

What I've Learned About the ELCA and Abortion from the Nebraska Synod

On March 1, 2010, I submitted to the Nebraska Synod two resolutions for the 2010 Synod Assembly: one on the ELCA health benefits plan's coverage of abortion, the other on the sacredness of all human life from the moment of conception.

On March 2, I received an e-mail acknowledging that the resolutions had been received.

In April I spoke by phone and exchanged e-mails with a representative of the Synod's resolutions committee. She told me that my resolutions had been ruled "out of order" by the committee because they are, and I quote, "inconsistent with the ELCA social statement on abortion." The Nebraska Synod cannot adopt a pro-life resolution, or even discuss or vote on one, and cannot ask the ELCA to change its health benefits plan without first asking the ELCA to change or rescind its social statement on abortion. She explained that a certain procedure, or order, needed to be followed and offered to help me write an appropriate resolution for the next assembly, which I appreciated. She also told me that even though my resolutions had been rejected, they would be printed in the Bulletin of Reports to be distributed at the Assembly, along with the committee's responses. She assured me that the responses would not approve or disapprove of anything in the resolutions and would only explain how they were not consistent with the social statement.

On April 15 she e-mailed to me the committee's written responses. On April 17 I wrote back to say that the responses seemed to me to go far beyond just pointing out inconsistencies with the social statement. Instead, in my view, even though the committee didn't deny any of the facts presented in the resolutions, it strongly defended the social statement and even misrepresented the resolutions. I asked that the responses be amended. My contact at the Synod defended the committee's responses and said they would not be changed. Both resolutions and the responses were printed in the Bulletin of Reports distributed at the Assembly and posted on the Nebraska Synod's website.

From this experience I have learned the following about the ELCA:

- A synod is not allowed to pass a resolution that conflicts with an ELCA social statement, and a synod-level committee decides what resolutions can be discussed at a synod assembly. An individual or group that wants to address what the ELCA says or does must ask the synod to ask the Churchwide Assembly to amend or rescind a social statement--which almost never happens. These practices seem to indicate that the ELCA is not, as it claims to be, a representative organization that encourages and values grassroots involvement, but instead is directed and controlled from the top down.
- The resolutions committee defended the most important and shocking sentence in the social statement on abortion: "What is determined to be a morally responsible decision in one situation may not be in another." Every other assertion made in the social statement and by the committee is rooted in this claim, which could be restated,

“The morality of ending the life of an unborn child is merely a matter of opinion.” This way of thinking is dangerous, because it relies on the limitations of human reasoning and emotion rather than on the natural and revealed law of God. The implications of this attitude--that there is no absolute moral right or wrong--are truly disturbing.

- The Synod resolutions committee makes clear that the social statement does not take the position that human life begins at conception, even though the Bible and Christian tradition have always affirmed this, and even though modern science and technology have proven that the unborn child is a member of the human family. Only once in the responses does the committee mention the child: when it refers to the potential early death of an “infant” due to an “extreme abnormality.” Otherwise, it refers only to *abortion, unintended pregnancies, ending pregnancy, and termination of a pregnancy*. It uses such language to avoid calling attention to the fact that what is aborted is a living human being.
- There can no longer be any doubt in anyone’s mind that the ELCA’s social statement on abortion is pro-abortion-choice. The Synod resolutions committee confirms this when it says that the social statement provides guidance for the mother and encourages her to seek pastoral and professional counseling and to pray for discernment about whether to “end” an “unplanned pregnancy.” In other words, the social statement tells the mother that she has the right to decide whether her unborn child should live or die. The Synod and the ELCA therefore consider killing to be an acceptable solution to the problem of an unwanted or difficult pregnancy. This conclusion contradicts what the ELCA has published in other official documents, such as its social message on community violence, which states the following: “Deliberate acts to harm or kill innocent people violate God’s intention for human community. God’s commandment is ‘You shall not murder’ (Exod 20:13). In proclaiming God’s law, we declare that all people are accountable before God and the community *to honor and respect the life God has given*” (emphasis added).
- The Synod committee insists that urging pastors to turn to options other than abortion would require amendment of the social statement on abortion. It claims that taking a pro-life stance on abortion would interfere with the “discretion” of pastors and other counselors. It implies that a “blanket rule” that would prohibit abortion except to save the life of the mother would “eliminate” or “minimize” the need for pastoral care. It seems to consider the counseling process an end in itself and to ignore the need for true moral guidance based on what the Bible and Christian tradition teach and modern science confirms. In other words, the social statement tells pastors that they may help a woman make a decision, any decision, but it does not instruct pastors to help her recognize, honor, and protect the life of her unborn child, though of course this is a possible outcome depending on the convictions of the individual pastor.
- The committee also defends the social statement by saying that it presents a “complex and nuanced set of parameters for determining” when it is supposedly morally responsible and defensible to kill the unborn child. It lists three conditions (which it calls examples, meaning that this is not a complete list of conditions in which killing an

unborn child is acceptable): (1) when there is a threat to the life of the mother, (2) in cases of rape and incest, and (3) when there is determined to be some sort of “fetal abnormality.” (Poor access to contraceptives is slipped in as a fourth possible excuse.) These are meaningless clarifications in light of the fact (which the committee does not dispute) that the health benefits plan covers any and all abortions performed during the first five months of the unborn child’s life, no questions asked. In other words, the health plan’s coverage is not limited to these three or any other conditions during this period.

- The committee does not deny that the ELCA’s health benefits plan uses offering dollars to pay for abortions. My resolution asks the synod to ask the ELCA to limit the plan’s coverage to preventing the death of the mother and to declare any other payments unjust. The committee claims that the social statement, with which the health plan is supposedly consistent, does not view abortion as only a question of justice. Yet the ELCA has made justice a central component of its ministry. Its website dedicates an entire section to justice, where it states, “We advocate dignity and justice for all people and stand with people in poverty and who are powerless.” No one is more powerless than a child developing in the womb, yet according to the Nebraska Synod’s resolutions committee, justice is not adequate for determining whether or not an unborn child should be allowed to continue living.

- Finally, the Synod and the ELCA do not appear to consider that abortion harms women. According to Leslie Weber of Church and Society, “The ELCA does not officially, that is, as a denomination, promote, support, and cooperate with crisis pregnancy centers” or with providers of post-abortion healing services. They are therefore willing to allow physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual harm to come to women (and men and families) by giving them permission to abort rather than supporting them in reverencing and caring for the lives of their unborn children. The authentic Christian response would be to counsel a woman that we cannot condone aborting her child or help her to do so, but we are here to help and support her in caring for her child, herself, and her family, both during her pregnancy and after. We are also here for women who have already had abortions, to show compassion, lead them to repentance, and help them find forgiveness and healing.