

ANOTHER Social Statement?

As I have travelled the Synod since August, I have heard again and again, “Why do we have to have social statements?” I hear it from bewildered parishioners who think that the church should stay out of politics. I hear it from beleaguered pastors who want to lift up all the good that the church is doing and are feeling distracted by the unprecedented attention that our church seems to be paying to our most recent social statement. “Why do we have to have social statements?” comes to me from all sides. And the answer, of course, is that we are a church committed to scripture and to our Christian tradition. And we are a church that believes that God has something to say about the pressing social issues of our day, even the ones that are not addressed in the Bible. We are a church that believes that God has given us resources to address the issues that affect our neighbors, and that the Christian community is the proper venue for addressing complex social issues.

From time to time when I am in a congregation and hear the criticism of the existence of ELCA Social Statements, I ask whether anybody can name any of the other 9 social statements that the ELCA has adopted. It usually gets pretty quiet then, except for the rare congregation where they have decided to do a study of all ten.

Social statements in the ELCA are not top-down declarations of doctrine. Rather they are thoroughly-researched, field-tested, debated, re-written documents that have their genesis in the churchwide assembly, and are adopted (or rejected) 6 years later at a churchwide assembly, by 2/3 of the voting members. They are not a litmus test of who is a good Lutheran and who is not. They are not the opinions of the Presiding Bishop. They are the product of a task force, appointed for its breadth and depth, vetted in hearings and written responses, and finally presented to the assembly. (Montana Synod members have served on various Task Forces on Social Statements. Bishop Rich Omland was part of the Health and Health Care team. Helen Waller served on the Economic Justice team. And Pastor Steve Rice works with the Criminal Justice statement, due in 2013.)

So it was with the social statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust. Proposed in 2003, it went through many versions. Resource materials were produced and distributed several times along the way. A draft was released in February 2008, and hearings were held in both Billings and Missoula in April 2008. Then in March 2009, the final version was released. Synod Assemblies debated it and advised on it. But the decision was the Churchwide Assembly's. And the Churchwide Assembly adopted it.

But in the meantime, three more social statements are in the works. The next one, due to be voted on in 2011 is the Social Statement on Genetics. The first draft of the statement will be released on March 18. It will be available online, and it will also be mailed to congregations. We are working with the Task Force to schedule a hearing in Great Falls some time later this spring. People will have until October 15 to submit written comments on the draft. Many people in the Montana Synod seem to have been taken off guard by the Social Statement on Human Sexuality. Every place I visited, I reminded people that Social Statements are a part of what we are as the ELCA, and it is worthwhile keeping abreast of the upcoming issues. Genetics is next.

And why should the church be concerned about genetics? Genetics is one of the fastest growing scientific fields, and it affects all of us. Jesus never had to deal with stem cell research, with the ethics of genetically modified organisms, with the patenting of life, with beginning of life and end of life issues. But we do. And as the church we bring together people and resources who can help us do our best thinking and praying about difficult and divisive issues that affect our neighbors.

The worth of a social statement is not whether it is adopted unanimously. It is whether it gets us, the people of the church, into productive dialogue with one another, dialogue that is respectful and gracious and is a model for the rest of society. Christians do not have to agree with one another on all things. But it is not too much to ask that we be an example of how to engage faithfully and respectfully with our sisters and brothers in the faith. Only then will our witness have meaning to the broader society.

So join the conversation on genetics. Read the draft. Come to the hearing. Send in your comments. Stay engaged. Stay positive. Stay concerned on behalf of your neighbor.

Bishop Jessica Crist