Genetics, Faith and Responsibility

SOCIAL STATEMENT OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA
ELCA Social Statements

• Theological and teaching documents
• Assist members to reach informed judgements on social issues from a perspective of faith
• Intended to cultivate individual and community deliberation as well as to guide moral formation
• Govern institutional policy in terms of social witness and guide work as a public church
• Developed through an extensive process of deliberation involving the whole church and must be adopted by a two-thirds majority of a churchwide assembly
Development of Genetics Social Statement

• Invitation for nominations from pastors and congregations to the national committee
  • Sought Individuals with various stakeholder perspectives
    • Theologians
    • Ethicists
    • Genetics professionals
    • Industry representatives
    • Pastors
    • Agricultural interests
    • Sociologists

• 5 year process
  • Developed a study guide, distributed and discussed across congregations
  • Supplied all congregations with resource on genetics knowledge and technology (NOVA Special Human Genome Project)

• Extensive community engagement across the US
  • Town meeting approaches
  • Call for comments and feedback
Historical Perspective
Key themes

• Morally responsible discernment requires knowledge and insights from both religious and secular sources.

• Both have contributed to this framework for theological reflection, public moral deliberation, congregational life, pastoral practice and mission-oriented action.

• The statement focuses attention on analysis, values, and convictions and not on specific issues, recognizing that specific issues are likely to change quickly in the field of genetics.
Basic convictions to frame and guide

- Genetics sciences represent gifts intended by God to contribute to the human vocation to order and shape, nurture and invent.
- To recognize and accept our distinctive power and freedom
- To take responsibility as innovative stewards who live out this gift and duty through various callings
- The vocation of the human race includes God’s call
- Human reality of sin, excessive pride and negligence or complacency corrupts efforts
- This power obligates humans to assume a greater level of accountability and moral consideration for the future of humans, but also all of nature
Ethical Framework

Respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom
God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars

Martin Luther
Key principles

• Community of life refers not only to human good, but also concern for biosphere and future generations

• Respect before promote:
  • cautious approach that respects the priority of species and natural processes as they currently exist
  • Does not object to imagination and innovation when one can demonstrate contribution to the good of all

• Justice: 4 guiding principles relevant to the study of genetics knowledge and its use
  • Sufficient
  • Sustainable
  • Solidarity
  • Participation in human society

• Wisdom
Respect

• Constitutes a moral baseline

• Places limits on all relationships, decisions and actions

• Must continually guide and may control human actions

• True for actions that seek to enhance or improve the community of life.

• We are to engage in moral scrutiny
  ◦ Should not assume that all new technologies are inherently valuable, inevitable, or irreversible.
  ◦ Take responsibility so that decisions are not left to the economic marketplace.
Promote

“Human beings are to be imaginative, inventive and responsible caretakers” Psalm 115:16

• Genetic knowledge offers stunning means to advance benefits and betterment of the community of life.

• The directive to promote can include the enhancement of life processes and traits that are passed to future generations.

• We must resist the temptation for negligence and complacency. We are called to be caretakers.

• God’s plan for fulfillment of creation is not dependent upon and will not be realized by human efforts to intervene. God’s redemption for creation will not come through genetics.

• We encourage human imagination and innovation in the use of genetic knowledge to address physical and mental conditions, relieve human suffering and improve the human situation.
Justice

Guiding principles to articulate the essential criteria for discernment and deliberation in the quest to use genetic knowledge for good while avoiding harm.

Sufficiency

Guides decisions in the present to care for the basic needs of others

◦ Looks to advance the common good rather than the economic gain of a few.
Sustainability

Protects the future by promoting an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations

- Are there future repercussions in terms of reproductive consequences for their children?
- Overly restrictive regulation isn’t the necessary default answer to novel technologies
- ELCA supports traditional criteria for regulation: Risk and safety assessment and technological efficacy
- Adds another criteria: **Assess long term ecological, social and economic impact which addresses impact on future generations and guards against unintended consequences**
Solidarity

• The moral duty to stand together
• To look at who benefits from the technology
• How are research priorities decided upon?
• Must weigh the needs and desires of affluent populations over against the most pressing needs in resource-poor nations.
• Encourages the search for ways to direct genetic research so that it becomes equitable and broadly accessible
• Seek funding opportunities that ensure the obligations of justice are met
Participation in human society

• Seek to foster community of moral deliberation.
• Seek to give access and voice to those marginalized.
• Require public accountability of genetic research
• Allow adequate time and accessible venue’s for broad community participation
Wisdom

• There is a duty to use expert knowledge and insights; learn to use critical assessment; share what is known and what is uncertain

• Humility: value in listening to others and remaining open

• Precautionary Principle: exercise caution in the face of uncertain knowledge

• Responsibility to demonstrate safety rests upon those who promote the novel action.

“In much wisdom is both vexation and satisfaction, and those who increase knowledge increase both sorrow and possibility.”

Ecclesiastes 1:12 - 18
Pursue goals, set policies and establish practices that:

• Advocate for genetic research and discovery that advance the good of the present generation and those to come

• Encourage varieties of research aimed at improving human health and well-being

• Give priority to global health issues and needs, particularly those which may benefit by genetic research even when the economic return is small.

• Maximize the use of medical genetic information to improve care without succumbing to discrimination or the abuse of privacy

• Affirm quality of human life improvement with reasonable life extension without expecting or seeking perfection, in so far as such research does not lead to unjust and disproportionately biased use of limited human and financial resources.
Summary

• Qualified by limits, the ELCA encourages human imagination and innovation in the use of genetic knowledge to address physical and mental conditions, relieve human suffering and improve the human situation.

• Moral deliberation is a key component of the evaluation and is recommended to include scientists and faith leaders together with representatives of any/all people who will be impacted (including those hard to reach—those marginalized)

• Include evaluation of the long-term ecological, social and economic impact of new uses of genetic technologies.
ELCA Social Statement and Gene Editing

• Use the Ethical Framework: *Respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom*

• Engage in moral scrutiny and offer time and access for moral deliberation.
  • Seek to engage voices of the marginalized, minority voices and the global community.

• Resist the temptation for negligence and complacency. We are called to be innovative stewards of all of creation.

• Look to advance the common good rather than the economic gain of a few.

• Assess long term ecological, social and economic impact which includes the impact on future generations (of all life on earth) and guards against unintended consequences.

• Encourage the search for ways to direct genetic research so that it becomes equitable and broadly accessible.

• Use expert knowledge and insights together with humility to recognize, acknowledge and address uncertainty.