



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Talking points on ELCA social teaching regarding vaccination during a pandemic Prepared by Dr. Roger A. Willer, Director for Theological Ethics, Office of the Presiding Bishop

Issue #1 Regarding Individual Religious Objections to Required Vaccination

Summary: ELCA leaders have encouraged participation in vaccination as a primary means to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no ELCA policy resolution dedicated to vaccination, but a basis in Lutheran tradition and ELCA teaching for religious exemption is virtually non-existent. On the contrary both the Lutheran heritage and ELCA teaching encourage participation in public health efforts since health is a shared endeavor. A case can be made for medical exemptions, of course.

The Lutheran tradition: In Lutheran teaching, historically, medicine is considered a gift of God for the good of the community. This is true whether it concerns individual medical treatment or when established by official medical authorities in civil society and government. A little discussed aspect of the Reformation is its abandonment of the church's privilege in the 16th century to be exempted from rules and regulations established by the "community" or the "secular government." The ELCA certainly affirms the 1st amendment in the Bill of Rights but has never drawn upon that line of reasoning around health care issues.

Key points from ELCA Teaching: The primary source is Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor (CH:OSE)

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/HealthSS.pdf?_ga=2.107516996.73183565.8.1626404296-1208436962.1626404296

1) The central theme in CH:OSE is evident in the title--health is a shared endeavor. Health implications go beyond the domain of "my" personal body and rights. This comes into play because the health of the whole community is connected to each person's health. My health is related to yours; your health is related to mine. This church supports "a comprehensive approach to health care as a shared endeavor among individuals, churches, government, and the wider society." (2)

2) "When we understand health in this larger context, we realize that we cannot be healthy by ourselves." Rather, it is a moral responsibility, grounded in loving the neighbor, to help each other attain good health through our ways of living together and through supporting those who provide all forms of health care services and healing. (4)

3) "Health as a shared endeavor makes public health services, which focus on the population as a whole, the foundation for any health care system." This commitment urges moral and financial support for services undertaken "on behalf of the entire community to prevent

epidemics, limit threats to health, promote healthy behavior, reduce injuries, assist in recovery from disasters, and ensure that people have access to needed services. Governments have an obligation to provide or organize many of these services, but all services depend on active collaboration with the entire community.” (13)

1

The statement Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility also touches on these matters

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/GeneticsSS.pdf?_ga=2.179352034.731835658.1626404296-1208436962.1626404296

“The ELCA calls upon individuals, agencies, organizations, corporations, and governments to pursue goals, set policies or establish practices that give priority to global health issues and needs, particularly those which may benefit by genetic research, even when the economic return is small...” (28)

About religious exemptions in general: The ELCA to date has not addressed the breadth of questions around religious exemption, except in support of conscientious objection to military service. It should be noted that the question of religious exemption is under study as part of the development of a social statement on Church, State, and Civic Participation. While one cannot anticipate what this church will say, predecessor body documents provide some clues in that they are opposed to broad religious exemptions. In addition, historical Lutheran thinking, again, has encouraged use of medical means and includes no history of objection or exemption to the use of medicine, such as that found among Jehovah’s Witnesses or Christian Scientists.

Issue #2 Regarding Vaccination Requirements by Institutions Affiliated with the ELCA

Summary: ELCA teaching encourages vaccinations and supports decisions by institutions to mandate vaccinations for the sake of public health. The ELCA has not called for mandates but they are in line with how the ELCA has addressed health as a shared endeavor.

Key points:

- See references to Caring for Health above for reasoning regarding health and public health.
- The Path to Affiliation document for social ministry organizations says that affiliated SMO’s will “provide services in a manner which is consistent with the social policy documents and positions of the ELCA.” (8) Similarly, ELCA Policy and Procedures for social teaching hold that “It is expected that ELCA-affiliated agencies and institutions will develop policies and practices consistent with the principles and directives of ELCA social teaching.” (13)
<https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Addressing-Social-Concerns>
- ELCA constitution— this church will “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction.” Federal and state law permit vaccine mandates.

■ An illustration: Many church-related college campuses selectively require appropriate vaccination as a condition for students to participate in certain activities, such as travel-related education, high contact athletics, music programs, and possibly residence hall occupancy. These activity-driven vaccination requirements suggest support for organized health efforts and can effectively result in a de facto vaccination mandate for nearly all students.