

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/1/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Periodically, the ELCA studies, develops, and then approves social statements on topics that are challenging for its members. These statements generally do not define how all ELCA Lutherans are to believe or what the official position of the ELCA is on controversial issues. Rather social statements seek to explore all sides of issues to help people gain the full spectrum of understanding on difficult subjects for the purpose of open conversation and acceptance even in the midst of differing beliefs. In 1991, the ELCA adopted a social statement on abortion. Following the Supreme Court's reversal of *Roe v. Wade* last week, our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, issued the following letter in which she draws much from this particular social statement. In some ways, it feels as though it is directed more toward the pastors of our church, but I think it may be helpful for all of us to read and consider.

Bishop Eaton Issues Pastoral Message
on SCOTUS Ruling Regarding *Roe v. Wade*
June 24, 2022

Dear church,

Whatever personal perspective one might take on the June 24 abortion ruling from the Supreme Court, it is the legal framework in which we now minister, and I wish to speak a pastoral word at this time.

The Supreme Court has voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, removing federal constitutional protection for safe and legal abortion and leaving decisions about abortion law largely to the states. As a result, safe and legal abortion will likely not be accessible in every state. This church's 1991 social statement *Abortion* argues that "the number of induced abortions is a source of deep concern" but teaches that the practice should be legal (pp. 3, 9-10). In other words, "Laws should be enacted and enforced justly for the preservation and enhancement of life, and should avoid unduly encumbering or endangering the lives of women" (p. 9). Overturning *Roe v. Wade* and placing decisions about abortion regulation at the state level encumbers and endangers the lives of all persons who need to make decisions about unexpected pregnancies.

First, as a pastor of this church, I want to acknowledge that this decision affects many people, especially those whose pregnancies unfold in complex situations and the people who love them. Many now find their moral agency restricted because federal law no longer guarantees access to legal and safe abortion. They already face difficult moral questions, and the Supreme Court decision only adds to their anguish. As our social statement reminds us, we have both the freedom and the obligation to serve neighbors in complex situations. As a church, we are called at this moment to recognize and spiritually support people who are struggling with decisions around pregnancy.

Second, as presiding bishop, I want to remind this church that, despite this new legal landscape, we continue to depend on our social teaching for guidance. Our social statement provides the moral framework for our church's communal discernment and ministry, holding in tension both the strong Christian presumption to preserve and protect all life as well as the complex moral situations in which pregnancy sometimes occurs. Our social teaching is complex and does not hew to clear categories or labels such as "pro-abortion" or "anti-abortion."

That complexity is reflected in several points. The statement recognizes that pregnant persons have moral agency; they are the ones to make decisions about a pregnancy (see pp. 5-6). This church and its ministers trust them to decide but expect them to make such decisions in relationship—with God, self, partner, family, ministers and others.

I also want to underscore for the whole body of Christ the statement's exhortation "that those who counsel persons faced with unintended pregnancies respect how deeply the woman's pregnancy involves her whole person—body, mind and spirit—in relation to all the commitments that comprise her stewardship of life" (p. 5).

Further, our church teaching holds that there are no exclusive rights in pregnancy. A pregnant person does not have an exclusive right to abort a fetus at all points during the pregnancy. A developing life does not have an exclusive right to be born (p. 2). This church does not support abortion as a normative form of birth control but rather understands it as necessary in some morally responsible circumstances. This church does not condone late-term abortions except in extreme circumstances, which must be determined by the individual with their medical caregivers (p. 7).

This church acknowledges that individuals and religious traditions hold divergent viewpoints over when life begins. These divergent views are not only scientific but also biblical and cultural. The ELCA social statement acknowledges these ethical ambiguities and states that "the closer the life in the womb comes to full term the more serious such [moral] issues become." (p. 7).

As we live into this new legal framework, we can respond to and minister in the current situation, for instance, by ministering to individuals who seek abortions; advocating for laws that provide free or affordable health care, child care and education; providing and promoting sex education; continuing to be a community of discernment where thoughtful and diverse perspectives can be shared and heard; and advocating for state laws that provide legal, safe and affordable abortions, and against legislation that would outlaw abortion in all circumstances (p. 9).

Finally, I wish to remind everyone that this church supports peaceful means of expression within a diverse society. Peaceful protest is a crucial element of civic engagement; violent protest is not, and this church reproves it. Likewise, this church is on record against hate speech. Let us be instruments for peace where there is none. Let us listen to one another. Let us serve the needs of neighbors in all the complexities life presents. God calls us to be for others, just as God in Christ is for us.

In Christ,
The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

If you wish to discuss this letter (or any other topics), as always, I stand open and available to do so. Don't hesitate to email or call me.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey