

A Theological Foundation Paper on...

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and ELCA Social Teaching

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the Law and the Prophets.”
-- Matthew 7:12

Introduction to AI and Purpose of this Document

Current developments in artificial intelligence (AI) may be compared to a severe, rapidly moving spring thunderstorm—there are both benefits and significant dangers.

While severe, such a spring storm brings needed rain. Likewise, AI benefits society by turning days of research into an hour, increasing productivity in business, broadening capacity in congregational life, helping scientists solve long-standing mysteries, and much more. Yet AI also brings destructive high winds. AI threatens livelihoods, the natural environment, pastoral relationships, shared understandings of what it means to be human, and much more.

Also, like facing a storm, no single person or group can fully track AI or predict specific consequences for those in its path. However, it seems clear that near-future developments in AI will thoroughly reshape social life. AI is a pervasive technology. Today’s AI bots already augment and empower multiple devices and systems that people use daily. Increasingly, AI will allow humans to turn over countless tasks to smart and able agents that will assume greater and new responsibility for things humans do. Some analysts expect that AI personal agents will soon be as ubiquitous as smart phones.

Whatever the precise effects, AI will reshape the social roles and places of responsibility through which God calls and empowers humans to live in society. Thus, emerging questions about AI require thoughtful and faithful engagement by our church.

Lutherans hold that God calls us, whatever the social circumstances, to discern the needs of neighbors as we encounter them. God’s call remains—we are to respect and promote the integrity of the community of life with justice and wisdom. However, AI already is radically reshaping our social context and the needs of our neighbors.

The ELCA’s current social teachings provide a theological and ethical foundation for faithfully and critically engaging these new questions. **This paper does not introduce new social teaching of the ELCA. Nor is it the final or definitive ELCA teaching on AI. Rather, it is a beginning that draws from and applies existing social teaching to the rapidly changing landscape of AI.**

How the ELCA Is Beginning to Engage AI

Theologically, the ELCA as a body has not yet entered into an official, organized discernment of AI. However, ELCA social teaching reflects an extensive history of communal moral deliberation, including discernment of challenging questions related to new technology and evolving social conditions (see, for example, the social statement *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*.)

Thus, the existing body of ELCA social teaching offers relevant insights for discerning the ethical use of AI as a novel technology. ELCA social teaching is grounded in the Scriptures, Lutheran theological heritage, human experience, scientific research and reason, distilled through the church's extensive participatory deliberation. Thousands of people in this church have contributed to the development of these theological and ethical documents, which have been officially adopted by our church.

While not directed specifically to AI, relevant ELCA social teaching provides:

- A necessary overarching framework.
- A nuanced approach to critically engaging questions related to changes in society and technology.¹
- Key normative principles.
- Specific guidance for practical questions.

The ELCA also has set forth relevant insights for the many institutions in society that AI is challenging and reshaping. These documents address the social arenas of the economy, business, education, political arrangements, science, ecology and others. Such social teachings point to relevant ethical insights for this moment. Read together, the body of ELCA social teaching provides initial theological and ethical parameters for this church as it seeks to engage AI. (All the ELCA teaching documents referred to below can be found at [ELCA.org/SocialStatements](https://elca.org/SocialStatements).)

An Overarching Framework Based on ELCA Social Teaching

1) Humans as innovative stewards

God creates human beings to be “innovative stewards” of creation. Humans are gifted by God with capacities for understanding, innovation, and creativity to “nurture and promote” the flourishing of creation, including human communities.² In this sense, the ELCA generally affirms the gift humans have to create technologies, such as AI. The exercise of invention is part of the human calling from God to order and nurture the creation with imagination and innovation. However, these inventions of human ingenuity and their use are to be guided by the command to respect and promote the earth's abundance for the sake of the integrity of the community of life. The vocation of innovative stewardship is experienced as both a gift and a moral burden of responsibility.³

2) The reality of sin

The ELCA also recognizes two fundamental ways that sin enters into every human endeavor. AI technology can be developed and deployed sinfully when accompanied by “excessive pride or self-assertion arising from misplaced trust in human knowledge, will and ability.”⁴ It is well-documented historically that such an arrogant attitude toward technology has led to the massively destructive use of human power. Sin also can enter the engagement with AI as a lack of trust in God's ongoing work. That lack is expressed through negligence, complacency, resignation, or fatalism regarding the proper use of AI.⁵

¹ This stance (posture) is evident throughout ELCA social teaching. This church's basic posture in relation to social developments is to engage with a *critical stance or perspective*. That is, this church does not automatically avoid, affirm, or reject developments in society. Rather, such an approach evaluates how well any social activity, law, policy, cultural practice, etc., meets the needs of the neighbor, especially the vulnerable ones. (For example, see how the judicial system is critically engaged in the ELCA's social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries*, 9-15.)

² *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2011), 2.

³ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 10-11.

⁴ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 11.

⁵ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 12.

Sin also has systemic and institutional expressions. These can include systemic racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, economic injustice, and environmental injustice. Such expressions of sin impact the development, implementation, and use of technology. AI is no exception. Examples of systemic sin within AI include inherent racial and gender biases in some AI systems, the perpetuation of biases and stereotypes in the data used to train AI systems, the non-consensual and non-compensated use of individuals' intellectual property or data in the training of AI systems, and the lack of transparency or internal limits on AI's environmental impact. As part of the ELCA commitments to confront concrete experiences of structural sin, this church must be attentive to the ways that the development and use of AI are shaped by such expressions of sin.

We recognize that these considerations of sin may make some ELCA members hesitant to use AI. Some view AI as an existential threat to the well-being of human society and the environment. Others view AI as a source of hope and near-limitless promise. The ELCA's teaching on technology advocates a more complex approach than simple rejection or acceptance. Consistent with Lutheran ethical traditions, this church recognizes the need to respect the consciences of Lutherans faithfully wrestling with the ethics of AI, including those who believe that the use of AI should be avoided or supported as much as possible.

3) The basic framework: Respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom.

The Christian tradition records Jesus as providing a command for the moral life: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12; see also Luke 6:31).⁶ In relation to novel technologies, ELCA social teaching restates this command: "*Respect and promote the community of life with justice and wisdom.*"⁷

ELCA social teaching holds this overarching ethical maxim as an imperative of human responsibility. The integrity of the community of life is the core value to be respected and promoted with justice and wisdom. This command is consistent with the biblical teaching that all humans have the God-given responsibility to contribute to the well-being of the community of life God has created. The use of AI is justifiable only insofar as it respects and promotes the integrity of the community of life with justice and wisdom.

4) Respect

Respect is the first of two moral principles for innovative stewardship. "Respect is a directive grounded in the dignity and integrity of created life (Exodus 20:11-17)."⁸ It is a minimal response recognizing that human use of power must always be limited by the inherent dignity and integrity of all creation, including both humans and nonhuman nature. In that sense, respect is a "moral baseline" or guardrail on the sin of pride in human achievement.⁹

Respect requires discernment of the needs of, and our relationships with, other humans, nonhuman nature, and future generations. This directive is prior to the directive "to promote," for two reasons. First, respect is a response to the inherent dignity of creation. Second, it is a minimal standard for ethical responsibility. In other words, at a minimum, the demands of respect must be met in the development and use of AI.

Here are some examples of applied guidance:

⁶ Jesus elsewhere summarizes the "law and the prophets" as the dual command to love God and to love the neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:28-34, Matthew 22:34-40, and Luke 10:25-42). The double love commandment is formed by a blended and extended combination of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:17-18.

⁷ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 15.

⁸ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 16.

⁹ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 16-19.

- AI systems must contain safeguards to ensure that the natural world is protected rather than degraded, even if that means some restraint on AI development is necessary.¹⁰
- The God-given purpose for humankind (the “*imago Dei*”) imbues each human being with dignity. Societies must take steps to preserve fundamental freedoms and rights for individuals and communities in interactions with AI.
- The use of AI should prioritize the minimization and mitigation of disruptions on human beings and human communities, especially the most vulnerable communities. For instance, while AI will necessarily replace some jobs, any reduction should be kept to a minimum. Moreover, profit alone is not a sufficient justification for economic decisions. The well-being of workers must be seriously considered.¹¹
- Government has the responsibility to regulate AI’s technology, commerce, and economic impact toward the well-being of all, not simply for those who own the technology or gain wealth from it.¹²

5) *Promote*

The second yet equally essential directive is for humans as innovative stewards to promote the well-being of creation and human society in creative ways. Both directives are grounded in the character of God’s creative action and the role God has assigned human beings. God’s creativity is expressed in *both* the long-standing structures of nature *and* the contributions humans may make using the gift of innovation. AI is one means, a breathtaking means, of humanity’s power to innovate in ways that may promote the well-being of creation and human society. Importantly, the ELCA teaches, “The 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.”¹³

Here are some examples of relevant guidance stemming from this directive:

- The unprecedented power of AI should be used to aid and support the thriving of human society and to benefit all creation.
- The promotion and expansion of fundamental freedoms and rights for individuals and communities, especially the most vulnerable communities, should be a key criterion for the evaluation of AI’s use. AI must demonstrate how it enhances human rights and the exercise of human responsibility beyond merely avoiding violating rights.¹⁴
- The vocation of civic participation is a calling from God. This church and all God’s people have a responsibility to promote the just and wise use of AI in those callings and a responsibility to hold development and use of AI accountable to the promotion of the well-being of all.¹⁵

Principles of Practical Application Drawn from ELCA Social Teachings

6) *Justice*

The Scriptures make clear that God intends justice be done *by* every person and *for* every member of a society: “...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24). The ELCA holds that justice means “honoring the integrity of creation, and striving for fairness within the human family.”¹⁶

¹⁰ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 22, and *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993), 2.

¹¹ *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999), 8-9.

¹² *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 7-10, and *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2025), 14.

¹³ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 20.

¹⁴ See, for example, *Faith and Civic Life*, 64.

¹⁵ *Faith and Civic Life*, 21.

¹⁶ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 20.

There are four mediating principles in ELCA social teaching that describe justice. Each principle points to specific justice concerns related to AI.

- *Sufficiency*: The ELCA teaches that economic activities must be evaluated in terms of how they “enable people to meet their basic needs, including nutrition ... health care, personal development, and participation in community with dignity.”¹⁷ The development of AI requires immense investment of human and economic resources. Economic activity resulting from AI’s development and application should explicitly align with serving the basic needs of human beings and the natural environment. The “good” use of AI cannot simply be left to the mechanisms of the market.¹⁸
- *Sustainability*: The ELCA has described sufficiency as “providing an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.”¹⁹ This means social, economic, and environmental impacts of AI on humans and creation in the future are legitimate criteria for consideration. The gifts of regulatory science, risk assessment, risk management, and impact assessment should be applied to AI. The goal must include fostering policies and practices consistent with long-term sustainability, not just short-term benefit. Regulation, however, must be justified by specified concerns for the potential harm of an AI application and its delivery. Such regulation can help guard against extraordinary, unanticipated and unintended consequences on the human species and creation, including when AI is shown to have extensive harmful impacts on the environment. In such cases, priority should be given to mitigating extensive and harmful environmental impacts. This may justify limitations in its use.
- *Solidarity*: “The principle of solidarity grounds the moral duty of human beings to stand together in interdependence to act locally and globally on behalf of individuals and cultures. It provides a check on the tendency of human endeavor to benefit primarily those who hold power or privilege at the expense of those who have little or no power.”²⁰ This principle holds that the needs and perspectives of those in vulnerable or poverty-impacted communities must be included in discernment.²¹ Solidarity resists the introduction or reinforcement of social biases and inequities in the development and use of AI and advocates for equal access and equitable benefits from the use of AI.
- *Participation*: The ELCA holds that all people impacted by any technology be given opportunity to offer free, prior, and informed consent to their participation in such processes. In short, the ELCA holds that the participatory principle involves much more than clients’ free choice to use AI agents and applications, or not, through paying fees. Specifically, the principle of human participation means that every application of AI includes human beings in the loop who remain accountable for its use and that corporations are liable for egregious harm.²² Participation also indicates that any neighborhood affected by a potential data center deserves meaningful attention to its concerns. The potential widespread economic impacts of AI necessitate meaningful participation in civic discussions and ²³ by people living in poverty and people whose livelihoods may be most impacted. The principle of participation also demands transparency from corporations about the benefits and risks of AI.

¹⁷ *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 11.

¹⁸ *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 4, 13.

¹⁹ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 22.

²⁰ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 23.

²¹ See *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 4.

²² See *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 14.

²³ See *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 6.

7) *Wisdom*

As AI grows in power, wisdom is demanded in its development and use. The ELCA notes three specific considerations within the exercise of wisdom: knowledge of experts, humility, and the “precautionary principle.”²⁴

- *Knowledge of experts*: The wise development and use of AI require honoring the knowledge and insight of specialists and experts. Knowledge is both a gift from God and a necessity for moral discernment. This principle is an antidote to automatic techno-pessimism. The specialist has a responsibility to exercise humility and honesty about the limits of their knowledge. Moreover it means specialists and experts from a variety of fields have a moral duty to engage in moral discernment with others. Further, this principle points to each citizen’s duty to seek basic education and informed moral discernment about use and policy rather than to operate out of spontaneous reactions, whether pro or con.
- *Humility*: Humility is an essential element in restraining sinful thought and action. There is an inherent moral ambiguity in any development and use of AI that *must* be acknowledged. For example, more attention must be given to this irony. While AI experts understand how these systems are built, they do not always know why AI responds the way it does. This principle of humility is an antidote to a techno-optimism that believes any dangers will simply “be worked out.” This includes the claim that AI itself will solve any harmful outcomes it introduces. Such dangers inherent to the use of AI include displacement of workers and the potential reduction in human capacity for critical thinking.
- *The Precautionary Principle*: The importance of both expert knowledge and humility invokes a key, if rarely used, principle of wisdom called the precautionary principle. “When human activities may lead to morally unacceptable harm that is scientifically plausible but uncertain, actions shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm.”²⁵ This principle is grounded in respect for the community of life whenever existing tools for risk assessment are overwhelmed by a high level of uncertainty *and* proposed actions may dramatically affect the integrity and limits of the earth or the existence of future generations. In such cases, the need for restrictions outweighs that of promoting all possible development.

Conclusion

Emerging technology, as a human endeavor, carries the potential for both risk and reward. “This church recognizes that good and sin, possibility and finitude, hope and anguish are always mixed together in earthly life.”²⁶ Thus, the ELCA endeavors to limit harm from the use and development of AI even while seeking its potential goods that strive to respect and promote the flourishing of the community of life and its inhabitants.

²⁴ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 26-28.

²⁵ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, p. 27.

²⁶ *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*, 34-35.