (Mark 1:15). The announcement of the Reign of God is Good News which creates a community, a people who follow Jesus Christ. The Gospel comes to persons, but it does not leave those people as individuals, it forms them into community (Augsburg Confession, Article V; Acts 2;; Galatians 3:27-28). Therefore we cannot think about ethical issues without first thinking about the Gospel and the church, about what kind of community the Gospel creates. For followers of Jesus Christ it is not the morality of heroic individuals which is the primary focus for ethical reflection and moral action, but rather the life of the baptized community as it goes about its mission of caring for God's creation (1 Corinthians 12 & 13).

17. The role of the church in the world is to communicate the Gospel of Christ and to witness to the nature of God and the Gospel through our life together as a steward community. God intends the presence of the church in the world to preserve the world (Augsburg Confession, Articles VII & VIII).

#### **God's Gift of Life:**

18. In our Baptism we are called and empowered to follow Christ as his disciples and in him we are taken into a community which is dedicated to "the care and redemption of all that [God has] made" (Romans 6). Our lives are a gift in creation (Genesis 2:7; Psalms 139:13) and in Baptism they are given to us once again as a redeemed gift in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (Large Catechism, Fourth Part). Life and life in Christ in the steward community are gifts which we cannot earn or achieve. They are gifts which empower us to lead a life of listening, giving and forgiving.

19. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are stewards of a God who is in love with the world. God created the world in love, Christ came to redeem the world in love, and the Spirit is drawing the world into God's future in love. God is aware of and concerned for the life of every creature, even long before that creature exists (Matthew 6; Luke 12). As members of God's steward

community we have been "called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified" so that we can play a constructive and creative part in creation, redemption, and consummation (Small Catechism II). We are called by God to be stewards of life in the territory of death.

### **Created in the Image of God:**

20. Since life is a gift in creation and redemption, and a gift which we are called to nurture and renew and give away, an important motif for Christian ethical decision-making in the world is stewardship. Stewardship recognizes that nothing which we have is our own; everything we are and have is pure gift (Genesis 1 & 2; John 3; Romans 3; Galatians.) All things and all people belong to God. The purpose of the community of baptized stewards is to care for and nourish God's gifts so that God's mission might be accomplished.

21. As stewards we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27-28). While the meaning of the phrase "image of God" is complex, at base it affirms that there is something in human being which reflects divine being. We believe that God is Trinity (Matthew 28:19), that is, the one who brings together unity and individual identity. The God whose nature is Triune is social by nature, one in whom relationship produces wholeness (Nicene Creed). If we reflect the being of this God, when we were intended from the beginning to be social and relational creatures, creatures who in our individuality find unity with one another. Thus the mission given to stewards in creation is to enable each other to become whole persons living together in a healthy society which is at peace with the rest of creation.

### **Original Sin:**

22. This stewardship was God's intended mission for humanity in creation, but we were unwilling to accept our creaturely status as stewards. We wanted to be like God, we wanted to be gods, and so we broke the harmony of creation (Genesis 3). We no longer care for and nurture God's creation, but we dominate and try to make all things our own (Formula of Concord I). This includes even the gift of life itself. We seek to be rulers of our own lives. Because we have the technology to lengthen life or to destroy the planet, we dream that we have the authority to decide when others should live or die. We even convince ourselves that killing is a desirable method of foreign policy. Some take life by murder and others advocate the killing of murderers. We make life miserable for millions that we can live in comfort. We spend money on weapons of death rather than the needs of children.

### **Justification by Grace through Faith:**

23. Because of our unwillingness to be God's stewards, Jesus Christ was sent into the world to call us back to the covenant of our stewardship. Our response was to decide that he must die, but in his death he overcame the power of sin and death. Christ brings us new life in himself and enables us to be again the stewards of life we were created to be (Ephesians 2:4-10). The Gospel is the Good News that God has taken us back without conditions and once again calls us to live as stewards who nurture life (Romans 3:23-24). The Holy Spirit communicates this Gospel, calls us into the steward community, and enables us to live as stewards of life through Word and Sacrament in the church.

24. As Christians we recognize that our unity in the church is not derived from our consensus on moral issues. Rather, it is based in the Gospel assurance that through Christ we are forgiven

sinners. It is as forgiven sinners that we are called to freely and seriously explore together the values we share, and the difference we hold, regarding the moral issues confronting us.

### **Preservation of Structures for Family and Community Life:**

25. As stewards of creation, Christians hope to encourage human societies to value justice, wholeness, and peace - that is, to value those things which make for a fulfilled life for all of God's creatures - by embodying those characteristics of God in the life of the steward community. We know that perfect fulfilment is not something we can achieve, yet we also know that the world can be made more just, that life can be more valued by the structures of society. We do not imagine that such will bring in the Reign of God, but we are called to express the values of God's Dominion by loving our neighbours in practical ways (Augsburg Confession, Article XX; Small Catechism I). This means that the steward community will of necessity be concerned with family relationships and be involved in the structures and institutions of society (Augsburg Confession, Article XVI).

26. As disciples of Christ we know that Christ has conquered even death, the last enemy. As followers of the resurrected Christ we do not need to drain life from others so that we might achieve immortality. In Christ we can accept our own death and face whatever the future might hold. In our Baptism we have died and been buried with Christ (Romans 6); we believe that, just as we rose out of the baptismal waters into Christ, so shall we rise out of the grave in Christ (1 Corinthians 15). This is the ultimate fulfilment of life.

27. The above emphases provide us as Lutheran Christians with a foundation for ethical reflection on abortion. In and through God's we are given the responsibility to be stewards of creation and all life within it. We must now draw out how these emphases work together to form an ethical mandate regarding abortion.

### **C. Theological Ethics**

28. The church is committed to the stewardship of life in the world, even when the world seems intent on destroying itself. In all of its preaching and action, in every facet of its institutional life and life in community, the church is called to exhibit the care and nurture of life on earth. Therefore the church cannot stand idly by when it sees social and economic structures which devalue life and push people toward choices that devalue life. The steward community cannot encourage choices which seem to deny that life is a gift from God; thus we believe that abortion is at best a tragedy.

29. The church is the community of stewards and our moral action arises from our life together. It is through Baptism, teaching the Word, proclaiming the Gospel, mutual support and sacrifice, and celebrating the Eucharist that commitment to the stewardship of life is formed and ordinary people are empowered by the Spirit to do something out of the ordinary. Christians do not properly take moral action based on their own abilities or efforts; Christian moral action occurs in the context of a community which, in the Wisdom of God shared in Word and Sacrament, follows Jesus Christ.

30. What Christian stewards have most to offer our society is not new legislation, advice to Parliament, or lobbying clout - though of course we will often find ourselves supporting or opposing various federal or provincial initiatives - but it is our life together as the church, the steward community. As the church we should show our society a way of life that can never be achieved through coercion or legislation. The steward community is also the witness

community. As such it shows the world a place and a people where, through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit is forming a fellowship of sisters and brothers out of a collection of strangers.

31. Whenever a person is baptized, that person is not only accepted by God, but is also incorporated into the church. The newly baptized disciple is part of the community, part of the family. Thus we cannot simply say to the member of the family who becomes pregnant, "Abortion is a sin; cope with this pregnancy the best way you can." Cut off from the steward community or acting as an individual, this sister is very likely to fail in her heroic attempt to do what is right, or even to do what is least damaging for herself and the unborn. It is unethical and unChristian for her baptismal family even to ask her to undertake the heroic alone.

32. Such a pregnancy ought not be primarily an individual problem. It is an opportunity for the whole baptismal family to be what God has created the church to be. While the church must never be paternalistic, we still must ask one another what the baptismal family will need to do in order to enable our sister as she seeks to be a steward of life. We also need to ask how we as her baptismal brothers and sisters, are enabled to be stewards of life as we seek to minister. This sister is not a social problem, not a political debate, but is a child of God. The family must listen to this sister and learn from her experience of society and church and family. With her the church can learn how better to express the Gospel and follow our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the life and experiences of this sister God is teaching and challenging the church to be a community of grace.

33. The fundamental question is not the moral permissibility of any particular abortion. The question is whether the church will express its stewardship of life with concrete action for the life of this sister and the life of the unborn. Do we value life enough to support this sister in all her needs? Do we value the brother who joined in beginning this pregnancy enough to call him to accept his responsibility and to support him in his role as a steward of life? The question is not what this sister must be willing to sacrifice for the sake of morality, but what the church is willing to sacrifice for this sister.

34. Because the church is simul justus et peccator, that is justified and redeemed people yet at the same time sinners, we must confess we do not yet have the structures within the church and have not yet developed the attitudes that enable us to relate as a caring community to those who confront the possibility of abortion. The church is still overly influenced by the individualistic ideology of our society. We will need to consider an ethic which can enable responsible stewardship of life in the interim until the church is better prepared to be the steward community. Since we seem not yet able to offer the kind of support which might make abortion unnecessary, we must, with pastoral integrity, offer support for those who face the agonizing choice of abortion so that they might make the choice in the integrity of their faith in Christ and their own life of discipleship. The necessities of the interim, however, cannot prevent us from working with energy for the eventual goal - a church family that supports all brothers and sisters in our mutual stewardship of life.

35. It is only as local congregations and the ELCIC as a whole are prepared to learn from baptized sisters and brothers, and support them with concrete action within the steward community, that we as the church will begin to be effectively heard by society at large about abortion. As we strive to be the church as a steward community, then we might also begin to hear and speak the Word in society. When we do so we might want to take positions which nurture the positive values for human life which are exhibited in our society. This is not to say that a secular society will value life in the same way as the steward community, yet we must

recognize and encourage those values in Canadian society which enable people to live more healthy and fulfilled lives and support those movements which work for a more just society.

36. If, as a society, Canadians truly value life, then simply passing legislation which deals only with abortion *per se* will not solve our problem or express our value for human life. Canadians must also address those social and economic structures which now make abortion a tragic necessity for some people. Such structures need to be changed. These changes would include (a) restructuring the social welfare system so that single mothers and their children are not trapped in poverty but have adequate economic and emotional support, (b) creating a system of public day care so that all children and parents have access to quality care at reasonable cost, (c) restructuring the child welfare system to provide stable and healthy nurture for all children, (d) creating systems which hold men as accountable as women for all children conceived, and (e) developing systems which provide appropriate medical, financial, and emotional care for all pregnant women. Simply ignoring or criminalizing abortion does not address the real issues. Rather, as Canadians who are Christian we favour legislation which embodies value for human lives. We would especially favour legislation which might result in decreased violence against women and children.

## **Our Ministry**

37. Because we deeply respect human life, and as abortion involves ending a life process, abortion is a serious matter which reflects the complex nature of the human condition. While abortion may be deemed justifiable under exceptional conditions, we are called to explore redemptive alternatives that would eliminate the felt need for abortion.

38. The reality that we are both saints and sinners calls us to acknowledge there are many who have conceived life who for various reasons feel compelled to consider terminating a pregnancy. As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, we have a responsibility to minister to those persons who come to us for help. As families, pastors, care-givers, and members, our ministry is to listen with compassion to those wrestling with such a decision.

39. We recognize that the pain surrounding a decision to abort can be longfelt and debilitating for those involved, including the individuals seeking an abortion and those facilitating it, often with great ambivalence. We need to provide on-going pastoral care which affirms that all who have suffered can experience healing and renewal in the family of God. We minister in the assurance of God's love and mercy to us all.

40. In seeking ways to eliminate the felt need for abortion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, as a loving community of faith, calls upon all its members, its congregational, synodical, and national leadership to:

- 1) speak and act as responsible citizens on behalf of all life, including the unborn;
- 2) produce and promote resources which can help all its members grow towards developing healthy and life-giving relationships wherein the responsibility for birth control and parenting is shared by partners;
- 3) encourage the school system, the church and workplaces to support women who are pregnant, so that pregnancy is seen not as a reason for discrimination, but is acknowledged with dignity and support;
- 4) support efforts being made to deal with the causes of all forms of family violence and actions which might lead to their prevention and elimination so that women might be treated with respect and children be raised in safety;
- 5) affirm and communicate to all levels of government:

- a) the need to extend public funding on an equitable basis to all community agencies which offer preventive or crisis counselling in the area of sexuality, family planning, pregnancy and prenatal care;
  - b) the need to develop consistent and fair legislation regarding access to abortion, and regulations regarding the conditions under which abortion may be permitted; abortion ought not to be included in the Criminal Code;
  - c) the need for legislation which respects the consciences of health care workers and protects their right to refuse to participate in abortion;
  - d) the need for just social policies that provide quality child care, affordable housing, accessible health care, recreational opportunities, and a healthy environment;
  - e) the need for social programs which encourage adoption as an alternative to abortion.
- 6) establish networks of people who would open their hearts and homes to women who need housing, support and nurture during and after their problem pregnancies.

### **As a Community of Faith, We Commit Ourselves to:**

- 1) Pray for wisdom, guidance, understanding, and love for all who are struggling with the reality of abortion;
- 2) Praise God by celebrating and demonstrating respect for human life in our worship, education, service, and outreach;
- 3) Proclaim in word and deed God's compassion for all.

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