

# Rationale for a Social Statement on Child Abuse and Child Protection

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During the Fall 2020 semester at Wartburg Theological Seminary, students in the Lutheran Ethics course engaged the theme, “Child Abuse and Child Protection.” A generous grant from the American Association for the Advancement of Science allowed the invitation of experts in the field of child maltreatment to provide presentations to the class. This work was organized in consultation with Victor Vieth, Chief Program Officer for Education & Research at the Zero Abuse Project.

Required readings for the course included *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel Van der Kolk, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* by Victor Vieth, and the theme issue on “Child Abuse and the Church: Prevention, Pastoral Care, and Healing” edited by Victor Vieth and Craig L. Nesson, published in *Currents in Theology and Mission* from July 2018.

The ethics students collaborated to research and write a “Proto-Social Statement on Child Abuse and Child Protection” as a summative project for the course. The edited version of this project is here made available, together with a listing of Recommended Bibliography and Resources. This document is published to provide rationale for denominations, here the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), to authorize the study process toward drafting and adopting a Social Statement on Child Abuse and Child Protection. This is a theme long overdue for the full attention of the church with the authority of a social teaching.

This work provides biblical, theological, ethical, pastoral, and scientific arguments for an urgently needed social statement by the church. It can serve as a substantial reference point for resolutions by congregations and synods to authorize this process. This document can also serve as a study document for church leaders and congregation members in preparing robust and enforceable child protection policies in congregations and all church-related organizations, including youth organizations, camps, schools, colleges and universities, and seminaries. Furthermore, we hope and pray this work can have significance for other church bodies, ecumenical partners, and faith traditions both in the United States and internationally.

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## Toward an ELCA Social Statement on Child Abuse and Child Protection

God’s work and God’s promises include human creation in the image of God, human redemption in the cross of Christ, and human sanctification, life, breath, and being in the Holy Spirit. This makes all humans, regardless of age, united in and with God, such that the Formula of Concord notes: “We, in whom Christ dwells only by grace, become ‘participants in the divine nature’ in Christ because of this great mystery [God revealed in the flesh as Christ Jesus]. What a communion of the divine nature that must be concerning which the Apostle [Paul] says that ‘in Christ the fullness of the deity dwells bodily’ in such a way that God and this human being are a single person!”<sup>1</sup> God, who chose to reveal Godself as an infant—a baby made even more vulnerable in being

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1. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 622.

born in a manger in the midst of a genocide, the slaughter of the innocents (Matt 2:16-18)—necessarily stands firmly on the side of children and moves all humans to love, care for, and protect these little ones.

While one in eight children in the United States experience confirmed cases of abuse or neglect before they turn 18, the actual prevalence of known and unknown abuse is significantly higher.<sup>2</sup> Most child abuse remains unreported. The sin and brokenness shown through our collective neglect and unwillingness to confront this crisis is stark.<sup>3</sup> Taking in the vast physical, psychological, social, and spiritual toll caused by child abuse, we affirm the statement made by Erik Erikson: “Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well-considered, and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child’s spirit.”<sup>4</sup> We pray that day is close at hand and that a social statement might be a step toward such a conviction.

For the Church to understand more fully what constitutes child maltreatment and neglect, clear definitions—based on current scientific research, legal requirements set by state and federal legislation, and the church’s ethical values—are essential. Only with these definitions can effective policies be established to proactively protect children. Furthermore, a clear understanding of child abuse and neglect will help inform and empower those who care for children. In this document, the term “child abuse” refers to physical abuse (which includes all physical violations of the body), sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, and child neglect.

What we do to our neighbors, we do to Christ (Matt 25:40). Jesus Christ is the incarnate icon of our faith and we are created in the image of Jesus, the very image and likeness of the Triune God.<sup>5</sup> God, our Creator in whose image we are made, moves us by the Holy Spirit to see the image, form, and likeness of God dwelling fully in and upon every person we meet, especially in the most vulnerable—the least of these—a category that inextricably includes children. As people justified by grace through faith and thus freed from sin, death, and the devil, we are freed for the freeing of others, especially those upon whom has been conferred, by law or by societal norms, a lesser or marginal status. In children, we see all the promise, wonder, life, and love that God has for all the creation.

As church, we are called to articulate a public theology that defends and protects children. Our Lutheran faith, together with other faith traditions, demands we love and care for neighbors with no exclusions. Christ expressly affirms children are equal

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participants as there are no “others” in the kingdom of God (Luke 18:15-17). We recognize that child abuse in all of its forms is a violation of God’s Law. We recognize careless interpretation of Scripture, particularly the Fourth Commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” has caused great damage. Luther speaks to caretakers of children in the Large Catechism when he states God does not want “scoundrels and tyrants” in the authority of children, and that caretakers are to “provide for the material support of their children.”<sup>6</sup> It is our call as followers of Christ, in partnership with the community of creation, to engage in the prevention of and a response to child abuse.

As church, we are called to repent our sins and proclaim good news to the youngest and most vulnerable among us—but we are called to do more than simply recognize, repent, and react. Simply having policies in place within our congregations to deal with issues of child abuse or neglect when they occur is not enough. Taking a proactive stance by fostering healthy relationships with children and youth in our congregations and communities is paramount.

The Apostle John addresses all of humanity as children in referencing the new commandment of loving God and loving neighbor (1 John 2, John 13:34). Our expression of love for neighbor, therefore, cannot condone or accept child abuse in any form. Furthermore, it is our duty to implement protocols which offer a safe environment for children to participate in all contexts and communities. We must remember that neither survivors nor abusers are outside of God’s redeeming love. Human sin and pain are very real; yet God’s grace, love, and mercy are ever-present, revealed to us in the suffering of Christ on the cross.

### I. What is Child Abuse?

Physical abuse includes intentional injury or infliction of pain that is the result of direct or indirect physical contact, including striking, kicking, burning, or biting a child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child. Corporal punishment, even when not defined as “abuse” per se by states, is a form of violence and aggression toward children that has many of the same impacts as child abuse.<sup>7</sup>

2. “Child Sexual Abuse Statistics,” Darkness to Light: End Child Sexual Abuse. Accessed January 30, 2021: <https://www.d2l.org/child-sexual-abuse/statistics/>

3. Casey Family Programs, *The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act: Keeping children safe and strengthening families in communities*. (May 2019) 4. Accessed November 1, 2020: [https://caseyfamily-pro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/CAPTA-Paper\\_web.pdf](https://caseyfamily-pro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/CAPTA-Paper_web.pdf)

4. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton & Co., 1958), 70.

5. Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord*, 34 (SD VIII).

6. *The Book of Concord*, 409.

7. Tracie O. Affi, Derek Ford, Elizabeth T. Gershoff, Melissa Merrick, Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, Katie A. Ports, Harriet L. MacMillan, George W. Holden, Catherine A. Taylor, Shawna J. Lee, Robbyn Peters Bennett, “Spanking and Adult Mental Health Impairment: The Case for the Designation of Spanking as an Adverse Childhood Experience,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 71 (2017): 24-31. This research finds that “spanking is empirically similar to physical and emotional abuse and including spanking with abuse adds to our understanding of these

Physical acts are considered sexual abuse when harm is inflicted upon a child through touching the child's (clothed or unclothed) genitals, forced touch of another's genitals for a sexual or aggressive purpose, rape, penetration, forced exposure of the child's naked body, sexual exploitation or any other activity that is intended to degrade or provoke a bodily reaction in a child, or gratify an abuser's sexual desires. Another form of sexual abuse includes exposure to voyeurism, exhibitionism, and being subjected to, or the subject of, pornography.

Since sexual abuse occurs when there is no consent or when consent is not possible, sexual abuse of a child can be committed by adults or other children. An egregious practice has involved the widespread cover-up of sexual abuses committed by clergy in the church. By transferring clergy offenders to other parishes or churches, the church institution fails to protect children from abuse. Other organizations, such as schools, daycares, organized sports, and various youth organizations, are also culpable for cover-ups. Sexual abuse furthermore includes the trafficking of children for sexual purposes and instructing or enabling a child to be sexually abused for profit.

Psychological maltreatment includes threats of injury or infliction of harm that is psychological, emotional, or spiritual in nature. Psychological maltreatment includes not only emotional abuse but also emotional neglect. A child is psychologically abused when they are repeatedly ridiculed, blamed, humiliated, or compared unfavorably with others. Emotional abuse occurs when the child is encouraged to engage in an activity that is inappropriate or risky, or when a child is bullied or demeaned emotionally. An often-overlooked form of abuse is spiritual abuse. This type of abuse is administered under the guise of religion and includes the use of religious ideology, tradition, or sacred texts to compel a child to engage in acts which may be harmful, the invocation of a divine authority to manipulate a child into meeting the needs of the abuser, or any abuse that occurs in the context of a religious setting or by a religious leader.

Child neglect is the "failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm."<sup>8</sup> Child neglect can be difficult to identify for several reasons. First, child neglect laws vary widely across the United States and their interpretations are highly dependent on specific circumstances. Though many states have civil statutes enabling child-protection authorities to intervene in neglect cases, this does not mean criminal proceedings automatically follow.<sup>9</sup> Second, public opinion about what constitutes child neglect varies widely, as influenced by one's values,

mental health problems. Spanking should also be considered an ACE and addressed in efforts to prevent violence."

8. Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Definition of Child Abuse and Neglect* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2019), 1.

9. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *What Are Child Abuse and Neglect?* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020), 1.

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experiences, and culture.

Child abuse and neglect are often perpetrated by individuals; however, systems, institutions, or organizations can also perpetuate injury when abuse and neglect are concealed. The separation of immigrant and refugee children from their families at the Mexico-U.S. border by federal agents is considered, by most medical experts, as a form of abuse or neglect.<sup>10</sup> In this instance, the federal government is responsible for perpetrating child abuse and neglect.

### **A. Trauma: the life-long impact of child abuse and neglect**

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have profound and life-long impacts on children.<sup>11</sup> The higher the score a person has on the ACE scale directly correlates to negative psychological, physical and/or social challenges that may be experienced throughout life.

Trauma refers to injury and derives from the Greek word for "wound." Trauma encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual damage. Psychologically, those who have been abused or neglected may be overwhelmed by memories of their traumatic experiences when they encounter everyday sights, sounds, smells, and physical sensations.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is common for traumatized children to feel unsafe within their bodies, since their body may be subconsciously reacting to their past traumas before their mind is able to process what is happening.<sup>13</sup>

A peculiar hell for survivors of trauma is the ongoing effect of

10. Hurley Riley, "The Impact of Parent-Child Separation at the Border," University of Michigan School of Public Health, *The Pursuit: Trending Topics from Michigan Public Health* (2018), <https://sph.umich.edu/pursuit/2018posts/family-separation-US-border.html>. See also Devon Miller, "AAP a leading voice against separating children, parents at border," (June 14, 2018): <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2018/06/14/washington061418> Accessed 30 December 2020.

11. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Adverse Childhood Experiences," <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/index.html>

12. Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 60.

13. Van der Kolk, 98.

what happened. Trauma survivors often experience daily, if not hourly, moments of reliving the horrors of the traumatic event. For those who suffer abuse at such a young and tender age, this can mean a lifetime of recreating the abuse via intrusive thoughts (reliving the trauma), avoidance behavior (avoiding people or places), nightmares (related to the trauma) and hyper-arousal (jumpiness, agitation, and anxiety).<sup>14</sup>

Physically, childhood trauma can impact the whole body in several ways throughout one's life. Stress hormones from trauma can interfere with sleep patterns and memory retention.<sup>15</sup> Unhealthy appetites, eating disorders, poor digestion, inhibited arousal, and low energy levels are other common ways trauma manifests itself physically.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, childhood neglect and abuse can also lead to higher fatality rates. In a 2018 report of abuse and neglect in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, it was reported that fatalities from abuse and neglect were 46.6 % for children younger than one-year-old.<sup>17</sup>

Neurologically, trauma—including abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, lack of attachment, and other adverse childhood experiences—affects the structure and chemistry of the brain and can stunt its natural growth and maturation.<sup>18</sup> Studies have pinpointed the impact of trauma on key structures of the developing brain. These include the hippocampus, which helps memory and spatial navigation, the amygdala, which enables us to process emotions, and the cortex, which plays a role in complex cognitive behaviors, personality expression, and moderating correct social behavior.<sup>19</sup>

Trauma causes an intense, biological “alarm state,” a perpetual feeling of intense arousal and fear that dulls other senses. The neural overload of this alarm state in children can cause healthy neural connections to short-circuit and disrupt the brain's basic architecture. The brain grows and adapts almost solely to survive the trauma, thus compromising core mental, emotional, and social functioning and normal, healthy development.<sup>20</sup> There is also a significant and growing body of research documenting that trauma impairs the spirituality of a child.<sup>21</sup>

The effects of trauma are severe, but science shows they can be reversed. Biochemical and brain imaging show the brain has the ability not only to survive trauma but to heal itself from trauma.

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Strategies in helping this healing process include providing the child with close and consistent positive relationships, creating rich environments and predictable routines in learning environments, and providing appropriate, safe, and individual opportunities to develop new skills and express emotions.

Ultimately, the societal effects of trauma are staggering. Some 90 percent of people receiving public mental health services for major mental illnesses have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in their lives, often as children. Other studies have shown that as many as nine out of ten boys and seven of ten girls in juvenile detention reported traumatic experiences in their childhood.<sup>22</sup>

Socially, children who have suffered abuse and neglect may struggle to form healthy relationships with appropriate boundaries. Due to a lack of trust in oneself and others, it may also be difficult for a traumatized child to share what has happened to them, for fear of being misunderstood. Unfortunately, studies have shown that those who experience childhood abuse and neglect have an increased risk of anti-social behavior and may be more likely to engage in criminal activity.<sup>23</sup> Survivors of child abuse are at a greater risk of being locked in a perpetual cycle of abuse and dysfunction in their relationships as adults.<sup>24</sup>

Lifespans of survivors of abuse are, on average, twenty years shorter than those of their peers.<sup>25</sup> Children who suffer child abuse/

14. Dani Bostick, “Breaking the Silence About Childhood Trauma,” in *TEDx Greenville* (TEDx Talks, 2018). Bostick is a survivor of childhood sexual assault and is a writer, educator and mental health counselor in Winchester, Va.

15. Van Der Kolk, 46.

16. Van Der Kolk, 56.

17. Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities 2018: Statistics and Interventions*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2020), 4. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/fatality.pdf>

18. “Multiplying Connections,” The Health Federation of Philadelphia, <https://www.multiplyingconnections.org/>.

19. “Multiplying Connections.”

20. “Multiplying Connections.”

21. Donald F. Walker, et al, “Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality Before, During and After Abuse: A Review and Synthesis,” *Psychological Trauma: Research, Practice & Policy* (2009): 130-145.

22. Andrea Sedlak and Karla McPherson, “Youth's Needs and Services: Findings from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement,” in *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (U.S. Department of Justice, April, 2010).

23. National Institute of Justice, *Pathways Between Child Maltreatment and Adult Criminal Involvement*. (October 11, 2017). Accessed November 10, 2020. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/pathways-between-child-maltreatment-and-adult-criminal-involvement>

24. Bostick.

25. Vincent J. Felitti and Robert F. Anda, “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare,” in Ruth A. Lanius, et al, eds., *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), 77-87. This research finds that children enduring abuse or other adverse experiences in at least six categories face a “lifespan almost two decades shorter than those seen with an ACE score of 0 but otherwise

sexual assault are more likely to complete suicide or struggle with suicidal ideation.<sup>26</sup> As such, trauma informs future mental health challenges, life challenges, and lifestyles.<sup>27</sup> “[Survivors] of childhood physical and sexual abuse are therefore trapped in a prison of the abusers’ creation. Emotional scars of shame show up in despising oneself and the mental health challenges of posttraumatic stress disorder, hyperawareness, flashbacks, and numbing or disassociation become the daily reality for abuse survivors.”<sup>28</sup>

Fortunately, prevention of abuse and neglect is possible by educating parents and caregivers about providing safe, stable, and nurturing environments in which a child can thrive psychologically, physically, and socially.

## B. The need for child protection

Developmentally, children are especially vulnerable human beings. Their limited reasoning capacities and dependency on caregivers for survival demonstrate how vitally important child protection is for the sake of healthy maturity into adulthood. Newborn humans enter the world critically undeveloped and helpless.<sup>29</sup> However, typical brain development in a fetus begins in the third week of gestation and is developed to 90 percent of adult capacity by the time a child reaches age six.<sup>30</sup> Abuse and neglect during these early years can inhibit brain development and brain capacity may not be regenerated or fully healed. In some cases, the damage cannot be undone.

There are extensive and challenging short- and long-term consequences to childhood abuse and neglect. Chronic diseases, mental health challenges, cardiovascular disease, addictions and substance abuse, and a higher likelihood of obesity are some of the ongoing health effects of abuse. Economically, the impact of child abuse is realized most profoundly in society when abused and neglected children become unhealthy adults. Care for abuse survivors can result in an excessive strain on healthcare systems, social and welfare services, law enforcement and the criminal justice system, and the labor force.<sup>31</sup> The financial cost of child abuse has been estimated to be \$210,012 over the course of the

similar characteristics.”

26. Bostick.

27. The psychiatrist Bessel Van Der Kolk writes: “Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health (and due to trauma of sexual assault) the brain may keep sending signals to the body to escape a threat that no longer exists.” *The Body Keeps Score*, 54.

28. While the linear progression of life continues, the traumatized survivor of abuse remains beholden to a reality. Van Der Kolk writes: “Being traumatized means organizing your life as if the trauma is still going on,” in *The Body Keeps Score*, 53.

29. Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 10.

30. J. Stiles and T.L. Jernigan, “The Basics of Brain Development,” *Neuropsychology Review* 20 (2010): 327–348.

31. Phaedra S. Corso, “Dollars and Lives: The Economics of Healthy Children,” *Prevent Child Abuse America* (February 5, 2016). Accessed Nov. 2, 2020. <https://preventchildabuse.org/resource/dollars-and-lives/>

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child’s lifetime.<sup>32</sup> The cost to implement proactive child protection is much less than providing care after the abuse or neglect has happened.<sup>33</sup> Early efforts to mitigate child abuse and neglect can prevent the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual toll later in life.

Protection must be based on policies which keep the process objective and impersonal while effectively decreasing risk. In the church, as in society, policies must be widely communicated and clearly state that abuse and neglect will not be tolerated and that child protection is of the highest priority.<sup>34</sup> Such policies must be crafted with achievable outcomes, effectively implemented, and reviewed and updated at least annually.

## C. Education, leadership, advocacy

As church, we are called to be a safe place where our communities can learn together how best to protect our children. In many cases, clergy and laypeople within the congregation are not adequately trained to identify, treat, or handle situations regarding child abuse. It is important that congregations involve themselves with church-offered consultations and training seminars with professionals who have expertise in the field of child abuse to ensure proper prevention and appropriate measures be taken with child abuse incidents. For the sake of congregational health, synodical leadership should raise and distribute funds for congregations that cannot afford this invaluable education.

Congregations should develop and normalize healthy boundaries that consistently protect children in all aspects of life in the congregation. A helpful structure for establishing these boundaries involves collaboration with the expertise of others in

32. Xiangming Fang, Derek S. Brown, Curtis S. Florence, and James A. Mercy. “The Economic Burden of Child Maltreatment in the United States and Implications for Prevention.” From *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*. 36 (2021): 156-165. Accessed November 10, 2020: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213411003140>

33. Lisbeth Schorr, “A Better Future for America, A Better Future for America’s Children: Strengthening our Capacity to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect,” *Prevent Child Abuse America* (February 5, 2016). Accessed November 2, 2020. <https://preventchildabuse.org/resource/strengthening-our-capacity-to-prevent-child-abuse-and-neglect-lisbeth-schorr>

34. Shira M. Berkovits, “Preventing Abuse in Christian Organizations That Serve Youth: Ten Policies to Create Safer Environments,” *Currents in Theology and Mission*. Volume 45, Number 3 (July 2018): 20-22. <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/129/148>.

the community. These include a primary team of child protection professionals in the community. Next are the teachers and people who work with youth. Third are the other members of the congregation. Ultimately, these serve the protection of children in the community. Each of these groups has roles in developing safe practices in the congregation.

A team of members from the congregation who are fluent in the available resources and with knowledge of how to handle known child abuse instances is a good place to start. This team may act as the congregation's leading sources of wisdom for safeguarding children and serve as the primary liaisons regarding the utilization of local resources, authorities, and agencies. These liaisons will have completed all mandatory requirements and training for child protection guidelines, including background checks. They also serve as mandatory reporters and encourage training and open communication for appropriate resources, including bullying, abuse, and communication styles between adults and youth (for example, texting).

In the absence of in-house authorities on the subject, the congregation should provide professional training for those who work with youth and equip them to establish communal boundaries, notice patterns of concern, and respond quickly to abuse and trauma. These properly vetted leaders should continuously be mindful of making their ministry environments safe spaces. They should hold one another—and the broader community—accountable for maintaining healthy boundaries. Members of this group should have an active role in making and revising policy connected to child welfare. This group of people also has a great responsibility to educate and inform youth about safety and healthy boundaries. Youth in the congregation also have a role in creating safe space and policy development. Congregations should educate youth about healthy boundaries and safety precautions. Youth do understand if we teach them.

The congregation's leadership should provide the rest of the congregation educational opportunities to learn about youth and how to minister with them safely. All safeguarding training should be made available to all people in the congregation. The whole congregation should be informed about agreed-upon communal boundaries.

Congregations should collectively review the data and evidence regarding child abuse and educate themselves on the harm that abuse can do to a child physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Corporal punishment is not an effective parenting measure, nor does our faithful interpretation of the biblical text condone child abuse. Additionally, normalizing conversation around healthy sex, using proper anatomical vocabulary, is vitally important in the prevention of child abuse and the ability as a church body to communicate with one another when abuse is suspected.

Congregational leadership and professional consultants should take measures to craft a policy regarding proper engagement with youth within the church body. Time spent making effective and accountable policy is preventative, not reactive, and will allow

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congregations to handle and address abuse when it happens. It is paramount that clergy and lay leaders maintain an adequate listing of community resources to guide congregation members and themselves to the proper channels to both prevent and respond to suspected or confirmed abuse. We cannot do this task by ourselves; we must be able to refer survivors to legal services, therapy, counseling, and other community assets.

Leaders should implore the church body to fund continuing education, specifically with regards to child abuse. While church leaders may not be trained on the specifics of abuse, keeping up to date with current data and research can allow a leader to act with urgency and best practices when faced with suspected or confirmed child abuse.

## **II. Naming sin, proclaiming healing, seeking wholeness: the goals of child protection**

We are called to name the act of abuse for what it is: sin. There is no space for abuse inside love. Abuse does a great injustice to the survivor, the church, the world, and the body of Christ. It is crucial for church leadership to name this as sin, an act that is not representative of how God wants us to live and act in the world. We are also called to name the hurt and pain that abuse has caused inside the church. We strongly condemn the act of abuse and commit our church to educating ourselves and doing our best, with the help of professionals, to make the church a safe place.

We, the church as the body of Christ, also separate actions from people. People can be conditioned and formed into believing something that is not normative or healthy. We believe people can grow and change their behavior; everyone can be rehabilitated. We name and identify that the perpetrator could be a survivor of abuse.<sup>35</sup> While there is room for grace for the sinner, we must

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35. Jill S. Levenson, Gwenda M. Willis, David S. Prescott, "Adverse Childhood Experiences in the Lives of Male Sex Offenders: Implications for Trauma-Informed Care," *Sexual Abuse* 28 (2014): 340-359.

simultaneously condemn the sin and prevent future offenses. Sin, if described as missing the mark, leaves room for an adjustment and a change toward beneficial behavior. Even so, the primary aim must remain vigilance for the protection of children.

As a community of faith, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) seeks to support and accompany human beings to live into the abundant life God has created for them. Unfortunately, our efforts have fallen short and we have sinned by what we have left undone.<sup>36</sup> We have not been proactive about stopping child abuse and neglect in our congregations and communities, nor have we responded decisively and effectively when abuse does occur.<sup>37</sup> Yet, God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit continues to call the church to learn from our shortcomings and to empower us to make a difference in the lives of children.

The church remains in a position to help. Many parents and families seek out support when raising their children, and faith communities are often seen as a trusted guide for the proper care of children. The church must educate parents and families about the negative impacts of abuse and neglect by demonstrating developmentally appropriate interactions and care toward children.

## A. Strategies for preventing child abuse

We are called to take direct action in our communities to prevent abuse from occurring. Child abuse prevention is an essential part of child protection and an extension of the profound love of children embodied through the ministry and words of Jesus Christ.<sup>38</sup> As a community of faith we propose that the ELCA develop and issue a social statement naming the reality of child abuse and advocating policies for child protection within the church, the greater community, and society. Within this document we lift up a framework for policies on a national, synodical, and congregational level to be integrated into all aspects of the body of Christ. In addition, we recommend the following:

- Mandatory child protection training in all ELCA seminaries, preparing leaders with the foundational protection training to lead into congregations and communities.<sup>39</sup>
- Establishment, with ecumenical partners, of a National Child Protection oversight committee that monitors synodical and organizational training and implementation of child protection policies on a regional and national level.

36. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

37. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Prevention Strategies" (March 5, 2020). Accessed November 03, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/prevention.html>

38. Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

39. Victor I. Vieth and Craig L. Nessian, eds., "Child Abuse and the Church: Prevention, Pastoral Care, and Healing," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (June 18, 2018): 3. <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/126>.

**The church must be a safe place for children, not just spiritually but also physically and psychologically. A lack of current, effective, and visible child protection policies in congregations is unacceptable, insofar as policies have been a recognized deterrent for child abuse and neglect.**

- Creation of a mandatory annual synodical conference for child protection training for synod staff, pastors, deacons, church staff, and lay leadership positions. The synod or governing body of the region will be accountable at the regional level for the collection of policies and monitoring background checks through the annual report.

The church must be a safe place for children, not just spiritually but also physically and psychologically. A lack of current, effective, and visible child protection policies in congregations is unacceptable, insofar as policies have been a recognized deterrent for child abuse and neglect.<sup>40</sup> The church also has a responsibility to address scripture passages and interpretations that have been used to condone harmful or abusive practices in raising and disciplining children. By providing science-based evidence of the risks associated with abuse and neglect and conveying alternative, ethical interpretations of scripture, the church can demonstrate Godly ways to care for children.<sup>41</sup>

We are called to accompany one another just as God accompanies all humanity. Scripture tells us to "speak out for those who cannot speak" (Prov 31:8). The call to care for our neighbor, particularly the most vulnerable, demands that we identify ways in which we as a church body participate in creating a safe environment in which survivors of child abuse can reclaim their voice and express their pain and experience in healthy ways. Just as the stories Jesus shared as parables were powerful, so too the experiences of survivors can be transformed into stories as a helpful means toward recovery.<sup>42</sup>

Providing abuse survivors with a voice and opportunity to share their experiences is an endeavor that the church must enter with collaborative partners who are appropriately trained in providing services. We as a church must extend an invitation into respectful accompaniment to access needed resources such

40. Vieth and Nessian, eds. "Child Abuse and the Church: Prevention, Pastoral Care, and Healing," 3. Accessed October 30, 2020. <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/issue/view/53>.

41. Vieth and Nessian, eds. "Child Abuse and the Church: Prevention, Pastoral Care, and Healing," 3.

42. Van der Kolk, 3.

as counseling, human services, education, and others. It is only through relationships with other agencies and services that the church can effectively participate in a holistic program to address the various needs of child abuse survivors and offenders.

The abusive experiences against children are unique to that child, therefore the specific needs of each survivor are also unique. Our accompaniment involves creating appropriate, safe, caring relationships in which individual congregations may consider providing support and comfort in a variety of ways depending on their context. In all cases, consultation with the appropriate community partners and professionals must be part of program planning. Examples of the types of support congregations may offer include, but are not limited to:

- Serving as host site for support group networks for survivors and families
- Serving as host site for support group networks for offenders and families
- Creating and maintaining a synodical and conference-level database of providers specializing in care and treatment of survivors and families
- Creating and maintaining a synodical and conference-level database of providers specializing in the care and treatment of offenders and families
- Establishing a spiritual care network for survivors, families, offenders, and congregations impacted by child abuse

The cost of discipleship is great.<sup>43</sup> As a church, we are called into the suffering of others for the sake of Jesus, to take up our cross and step into the places where suffering exists.

## B. Strategies for training and raising awareness

Child protection within the congregation is a critical aspect of a healthy community. There is a need for mutual understanding to combat the abuses that congregations face, especially when it comes to the youth. Adults must take ownership of their role in preventing abuse and neglect by seeking education to implement and enforce prevention policies and training, while remaining otherwise vigilant in protecting the children.<sup>44</sup> To provide the best policies and procedures, we need to be aware of the reality of abuse and implement training for leaders and the entire congregation on the signs and symptoms of child maltreatment and the procedures for dealing with an abusive situation. Knowing the signs of abuse can help congregational leadership foster healthy relationships with those affected.

Child maltreatment situations are complex. Congregations need to provide the leaders with training to handle those com-

## Adults must take ownership of their role in preventing abuse and neglect by seeking education to implement and enforce prevention policies and training, while remaining otherwise vigilant in protecting the children.

plexities. Best practices include taking every allegation seriously, knowing that the vast majority of allegations are true.<sup>45</sup> All too often, the alleged offender can be a widely respected, influential, and well-loved individual.<sup>46</sup> Proper training will ensure an environment in which the survivor is always put first. The congregation will prioritize addressing the alleged offender's behavior over that person's relationship to the community or how well-known they are. The congregation leadership will need to take the side of the survivor. Additionally, it is vital to use formal language in describing the details of the abuse. This language would include using wording that does not belittle the survivor and using proper terminology for the parts of the body involved in the abuse (for example, using "penis" instead of "wee-wee").

Congregations need to provide leaders with professional training on how to handle a situation as it occurs. Not everyone has sufficient training as a professional psychologist or therapist. Though clergy and lay leaders are often the first people with whom an abused person talks about their experience, they are not qualified to diagnose and treat the situation. Instead, clergy, lay leaders, and congregation members should have policies and procedures to protect everyone involved. Taking steps to educate all adults on how to respond when a child reports abuse is needful. It is vital to teach a child to tell if someone has violated their boundaries, but there should also be education offered for those to whom children might report. This education can help responders feel empowered to act on behalf of the children, even when an offender is in a position of power. There should also be education explaining why most children do not disclose abuse, to avoid an unrealistic expectation that a child will always tell if there is a problem.<sup>47</sup>

Taking steps to develop a comprehensive training program for the leadership and members of the congregation lays the foundation for a safe environment in which abuse is identified, understood, and responded to promptly and effectively. Such

43. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Touchstone, 2012), 39.

44. Alison Feigh, "In the Footsteps of Mary and Joseph: The Role of Adult and Child Education in the Prevention of Abuse," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 3 (2018): 23. <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/130>

45. Basyle Tchividjian, "Responding with Excellence to an Allegation of Sexual Abuse within the Church," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (2018): 41-42. <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/134>

46. Tchividjian, "Responding with Excellence to an Allegation of Sexual Abuse within the Church," 41.

47. Feigh, "In the Footsteps of Mary and Joseph," 23.



an environment provides the opportunity to correct potentially harmful behavior objectively. It also sends a warning to those who would test the boundaries or engage in abusive behavior. The community holds one another accountable and takes appropriate action in response to an offense.

### C. Suggested policies and procedures

Having a churchwide and congregation-wide policy for child protection and child maltreatment prevention is essential. First and foremost, a policy intends to protect both children and those who work with them. Policies define behavior, describe acceptable and unacceptable behavior, make it possible to identify violations of expected behavior, and draw needed boundaries to safeguard against both abuse and ambiguity. Policies help safeguard children, educate congregations, deter potential offenders, and prevent congregational liability.<sup>48</sup> Having a policy focuses observation on specific behaviors, not on the character or identity of individuals. A successful policy will also guide in dealing with policy violations. Child protection policies are a strong witness to our faith (James 2:17).

Knowing expectations helps shape the institutional culture. Congregations intend to use policies to keep all children and all members of the community safe. The congregational leaders are responsible for making everyone aware of what the policy contains, the behaviors it describes, and the protective measures taken. Moreover, the policy needs to be communicated widely and frequently both within the congregation and publicly. At the very least, policies targeting child abuse and promoting child protection need to address the following:

- Background checks for anyone who comes into contact with minors
- Use of space to limit access, maximize visibility, and restrict movement
- Identification of risk
- Guidelines for positive one-on-one interactions
- Definition of boundaries and behaviors
- Clear and enforced guidance on social media, text messaging, and online interaction between staff/volunteers and children
- Procedures for reporting policy violations
- Criteria for initiating independent investigations
- Steps for educating and informing others about the policy
- How the policy will be evaluated and updated regularly

The development of a child protection policy should draw upon the guidance of numerous resources, including child protection agencies, attorneys, law enforcement, and insurance

48. Basyle Tchividjian and Shira M. Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy for Churches and Ministries* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2017).

**F**irst and foremost, a policy intends to protect both children and those who work with them. Policies define behavior, describe acceptable and unacceptable behavior, make it possible to identify violations of expected behavior, and draw needed boundaries to safeguard against both abuse and ambiguity.

companies. Finally, such a policy should address a plan for implementation that addresses the means of communication and assures the consistency of its application.

Congregations are advised to include language addressing known offenders who wish to be a part of the faith community. Such language should address these individuals with dignity and not treat them disrespectfully because of their offense. Accepting offenders into the faith community also requires both acknowledgment and accountability. As a result, such a policy must include an action plan to minimize risk, name accountability partners and care providers to ensure compliance, and define the congregation's communication plan.

### D. Elements of pastoral care in instances of abuse

Pastoral care is necessary at multiple levels around the issue of child abuse. First and foremost, the survivor of child abuse—whether it be an active situation or years in the past—needs direct care and healing. Second, the survivor's family, the congregational leadership, congregation members, and the wider community need care as they have been affected by the abuse situation. Finally, for the offender: it is essential for congregational leaders to be aware of confidentiality and applicable laws surrounding mandatory reporting and to communicate that requirement to recipients of pastoral care. It is equally critical for congregational leadership to integrate outside resources into pastoral care, such as medical and mental health care providers. "There has been a long-standing belief by many medical providers that spirituality and health are interconnected," so it is vital to engage these medical providers and invite them into partnership.<sup>49</sup>

Child maltreatment covers infractions against children ranging from sexual abuse within the congregation to hitting children

49. Victor I. Vieth, "Coordinating Medical and Pastoral Care in Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (July 2018): 27. <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/131>

within the home as a means of discipline. This range of situations means that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to pastoral care in situations of child abuse. However, some helpful strategies include:

- Believing survivors
- Protecting privacy and confidentiality
- Being attuned to the needs of the recipient, whether expressed verbally or nonverbally
- Actively and deeply listening, especially for non-verbal expressions
- Taking trauma responses seriously, whether for the survivor, the family, the church staff, or all those affected
- Countering hurtful theology used by the offender and internalized by the survivor (for example, do not demand or exhort that the survivor forgive an abuser)
- Referring survivors, families, and potential offenders to mental health professionals
- Engaging the congregation to create and keep updating policies and procedures to protect survivors and potential survivors (as outlined in the Policies and Planning section of this document)
- Separating survivors and offenders by not asking the survivor to face the offender

Additionally, all those providing pastoral care in child abuse situations should be sure to attend to their own health and well-being physically, mentally, and spiritually.

### III. Theological perspectives on children and child abuse

For millennia, the Bible and Lutheran theology have been used to justify the abuse of children, citing it as necessary for the development of proper discipline and quality of character. Verses in Proverbs praise the necessity of beating children with rods. New Testament letters to the Ephesians (6:1) and Colossians (3:20) direct children to obey parents in everything, and Hebrews (12:7) directs the faithful to endure trials for the sake of God's good discipline. The Bible offers a variety of metaphors and language describing God's vision for parental love and care, alongside imagery of God as an angry and vengeful parent. One tragic consequence of this authoritarian framework for preaching, teaching, and liturgy is the mistreatment and abuse of children.

We, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, regret our neglect in speaking the truth in love to our own history. While the Bible does say these things, the overarching message in all of scripture is God's love and care of the weak, poor, and disadvantaged. Today medical and social science agree discipline is best achieved through better instructional strategies, not physical punishment. Citing passages of scripture as parenting advice becomes difficult

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at best, dangerous at worst.<sup>50</sup> When we put new understandings of the Bible, God, and science in conversation with what God commands with respect to caring for little ones, a different directive emerges.

#### A. Uses and misuses of Scripture

Physical punishment for children has been justified by Christians based largely on only five verses in Proverbs (13:24, 20:30, 22:15, 23:13, 29:15). Heavily patterned after the wisdom literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Proverbs is influenced by a culture in exile in the sixth century BCE, a culture where infant and early childhood death rendered the status of children as patently marginal.<sup>51</sup>

##### 1. Who is God in the Bible?

Holy Scripture provides numerous metaphors for the Triune God from a potter (Gen 2:7) to a woman in childbirth (Is 42:14). Other common Hebrew Bible metaphors reflected in our liturgy and hymns include divine warrior, conquering king, angry judge, and frightening parent. One consequence of focusing on authoritarian metaphors for God and Christ is that Christians have traditionally viewed parenting according to such authoritarian patterns, which can lead to abusive parenting and/or rejection of the Christian faith.<sup>52</sup> Those who have experienced harm from a parent may have difficulty with parental imagery for God.<sup>53</sup> Alternative metaphors

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50. Troy Troftgruben, "Toxic Theology: A Pastoral Response to Bible Passages Often Used to Justify the Abuse of Children or Prevent Them from Seeking Care," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (2018): 57. <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/137>

51. "The Israelite sages shared the assumption of surrounding cultures that physical beating was a normal and even necessary aspect of discipline." Elizabeth Huwiler, "Introduction to the Book of Proverbs," in *The New Interpreters Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, Walter Harrelson, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 894.

52. Victor I. Vieth, "Augustine, Luther, and Solomon: Providing Pastoral Guidance to Parents on the Corporal Punishment of Children," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44 (2017): 33. <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/78>

53. Amy Russell, "The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse and Exploitation: What Research Tells Us," *Currents in Theology and Mission*

for God, such as God as a loving provider, can instruct parents and caregivers in the practices and habits of generosity, abundance, and unconditional love. God is often called upon as that gentler presence in the Psalms, where we read: “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light” (Ps 36:7).

## 2. Who and what matters to God?

Widows and orphans as unprotected and powerless individuals are of prime importance to God in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 10:18; Ps 146:9; Exod 22:22-24). Such people would have been the most powerless and vulnerable ones during the times and in the places the scripture was written. Neither an orphan nor a widow has family to care for them. With no family to guarantee protection and support, they were vulnerable. Scripture’s call for the care of the widow and orphan, therefore, may be interpreted to extend to all vulnerable people. Children, dependent on the world of adults for all their needs, exemplify that vulnerability. As God and the prophets call the people of God to work for and protect the widow and orphan, they also call for the protection of vulnerable children.

Children are important to God from the beginning. The word for hell (“Gehenna”) in the New Testament refers to the valley near Jerusalem where it was believed ancient people sacrificed children. The history of this practice is not agreed upon by scholars, but it is clear that stopping child sacrifice was important to God. God speaks against this practice in five places in Leviticus (Lev 18:21; 20:2; 20:3; 20:4; 20:5). It is mentioned again in 2 Kings 23:10, and strongly condemned by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 32:35). Despite their seeming marginalization, it is evident very early in the history of the people of Israel that children were seen by God as valuable and in need of protection.

## 3. Old and New Testament lessons

A strong message against child abuse is given in Genesis 22, commonly known as “the binding of Isaac.” The patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah are miraculously given a son, Isaac. Abraham is then asked by God to sacrifice this miracle son. This episode in Israel’s history is often commended as a story of obedience and, while this may be so, it also portrays something more radical. The God of Israel marks a dramatic shift in how worship is to be done by commanding Abraham, ultimately, not to kill the child.<sup>54</sup> A strong distinction is made between pagan practice, which too often involved child sacrifice, and the practice of the people of God, who are never again to engage in the practice of sacrificing their children. For those like Abraham, who emerge from and

As God and the prophets call the people of God to work for and protect the widow and orphan, they also call for the protection of vulnerable children.

leave behind pagan traditions to join the people of God, this text is profoundly redemptive. Through this episode, the God of Israel sounds a warning about how children are to be treated differently: as precious members of the people of God, treated better than they are treated by the unbelievers around them. It is a notion echoed elsewhere throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Within the New Testament, one passage from the Gospel of Mark is of particular significance to those working to protect children.<sup>55</sup> Mark 9:42 reads: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” This passage can help us understand “little ones” literally—as children. Reading this text throws into sharp relief the wages of sinning against a child: if a part of your body causes you temptation to harm a little one, you are better to cut it off than to live with it (Mark 9:43). For many scholars, this is a command to child protection from the very mouth of Jesus.<sup>56</sup>

## 4. Shalom of God

The Bible is always in conversation among its varied voices and with all people in their time and place. A faithful interpretation clarifies each word with the faithfulness and steadfast love of God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the *shalom* of God: wholeness and peace. *Shalom* is the wolf lying with the lamb, the calf and the lion existing together, all led by a little child (Isaiah 11:6). Far from rods and obedience, far from marginalization and vengefulness, *shalom* means the poor are blessed, the meek are inheritors, the merciful are receiving mercy, and the pure in heart are seeing God. In all this, *shalom* points to children as the poor, meek, merciful, and pure in heart. These little ones serve as reminders of God’s goodness and mercy toward all God’s children, a sign of all creation’s ultimate reliance upon God to provide, love, and care for us.

## B. Problematic theologies

There are many problematic theologies regarding child abuse.

45 (2018): 17. <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/128>

54. It is important to acknowledge the troubling fact that God apparently asked that a child be sacrificed and, from the vantage point of Isaac, it must have been frightening to be tied and nearly killed by your father.

55. In Mark 9:42-43, Victor I. Vieth, a former prosecutor and current director of education and research at the Zero Abuse Project, finds a radical directive on how children are to be viewed within the body of Christ. Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 1-2.

56. Vieth, *On This Rock*, 25-26.

Certain atonement theories, such as misinterpretation of penal substitution, appear to portray God as a violent abuser. In this understanding, on account of our sin human beings deserve the wrath of God. Jesus Christ came to take on God's punishment as a substitute in our place, in order to satisfy God's justice and grant forgiveness. This theology may suggest to some that God the Father engages in child abuse.

As the church, it is important for us to recognize, understand, and reject theological understandings harmful to survivors. Even more than this, however, we should encourage children in every way. Martin Luther, himself a survivor of abuse at the hands of his father, urged loving and prayerful instruction of children over and against corporal punishment. Luther "urged parents to teach the commandments of God 'in a childlike and playful way. [...] For we are preaching to children, so we must also talk like them.'"<sup>57</sup>

### C. Children as a means of grace

Jesus Christ—the Second Person of the Trinity, the Incarnate One, Emanuel, and God with Us—came to Earth as an infant, born of a human mother. Jesus was a baby, a toddler, a growing child, a pre-adolescent, and a teenager. Jesus experienced all the fullness of life, including all the challenges, fears, and instabilities of childhood. And Jesus underwent all this at a time when children were not nearly as prized and cared for as they are in our own historical moment. Unlike almost all other beings in creation, humans are not born with the ability to care immediately for themselves. We are utterly dependent upon another for everything from food, shelter, and safety to even our very movement. This physical helplessness reflects human dependence in general and our reliance entirely upon God as the source of all life, healing, and forgiveness.

In this, children—through their birth, growth, and maturity—could rightly be called means of grace: reminders of the Triune God with us and for us in visible ways with indelible promise. Adults in the church, both those who are ordained and laity, know God by welcoming children in their innocence and by their gift of disrupting the flow.<sup>58</sup> Through their participation in the life of a church—particularly in the sacraments, ministries, and rituals of a congregation—children open adults to a practice of grace.<sup>59</sup> While this may be uncomfortable, it can also connect us not only to our children but also "with the grace in the world around [us]."<sup>60</sup>

In the sacrament of baptism, we know God meets us in water and the Word. In the Holy Supper, Jesus is host and meal—body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine. Children provide a reminder of God with us, the God who enters the creation as a

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little child. Children give us a reminder of our own place as God's beloved children, fully dependent upon God. As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's statement on the practice of Word and Sacrament states: "The living heart of all these means is the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit as the gift of the Father."<sup>61</sup> In a world seemingly made only for adults, children also remind us of the expansiveness of God's presence in creation, God's promises, and God's grace.

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