

Human Life—ECO's Polity and Theology

Approved by the Synod Executive Council 7/1/22

Pastoral Letter

In light of the decision by SCOTUS overturning the 1973 Roe v Wade decision legalizing abortion nationally, ECO affirms the purpose of each human life to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We embrace the gospel of love from God, through grace in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We view one another as people made in the image of God, loved with a love that is “not impersonal, but a particular and intimate love in which each individual child of God is called by name and known as precious” and that furthermore, that “God’s love is not only acceptance, but a transforming and effective love in which His image within us is restored so that we are capable of holy living.” (*Essential Tenets*, III.A)

We affirm the importance of our life together as communities dedicated to saturating our world with the transforming power of Jesus Christ. As such we seek to provide places where it is safe to speak candidly from a diversity of perspectives, honoring one another and protecting as particularly precious those who suffer from the abuse of others through rape or incest. We uphold the importance and concerns of women and girls dealing with unexpected or crisis pregnancies, and also affirm our deep concern for the unborn. We lament especially with those who have lost children for medical reasons.

We offer God’s comfort to those in any trouble with the comfort that we ourselves have received from God. (2 Cor 1:4) We maintain our commitment to be a community devoted to the cultivation and flourishing of healthy families. We commit to being churches that welcome and love everyone regardless of background or physical condition or marital status. We offer support consonant with God’s love, grace, and forgiveness, as well as for practical needs including emotional support, because to refuse to do so would violate God’s commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We grieve with those who suffer with the challenges of unwanted pregnancy, and understand that these situations are often inextricably interwoven with other very important issues like poverty, lack of education, poor medical care, physical vulnerabilities, generational trauma, the absence of family support and many other factors that the Church is called to address with compassion and conviction for the sake of our witness to Christ. We affirm our desire for everyone made in the image of God to enjoy life in God’s presence.

We also grieve the death of the unborn. Whether or not their death was intentional or unintentional, an image bearer of God has died. We grieve that the vulnerable are often unable

to speak for themselves or assert their own right to life and seek to protect the vulnerable from those who threaten their lives and livelihoods.

We pledge our willingness to listen with open and humble hearts and to refrain from judgmental or polarizing rhetoric that denies the power of God's love for sinners, because none of us is without sin (Rom 3:23). We offer grace abounding to all who would receive our ministry, withholding nothing, for in Christ we have received everything and offer it to others in a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace and love.

Polity Foundations

ECO believes that ministry occurs in local churches, not by denominational statements. The conception and birth of human life is inextricably personal, and our ministry is to women, men, children, and families for whom issues of abortion are present and real, as well as to the communities involved in the lives of these. ECO believes that the truth of our shared belief must be contextualized in pastorally appropriate ways.

ECO is a Christian denomination that is guided and governed by its *Constitution*. The beliefs of ECO are stated clearly in its *Essential Tenets*, which form part of the *Constitution*. All pastors, elders, and deacons are required to "receive, adopt, and be bound by the *Essential Tenets* of ECO." ECO does not permit its officers to "scruple" or take exception to parts of this document.

The *Essential Tenets* of ECO are grounded in the truth of the Christian Bible, and the Reformed tradition, of which ECO is a part. ECO holds that this document is a short summary of what all orthodox Christians believe, and what ECO as a Reformed denomination in particular believes.

Theology

The *Essential Tenets* use the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) as a moral guide, upholding our Reformed Tradition's "third use of the law" which states that God's law is useful not just in limiting and condemning moral faults, but to also guide upright human behavior.

The sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13), "Do not murder" is elaborated by our *Essential Tenets*, in part, by the phrase "We hold one another accountable to... recognize and honor the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death" (*Essential Tenets* III.E.6). This sentence combines the commandment of Exodus 20:13 with the prohibition of murder from Genesis 9:5-6, which states that God requires an account of all human life taken, for humans are made to bear God's image, that is, to be representations of God.

So, while acknowledging that human life should not be taken by other humans, ECO also upholds that human life is given great value by its function of representing God. This function

of bearing God's image cannot be reduced to human capacities that are gained and lost at various points of human life. Rather, the Bible links this image to all people regardless of their state of development, decline, or social status.

ECO upholds the central Christian hope of the resurrection of the dead through the work of Jesus Christ, and that life will triumph over death. We believe that Christians are to be a people who actively represent, reveal, and hope for the reign of God at which time death will be defeated. (See 1 Corinthians 15).

Our Essential Tenets state that "Every Christian is called to extend the lordship of Christ to every corner of the world. And every Christian is called to participate in Christ's priestly, mediatorial work, sharing in the suffering of the world in ways that extend God's blessing and offering intercession to God on behalf of the world" (*Essential Tenets*, III.D). This means that ECO holds that, while we condemn and mourn the destruction of any human life, we are called to actively work to oppose this destruction, pray for all involved in this destruction, mediate between different parties as we are able, and to prepare our communities to be places of life that bless others.

Therefore

ECO holds that human life begins at conception. To artificially end the life of a conceived fetus (abortion) is the shedding of human blood and dishonoring the image of God.

ECO holds that human life ends at natural death.

ECO holds that humans do not have a God-given right to end human life.

ECO holds that Christians are to actively work to reveal the coming reign of God's kingship by valuing life and abstaining from dealing death.

ECO holds that all officers of ECO hold one another accountable to affirm the image of God in all human life from conception to natural death. We hold that this is an essential tenet of our shared belief, and that, while not all Christians in the world may agree on this or other points, we stand united by sharing this high value of all human life.

ECO holds that its churches should be communities of flourishing that pray for the world and create contexts in which human life can thrive, and that its communities will do this in ways appropriate to their various contexts.