

Introduction to this Study Booklet

The science and technology of “genetics” is hard to miss today. News about it appears regularly, sometimes daily, in headlines announcing scientific breakthroughs, new applications, and moral quandaries. Many commentators talk about the 21st century as the age of genetics or biological control because our new knowledge grants human beings the power to change, at deep levels, the character of society and even the course of life on this planet.

While the positive potential of genetic knowledge is rightfully celebrated, its application presents challenges that range from curious novelty to troubling personal crises to social dilemmas. In such a time, many ask: “What does my church teach about these developments?” That kind of question led the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to authorize the development of a social statement that would address “significant theological, ethical, public, and pastoral challenges arising from developments in genetics.”

The task force charged with guiding the development of that statement has drawn upon previous work done by this church (see Additional Resources, below) and labored for two years to produce this tool for study and deliberation. The task force has come to believe that the nature of human power and the responsible application of that power for blessing or bane is the fundamental issue posed by the age of genetics. At the same time, the task force has discussed particular issues that are controversial in various sectors of our society, such as stem cells or the use of genetically engineered products.

This study is laid out in two parts in order to do justice to both fundamental challenges and particular concerns. Part A addresses fundamental social, theological and ethical themes, while the sessions of Part B engage particular scientific and biotechnological issues and topics in light of those themes. Both parts invite members of this church to faithful conversation, according to their particular interests and concerns.

That last point—according to interest and concern—is crucial to stress. Given the size and complexity of genetics as a social concern, the task force knows that most participants will only be able to study four to six sessions. Rather than attempt to prioritize which of the many crucial topics should be excluded, the task force conceived of this study as a smorgasbord. That is, it provides a variety of choices for group use and individual reflection and provides more food for thought than most will be able to ingest. They believe it is not necessary for participants to study every session in order to benefit from the material or to provide the response they seek from this church.

Each session is intended to be an entry point to the subject of genetics and, therefore, each session is reasonably self-contained. The study is designed with group discussion in mind, but is also suitable for individual reading and reflection. The task force welcomes responses from individuals who are not able to participate in group study but have worked through all or some of this material on their own. It should be stressed that the task force encourages *everyone who uses the study to take time to provide a response* using the form at the back of this study book. Those responses are vital to the task force’s ongoing work.

Discernment, deliberation, and dwelling in the Word

The first social statement adopted by the newly formed ELCA was titled *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. It describes the church as “a community of moral deliberation.” Such a community can be defined as a context for and contributor to both personal and public morality. It stresses the responsibility of members of the church to engage together in thoughtful, well-informed deliberation about questions and problems that are theological and moral in nature. This study is designed to put this understanding of the church as a community of moral deliberation into practice.

This model underlines the fact that Christians of good will can and do disagree about moral questions, even though they share many basic values and convictions. Deliberation sometimes is difficult because social concerns like genetics are complex and have an institutional and structural pay-off, as well as a personal dimension. Still, it is the conviction of this church that moral deliberation should be conducted by “everyday folk” and not

Assembly Action CA05.06.25: Social Statement on Bioethical Research

*(Adopted by the 2005
Churchwide Assembly in
Orlando, Florida.)*

Resolved: To receive with gratitude the memorial of the Northeastern Iowa Synod requesting that an ELCA social statement on genetic research and therapy be developed; To acknowledge that conversations on this topic already are being conducted throughout society and this church; To call upon the Division for Church in Society (or the appropriate churchwide unit) to develop a social statement that addresses significant theological, ethical, public, and pastoral challenges arising from developments in genetics in accord with ELCA guidelines (as set forth in “Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns”) for possible consideration by the 2011 Churchwide Assembly; and To encourage continued faithful conversations on this topic throughout this church during the study process.

simply specialists of whatever field. This model of being church together calls us to bring our Lutheran imagination and conviction to the task of communal moral deliberation.

To help us in our deliberation, the task force acknowledges the importance of dwelling in the Word of God in order to discern how God may be speaking to us individually and in our faith communities. A key feature of this study, therefore, is a selected reading from Scripture at the beginning of each study session so that dwelling in the Word may initiate the process of *discernment* that will lead to moral or theological *deliberation*.

Action

Genetic science moves rapidly, and many who pick up this study may believe they simply don't understand the science well enough to discuss the issues. The task force sought a remedy for this problem, without burdening the study itself with extensive scientific explanations, by: (1) providing a primer on genetics and a glossary at the back of the study book, and (2) making available a DVD, *Cracking the Code of Life*, a NOVA series acclaimed for its lively and entertaining introduction to basic information about genetic advances. It is important to express thanks to WGBH in Boston for extending an educational discount to the ELCA so we can offer the DVD free upon request.

The fact of rapid scientific advance is a reminder that while the primary focus here is reflection, the ultimate purpose of our study is morally responsible action. The speed of change, the broad impact of new technologies, and the complex character of developments, mean that we cannot simply think our way to answers. Study and discernment will grant us new insights, clarity, and guidance. Yet the Christian responsibility encouraged in this study must be *lived into* with simultaneous measures of faith and courage, fear and trembling, joy and hope. The ways in which God's people deliberate in order to discern God's leading, and the ways in which Christians will give an account in this century to genetic developments, will shape an important witness to what Christianity actually is, and who Christ really is for us today. These are not armchair conversations.

What is in the study

The following provides a summary of each session's content.

Part A: A framework for conversation, prayer, and action

A1 The Global Reach of Genetics introduces the study of genetics from a faith perspective by focusing on the question "what is going on" in the world today? It describes how we are moving into an age of genetics that confronts us with unprecedented choices and daunting responsibilities. These choices and responsibilities often lead to profound disorientation and sharp controversy as we try to make wise decisions. This session suggests, also, that each of us has a personal responsibility in these developments, and it sketches some of the challenges—as well as bedrock commitments—for Christians living in these times.

A2 Caring for Neighbors explores how the study of genetics affects broad human self-understanding, and how Christians understand their God-given vocation. It explores the relation of humans to the rest of nature, and then reminds us of the global scope of genetic developments—developments experienced in a variety of ways by people in different parts of the global village. The session also discusses the problems of sin, failure, and human limitation. It concludes by charting the meaning of God's love that washes over us in our baptism, giving us profound vocational direction. This direction calls us to love, to careful thought, and to responsible action that seek to bring out the potential good of genetics while avoiding the potential harm.

A3 Human Power Today investigates the important question of what it means to be a human being in light of our relationship to God, and with an eye on how advances in genetics are interpreted in our society. The first section identifies some troubling ways of thinking about human beings related to what might be called "the gene myth." The second then sketches Christian ways to think about being human in relation to God, the

A complimentary copy of *Cracking the Code of Life* can be obtained either by calling the ELCA resources line at 800-638-3522 ext 2996 or by contacting Augsburg Fortress by phone or online. (800/328-4648 or www.augsburgfortress.org)

creation, and to one another in the contemporary world.

A4 Christian Responsibility Today considers the moral or ethical resources that Christians can turn to as they ponder the developments and social issues with which genetics confronts society. The first segment explores Lutheran convictions about scripture as a resource for the moral life, while the second identifies values that all people of good will might claim as touchstones for living in the genetics age. The last segment concludes by looking at several relevant moral resources taken from established social teachings of the ELCA.

A5 Toward a Lutheran Ethic This session brings together insights from previous sessions and invites reflection on the nature of Lutheran ethics in the age of genetics. It first presents elements for a moral framework, and then invites the reader to exercise moral imagination and judgment in evaluating these principles by trying them on for size. It concludes with a reminder of the bed-rock of faith, life, and action—the gracious and justifying promise of God.

Part B: Exploring responsibilities and engaging issues

B1 Genetics and Congregations encourages conversation on how congregations might address genetics or genetics technology issues today. We must be prepared to understand enough of the science and to listen to the potential implications posed by genetics and biotechnology in order to consider how we, as Christians, might respond to the questions. Within congregations are families affected by the chronic nature of genetic conditions, people living in the midst of biotechnology they had no idea would impact their lives, and people called to advocacy for change because of their belief that in God's world life should be different.

B2 Genetics and Human Identity reflects on the issue of genetics and human identity and takes up the issue of genetic determinism. The session addresses questions such as: As Christians, should we consider our genome to be our essence? Is the answer to “who we are” found in the genome? Do our genes lead us to sin? Can God's grace work through gene expression? Can we reduce the most sublime of our intuitions to gene expression?

B3 Genetics and Social Location asks you to reflect upon the significance of social location for assessing the ethical dimensions of genetic research and treatments. The focus will be upon communities of color and women of color. You will be asked to reflect upon your own social location and how it has shaped your ethical worldview.

B4 Genetic Testing and Screening invites you to learn more about genetic testing and screening and to reflect about the personal challenges it presents. Three examples are provided from real life situations: cancer genetics, prenatal testing, or teens at risk. The first section of reflection describes vital background about each example. The subsequent section provides key ideas about each in relation to faith. Readers are then invited to reflect at length on one of these examples as a way to explore its personal challenge.

B5 Genetic Engineering in Agriculture considers concerns around the use of genetically engineered crops, animals, and microbes in agriculture. Scientists, farmers, agribusiness representatives, activists, policy makers, and food eaters hold a variety of different, complex, and even mixed perspectives on how to promote the promising aspects and prevent the perilous ones. Activists on competing sides of the issues produce strongly worded position statements that may help to inform the dialogue, but may also serve to mislead and misinform. To promote debate and discernment, this session introduces some of the key issues that shape people's perspectives on the promises, perils, and controversies.

B6 Stem Cell Research and Therapy offers an overview of the state of stem cell research today, and identifies the key ethical issues in the debate in order to facilitate engagement with stem cell issues. By exploring these issues from a variety of perspectives, the reader will gain a deeper understanding of what is at stake in this controversy. The session hopes to aid each reader to understand why he or she holds his or her views and why equally informed, conscientious Christians may make different judgments.

B7 Patenting Genes considers the complex matter of patenting genetic inventions or discoveries. It connects this issue to the biblical idea of blessing and curse, and asks how such patents could be blessings or curses, and for whom. The session first covers the contemporary significance of gene patents, how genes came to be patented, and the advantages and disadvantages of genetic patents. It then widens the focus to discuss genetic patents in terms of developing countries and international trade. The final set of reflections raises some biblical themes that can help us consider ethical issues in the use of gene patents and in patent laws and regulations.

B8 Enhancing Human Life explores questions of faith and witness around the use of genetic knowledge and technology to “enhance” life. Christians claim a calling to care for the disabled and to heal disease. As disciples of Jesus, we seek to restore wholeness to the brokenness of life. But suppose that new powers over mind and body, today and in the future, allow us to be “better than well” in the sense of improving upon the genetic inheritance that we receive from God through biological parents. Is this a new calling for people and society or not? If so, what should this mean practically? If we can make people better, do we owe this to future generations?

Additional resources

The following publications represent work in which the ELCA's churchwide office has been directly involved. The purpose of each has been to encourage conversation and moral deliberation. As such these remain the work of individual writers and are not official statements of this church even though they are recommended resources.

David C. Ratke, *Theological Foundations in an Age of Biological Intervention*. (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2007).

Genetics! Where Do We Stand As Christians? (Chicago: Division for Church in Society, 2001).

Roger A. Willer, *Human Cloning: Papers from a Church Consultation*. (Chicago: Division for Church in Society, ELCA, 2001).

Roger A. Willer, *Genetic Testing and Screening: Critical Engagement at the Intersection of Faith and Science*. (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1998).