



# THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

### General Information

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) traces its origins to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation, although it achieved its current form in 1988 when three previously independent churches merged together to form the largest Lutheran denomination in America.

More information about the ELCA, including the Church's beliefs, structure, and history, can be found by going to <http://www.elca.org/>

**Number of Members in the United States: 4.2 million**

### Official Statements on Animals<sup>1</sup>

#### Human "dominion" is a call to serve creation as Christ serves us

- **Although the Bible states that humans have "dominion" over animals and the earth, this statement is not intended as "a license to dominate and exploit," according to the ELCA. Instead, dominion is correctly understood as an invitation to imitate Christ's service to us through our service to creation. When we serve "all members of the community of life"—living "within the covenant God makes with every living thing"—then we have grasped what Genesis means when it says we are "created "in the image of God."**
- "Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole of creation. Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. God's command to have dominion and subdue the earth is not a license to dominate and exploit. Human dominion (Gen 1:28; Ps 8), a special responsibility, should reflect God's way of ruling as a shepherd king who takes the form of a servant (Phil 2:7), wearing a crown of thorns."  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Environment: Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice](#), I:B Our Place in Creation.

- “God creates human beings as interdependent with the whole creation and as responsible to provide oversight as stewards who care for that creation. It is a vocation, a calling to continue what God is already doing for the earth—a calling to respect and promote the creation’s flourishing. In this sense, Genesis understands the human species as being created ‘in the image of God’ (Genesis 1:26-28).”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 3:2 God: Creator of the Community of Life.
- “According to Gen 2:15, our role within creation is to serve and to keep God’s garden, the earth. ‘To serve,’ often translated ‘to till,’ invites us again to envision ourselves as servants, while ‘to keep’ invites us to take care of the earth as God keeps and cares for us (Num 6:24-26).”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Environment](#): I:B Our Place in Creation.
- “[T]he ELCA articulates an ethic of universal human obligation to serve the flourishing of the created order.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4:1 The Imperative.
- “We are to live within the covenant God makes with every living thing (Gen 9:12-17; Hos 2:18)...We are to love the earth as God loves us.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Environment](#): I:B Our Place in Creation.

**“All creation, not just humankind, is viewed as ‘very good’ in God’s eyes”**

- **When we look to the Bible for clues about God’s relationship with the world and our own responsibilities as “God’s image” on earth, we learn that God loves *all* creatures “from the amoeba to the person.” This love means that all creatures have “inherent or intrinsic value.”**
  - “God blesses the world and sees it as ‘good,’ even before humankind comes on the scene. All creation, not just humankind, is viewed as ‘very good’ in God’s eyes (Gen 1:31)... God showers care upon sparrows and lilies (Mat 6:26-30), and brings ‘rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life’ (Job 38:26).”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Environment](#): I:A God, Earth and All Creatures.
  - “Because each participant of creation depends ultimately upon God and is tasked by God, they are not simply resources for human well-being or parts of a greater good: they are good in themselves.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 3:2 God: Creator of the Community of Life.
  - “God’s creative action brings forth a dynamic, varied, evolving, interdependent community of abundance and life. In this creation, each participant has a relationship to God and has a God-given integrity and value.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 3:2 God: Creator of the Community of Life.

- “Respect is a directive grounded in the dignity and integrity of created life (Exodus 20:11-17). For Lutheran Christians, respect follows from God’s regard for all life as precious, from the amoeba to the person. Human beings cannot love as God loves, but the minimal response of innovative stewards to other members of the community of life is to recognize their givenness and to perceive their inherent or intrinsic value.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4:3 Respect.

**We are kin to all creatures and must include them in our “sphere of moral consideration”**

- **Both biology and the Bible tell us that we are related to, and interdependent with, all creatures. Our kinship and interdependence, as well as God’s word and example, teach us that “the sphere of moral consideration must encompass all of nature, not simply the immediate circle of human beings.”**
  - “All living beings exist because of common biological structures and processes, and all share fundamental dependencies and interdependencies. All life forms are related one to another.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4:2: Seek the Good of the Community of Life.
  - “Humanity is intimately related to the rest of creation. We, like other creatures, are formed from the earth (Gen 2:7, 9, 19). Scripture speaks of humanity’s kinship with other creatures (Job 38-39; Pss 104). God cares faithfully for us, and together we join in singing the ‘hymn of all creation’ (Lutheran Book of Worship, page 61; Pss 148). We look forward to a redemption that includes all creation (Eph 1:10).”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Environment](#): I:B: Our Place in Creation.
  - “Solidarity recognizes a kinship within all of nature that issues from God’s creative activity (Psalms 104 and 148). It recognizes the fundamental human continuity and interdependence with all living things and natural resources on the earth. It expresses the contention that the interests of the entire community of life should be legitimate concerns when decisions are made and actions evaluated.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4:5: Justice/Solidarity.
  - “Today, the meaning of ‘common good’ or ‘good of all’ must include the community of all living creatures. The meaning also should extend beyond the present to include consideration for the future of the web of life. The sphere of moral consideration is no longer limited to human beings alone.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4:2: Seek the Good of the Community of Life.
  - “The sphere of moral consideration must encompass all of nature, not simply the immediate circle of human beings.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 1: Prologue.

**“When the interests of life forms conflict, Christians must discern....ways that respect all”**

- **Although all creatures are loved by God and have value in and of themselves, independent of any value they may or may not have for humans, this does not mean that all creatures have identical needs or identical value. Where we have erred in the past is in our assumption that these differences permit humanity to place any and all human desires above the needs of other species. The ELCA affirms that human decisions should not be “based solely on human interests,” that human beings are obligated to “care for the basic needs of...all other life forms,” and that the “good of the community of life should now serve as the overarching value to guide moral reflection and action.”**
- “When the interests of life forms conflict, Christians must discern morally relevant differences and seek to resolve these dilemmas in ways that respect all.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4.3: Respect.
  - “As reciprocity between humans does not always mean strict mutuality or equal treatment, so, too, reciprocity between humans and the community of life requires careful discrimination and judgment. Reciprocity must always mean that the community of life, its members and individuals, has moral standing that needs to be taken into account in discernment and deliberation for action.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4.1: The Imperative.
  - “...[H]umans should not claim for themselves authority to make decisions based solely on human interests. They should consider both the integrity of the other participants in the community of life and their tasks before God. The human vocation as innovative stewards must be guided by the goal to respect and promote the earth’s abundance for the sake of the community of life.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 3.2: God: Creator of the Community of Life.
  - “The principle of sufficiency obligates human beings to care for the basic needs of others and all other life forms. It is grounded in the belief that God provides abundance that is sufficient for all.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4.5: Justice/Sufficiency.
  - “...[T]he ELCA articulates an ethic of universal human obligation to serve the flourishing of the created order.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4.1: The Imperative.
  - “The good of the community of life should now serve as the overarching value to guide moral reflection and action.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4.2: Seek the Good of the Community of Life.
-

<sup>1</sup> All of the statements in the “Official Statements on Animals” section are taken from official “ELCA Social Statements.” ELCA Social Statements “are meant to...set policy for [the] church and guide its advocacy and work in the public arena. They result from an extensive process of participation and deliberation and are adopted by a two-thirds vote of a Churchwide Assembly.” They are considered officially binding on the Church.

—from [ELCA Social Statements](#)

## Historical References on Animals<sup>2</sup>

### **Martin Luther: Animals are our “teacher ...in Scriptures” and help us recognize God’s presence within creation**

- **“The ELCA, along with other Lutheran churches, can trace its roots directly to the Protestant Reformation....in the 16<sup>th</sup> century [when] [Martin Luther](#), a German monk, became aware of differences between the Bible and church practices of the day.”<sup>2</sup>**

**Prior to the fall of Adam and Eve, said Luther, humanity had perfect knowledge of “God’s word and command.” Since the fall, our knowledge has become imperfect. Creation can help us recover some of our lost wisdom if we allow the creatures around us to become our “teacher and master in the Scriptures” and to help us recognize God’s presence shining through creation.**

- **“But man has become crazy and foolish, since he fell away from God’s word and command, so that henceforth there is no creature living that is not wiser than he; and a little finch, that can neither speak nor read, is his teacher and master in the Scriptures, although he has the whole Bible and his reason to help him.”**  
—from Luther, *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, 342 (re: Matthew 6:26-27).
- **“In all things, in the least creatures, and their members, God’s almighty power and wonderful works clearly shine.”**  
—from Martin Luther, *The Table Talk*, trans. William Hazlitt (electronic version: MobileReference) “Of God’s Works,” LXIII.
- **“God’s entire divine nature is wholly and entirely in all creatures, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself.”**  
— from Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 37, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 60.

### **Luther: God holds animals in “high esteem” and cares about their wellbeing**

- **According to Luther, God loves animals and “holds them in such high esteem that he daily feeds them” and takes personal pleasure in caring for them.**
- **“Thus Christ now speaks:...you daily see how your heavenly Father feeds the little birds in the field, without their having any care...[H]e holds them in such high esteem that he daily feeds them, as if he had only these to care for; and he takes**

pleasure in it, that they quite without care fly about and sing, as if they should say: I sing and am cheerful...”

—from Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Charles A. Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1892), 341 (re: Matthew 6:26-27).

### **Luther: On Judgment Day, animals will cry out against those who have abused them**

- **All creatures “have speech intelligible to God and the Holy Spirit,” says Luther. God hears their cries and will listen “on the last day” when “all creatures will utter an accusing cry against the ungodly who have shown them abuse here on earth.”**
  - “Just as we Christians endure many kinds of injustice and consequently sigh for and implore help and deliverance in the Lord’s prayer, so do the creatures sigh. Although they have not human utterance, yet they have speech intelligible to God and the Holy Spirit, who mark the creatures’ sighs over their unjust abuse by the ungodly.”  
—from Martin Luther, *Luther’s Epistle Sermons: Trinity Sunday to Advent*, Vol. III trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis: The Luther Press, 1909), Fourth Sunday after Trinity, Romans 8:18-22, paragraph 17.
  - “Rightly was it said from the pulpit in former times that on the last day all creatures will utter an accusing cry against the ungodly who have shown them abuse here on earth, and will call them tyrants to whom they were unjustly subjected.”  
—from Luther, *Epistle Sermons*, Romans 8:18-22, paragraph 18.

<sup>2</sup>The statements in the “Historical Statements on Animals” section are part of the history of the Lutheran church but are not officially binding on it. Among Luther’s writings, only the *Small* and *Large Catechisms* and the *Smalcald Articles* are considered official statements of the faith.

## **Contemporary References on Animals<sup>3</sup>**

### **“We cannot love God or our human neighbor without caring for creation”**

- **The ELCA’s social statements on the environment and genetic engineering affirm that all of life is interconnected and interdependent (see “Official Statements on Animals,” above). The ELCA’s Presiding Bishop explains that this interconnection means “we cannot love God or our human neighbor without caring for creation.”**
  - “We cannot escape the interconnectedness of the earth’s fabric of life. Creation is the matrix of all our activities, both as human beings and as Christ’s church. God gives us and all creatures life through the water, air, food, and all the other gifts that come to us from the earth. Everything we do both depends on these gifts, and has some kind of impact upon them. If these gifts are treated with contempt and abused, people, animals, and plants suffer together. If they are

graciously received and cherished, people will flourish with the rest of creation. We cannot love God or our human neighbor without caring for creation.”  
—from Mark S. Hanson, ELCA Presiding Bishop, Letter first published November 2003. Excerpt reprinted in ELCA, [Awakening to God’s Call to Earthkeeping](#): Study Guide (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2006), 11.

**Caring for creation includes not only eco-systems, but also “all of God’s living creatures”**

- **The Presiding Bishop’s assertion that “we cannot love God or our human neighbor without caring for creation” is reflected in the work and words of the ELCA’s Environmental Education and Advocacy Program. This Program asserts that responsible stewardship must extend to all God’s creation, including “all of God’s living creatures.”**
  - “The Environmental Education and Advocacy program of the ELCA is committed to caring for our Lord’s creation. This involves the responsible stewardship of all God’s creation: soil, air, water and all of God’s living creatures.”  
— from ELCA, [Justice Issues: Environment and Energy](#): *Our Lord Commanded Humankind to ‘Keep the Earth.’ Genesis 2:15.*

**In order to care for all God’s creatures, we must protect endangered species and their habitats**

- **In its social statement on the environment, the ELCA declares that the “church will favor proposals and actions that....protect species and their habitats.”**
  - “This church will favor proposals and actions that... seek: to protect species and their habitats; to protect and assure proper use of marine species; and to protect portions of the planet that are held in common, including the oceans and the atmosphere.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Environment](#): V.E.2: Commitments of this Church/Public Sector.

**Our responsibility to care for creation should include addressing the negative impacts of factory farms**

- **In 2005, the ELCA’s Advisory Committee on Corporate Social Responsibility (ACCSR) resolved to have livestock operations that supply the church report on the environmental impact of their operations. To support the necessity of this decision, the ACCSR explained that concentrated animal feeding operations (also known as CAFOs or factory farms) emit harmful levels of toxins into the air and water that constitutes “a public health hazard.” Concern over the environmental impact of factory farms is consistent with the ELCA’s social statement on economic life, which states that economic decisions should be ecologically responsible and “help sustain humans and the rest of creation now and in the future.”**

- “The environmental impacts of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) on air and water are of particular concern. Leakage from CAFO waste lagoons and runoff have contaminated surface water and drinking water, impaired aquatic ecosystems, and reduced fish and shellfish harvests...A study by Iowa State University concluded that ‘CAFO air emissions may constitute a public health hazard and that precautions should be taken to minimize’ chemical and odor exposures from CAFOs.”  
—ELCA, Advisory Committee on Corporate Social Responsibility: [Sustainability Report](#) - Environmental Performance, 2005 Shareholders Resolutions Issue for Sustainability.
- “Sustainability has implications for how we evaluate economic activity in terms of its ongoing effects on the wellbeing of both nature and human communities. Economic life should help sustain humans and the rest of creation now and in the future.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Economic Life](#): *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All: We Call for: Sustainability*.

**Our responsibility to care for all creatures forbids “frivolous or abusive” research on animals**

- **The ELCA’s social statements support care and compassion for all God’s creatures. Although the position does not require a cessation of all use of animals in research projects, and even affirms that some forms of research are beneficial to the “community of life,” it does forbid “frivolous or abusive treatment” of “experimental subjects.”**
  - “Christian faith views all life as precious and given, such that respect and gratitude must govern even the sacrifice of life in which humans are inevitably involved, such as...aspects of scientific research....[R]esearch on animals, such as mice, may require the death of individual experimental subjects. The directive of respect, however, rules out frivolous or abusive treatment.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4.3: Respect.
  - “Human efforts to promote the flourishing of the community of life through genetic innovation...can contribute to the good of the whole community...[However] [t]he priority of respect over that of promotion means that not every possible enhancement or innovation should be pursued. Promotion must not violate the fundamental directive of respect. Efforts toward enhancement or innovation must be evaluated also through the norms of justice and wisdom. This church rejects striving after some imagined perfection or idealized state of human life.”  
—from [ELCA: Social Statement: Genetics](#): 4.4: Promote.

<sup>3</sup> All of the statements in the “Contemporary Statements on Animals” section are taken either from official ELCA Social Statements or from documents produced by ELCA departments. Only the Social Statements are considered officially binding on the church, although all the statements have been circulated as resource material for denominations and members.

For more information and resources, visit [humansociety.org/faith](https://humansociety.org/faith).