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# USING THE CHURCH'S ETHICS STATEMENTS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

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BY MARK F. CARR AND GERALD R. WINSLOW



**T**he General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has, over nearly 20 years, generated a number of position statements on a wide range of ethical issues. This should not be surprising for a community of faith that is deeply committed to introducing a Savior to a suffering world.

Societies worldwide are wracked by evil. The church has a mission to share the good news of deliverance from sin and recommendations for achieving a happy and healthy lifestyle. Whether the issue be domestic violence, tribal and national warfare, use of tobacco, abortion, euthanasia, or caring for the environment, the church has positioned itself on many of the key moral issues of our day. Indeed, it would be irresponsible to operate an educational system, hospitals, social programs, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency without some sense of where the church stands on such issues.

Recognizing the need to provide leadership in the area of ethics, church leaders have established study groups of experts and laypersons to formulate position statements. Even though most of the issues addressed in these statements are highly controversial, they have usually met with an appreciative response from those who have studied them. The statements have also provided guidance to Adventist institutions because of their focus on specific issues that are relevant to education, health care, social services, and local congregations.

Unfortunately, most church members, including many educators, are unaware of the statements. This article will suggest ways to encourage more widespread use of the statements, so that students and teachers will be more informed on positions shaped by the biblical and theological convictions of our church. It will answer questions such as these:

- How were the statements generated? Who created and reviewed them?
- What is the justification for such work?
- How can those who are interested access the statements?

## Hard Questions

In the course of our work, the authors, both ethicists, are thoroughly engaged with educational, health-care, congregational, and administrative organizations within and outside the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We routinely must grapple with the implications of our faith for human biology and medicine—an area known as bioethics. The work is sometimes stressful, but never boring or trivial.

Perhaps the issue that most vividly illustrates these dynamics is abortion. Sometimes, when conducting seminars, we ask how many of the attendees have studied the church's official statement on abortion. It is rare to find an Adventist audience in which the majority has even heard of this statement. The abortion guidelines document is just

one of dozens of important statements that the church has produced on matters of ethical, theological, and social significance.

### **Christian View of Human Life Committee**

In 1989, recognizing the growing need for attention to ethical issues, our church's leaders established an abortion committee that eventually embraced a broader agenda and was therefore renamed the Christian View of Human Life Committee (CVHLC). Led by Dr. Albert Whiting, then director of the General Conference (GC) Health Ministries Department, an interdisciplinary group was assembled in Takoma Park, Maryland. From the beginning, the chairman insisted that the CVHLC be balanced for gender and cultural diversity. While membership varied over the years, the number of those in attendance was usually between 20 and 30.

Drafts of a number of the CVHLC's proposed statements were circulated to church leaders around the world to obtain feedback, a step that turned out to be exceptionally helpful.

The first issue taken up by the CVHLC was

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abortion. Their work on that topic aptly illustrates the need for such efforts. The issue had been controversial for some time, both within and outside the church. The church had already issued a brief statement in the 1970s, which was later modified. But by 1989, it was clear that the church needed a statement with greater clarity. Its health-care institutions were asking for help in creating policies on this issue.

Obviously, faithful Christians, each reading Scripture carefully, have come to a variety of positions on abortion. So the question arose: Should the



The church's ethics statements can provide guidance to medical students and doctors at Adventist hospitals as they are called upon to make life-and-death decisions about patient care.



Mark Carr, one of the authors of this article, discusses ethical issues with one of his classes at Loma Linda University.



church take on the role of arbiter in ethical debates, laying out what should be regarded as *the* Seventh-day Adventist position on such matters? If so, does this negate the role of individual conscience? If the church does *not* offer guidance, where are its medical and research institutions to get assistance with decisions about bioethical issues?

Recently, one of us was conversing with a young physician regarding abortion. I mentioned that the Adventist Church had a position statement that could inform his thinking on this matter. Some five minutes later, he stopped me, and referring back to my earlier reference to the church's official statement, said, "What do I care if the church has an official position on this matter? This is my decision to make!"

### Shared Answers

Perhaps some readers will be surprised that we agree with the young physician's basic sentiments. As Protestants, Adventists rightly reject the notion that ecclesiastical authorities should dictate what each member must believe about complex ethical issues. However, we believe that the church does

have an important role to play in helping our members and the societies in which they live to think carefully about such matters.

The Adventist statement on abortion makes a very deliberate effort to do that. It clearly delineates the relationship between church guidance and personal conscience: "The need for guidelines has become evident, as the Church attempts to follow Scripture, and to provide moral guidance while respecting individual conscience."

The introduction to the most recent compilation of the church's statements on ethics, *Statements, Guidelines, & Other Documents of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*,<sup>1</sup> responds to this question: *Why should the church bother taking positions on matters of moral import?* Ray Dabrowski, communication director for the General Conference, boldly states: "It goes without saying that the church as a moral force in society is expected to clarify or express its stance, or even develop a particular concern." Tapping into our denominational history, Dabrowski notes some of the issues about which Adventists have been vocal in the past: civil rights, slavery, religious liberty, health and temperance reform, alcoholism and drug dependency, tobacco, and education.<sup>2</sup>

Affirming this stance, General Conference President Jan Paulsen wrote recently in *Adventist World*: "There is a vast difference between seeking a voice in the public discourse, and seeking to wield political power. As a church—and individuals—we have not only the right, but the obligation, to be a moral

voice in society; to speak clearly and eloquently on that which touches our core values. Human rights, religious freedom, public health, poverty, and injustice—there are some of the areas in which we have a God-given responsibility to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

The work of the Christian View of Human Life Committee from 1989 to 2000 illustrates the wisdom of gathering informed members to address the pressing ethical issues of our times. After input from a variety of sources, a number of statements were finalized and sent to either the church’s Annual Council or its executive branch. The topics included assisted human reproduction, birth control, genetic intervention and therapy, euthanasia, and human cloning.

The CVHLC is not the only body that has generated position statements considered to be representative of Seventh-day Adventist thinking on matters of social or ethical import. Such documents have come from the General Conference in session, the GC Executive Committee and GC Administrative Committee, and the office of the GC president. Additionally, statements from the Biblical Research Institute have occasionally taken up ethical issues.

However, none of these bodies has been charged with making sure the statements are widely disseminated. As a result, few members are aware that the statements exist.

### **Where to Look**

For those with computer access, the easiest place to find the documents is on the Internet (<http://www.adventist.org>).<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the statements have been compiled in an inexpensive book, referred to above, which is published by the GC Communication Department. The third edition (2005) is available through the Review and Herald Publishing Association, although we have yet to see it featured at an Adventist Book Center.

### **Using the Statements in the Classroom**

In our day-to-day work at Loma Linda University, we find a number of ways to introduce and use the church’s statements. Since we teach ethics courses, it makes sense to incorporate a number of the statements into the curriculum, such as those on care for the dying, domestic abuse and violence, abortion, peacemaking, environmental responsibility, HIV/AIDS, genetic therapies, and reproductive technologies. We often have the students buy the inexpensive book referred to above, but they can also access and read the statements online if they wish.

Because of their brevity, the church’s statements

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It is important for students at Adventist schools, especially those who are studying to become health-care practitioners, to know about and reflect on the guidance from a faith community that bases its ethical positions on a thoughtful study of Scripture.

form a useful supplement to other required readings in a class syllabus. The statements are enlightening both for Adventist students and for students from other faith traditions. For those unacquainted with our church, the statements illuminate how Adventists establish biblical positions with regard to important health-care issues. Since most of the Adventist students are unaware of the church’s statements, the readings help them to understand their own faith tradition more fully.

Because of the pervasive ethical relativism of Western society today, we believe it is extremely important for all students to know about and reflect on the guidance from a faith community that bases its ethical positions on a thoughtful study of Scripture.

One of the more fruitful methods of using these statements is to have the students analyze them in discussion groups, either face to face or using course-management software. When teaching online courses, we sometimes require our students to post their analysis of one of the church’s statements,

and to respond to classmates' online postings. This often stimulates vibrant dialogue.

The level of students' interaction and interest highlights the ongoing relevance of the church's statements. The topics dealt with by the statements energize, and sometimes balkanize, entire communities. The fact that Adventists have something to say about these topics indicates that the church is wrestling with matters that are relevant to church members and to the societies in which they live.

These statements can be useful in a number of



Adventist researchers also benefit from guidance from their faith community as they plan experiments and consider the ramifications of how their studies are used by society.

courses, not just those that explicitly focus on ethics. As a teaching tool, they highlight a foundational principle of Adventism: to help students engage in critical thinking, not simply memorize specific bits of information. Ellen White, in one of her most provocative statements about teaching methods, wrote: "Teachers should lead students to think, and clearly understand the truth for themselves. It is not enough for the teacher to explain or for the student to believe; inquiry must be awakened."<sup>5</sup>

In light of this mandate, one way to use the church's statements into the classroom is to ask students to discuss questions such as these:

- Should our church issue statements on controversial ethical issues?
- Isn't there a danger that such efforts might be viewed as political statements rather than ethical ones?
- If the church does formulate statements on ethics, who should be selected to develop them? How can any drafting group be sufficiently representative?

- How should we approach ethical issues when there is no specific guidance from the Bible?
- If the church does offer ethical guidance on a particular issue, how should individual members relate to it? Should it be considered binding on all members? On all church institutions?
- What process should be used for revising statements that the church has already formulated?

Questions like these can help students go beyond the specific content of the church's statements to think about what it means to be responsible church members seeking God's guidance together.

### Other Venues

In addition to our work in the classroom, we often find other opportunities to highlight the church's statements. One of the primary avenues is via publications.

One example is *UPDATE*, the news journal published by the Center for Christian Bioethics at Loma Linda University. Mailed quarterly free of charge to those interested, *UPDATE* highlights the work of



the center and addresses issues relevant to bioethics. But it also publishes articles on ethical issues outside the realm of bioethics. Recently, for example, two editions focused on race relations, homelessness and poverty, domestic and family violence, and women's issues. Using the church's statements, Adventist scholars offered analysis, and suggested other topics that the church should address.<sup>6</sup>

Five years ago, one of us began writing a column for our union conference paper, the Pacific

Union Recorder. The assignment was to write a brief article periodically about a topic that was relevant to church members, focusing on ethical issues faced by the Center for Christian Bioethics. The ethics column has challenged church members to think about what our church can contribute to the major ethical issues of our time.

Yet another channel of communication is curriculum materials. Several years ago, the North American Division developed a new series of textbooks for academy-level Bible classes called “The Crossroads Series.” One of us served as the primary author of an elective resource for the grade 11-12 textbook, entitled, “Life Philosophy and Moral Issues.” It includes a number of our church’s ethics statements in the hope that students and faculty will be helped by knowing that the denomination has engaged in careful reflection and study of ethically significant questions.

The Center for Christian Bioethics is now working on a textbook for college-level classrooms. The first half will focus on a Seventh-day Adventist framework for addressing ethical issues. The second half will be a collection of church statements focusing on bioethics and social ethics. In planning for the latter section, we have asked a number of scholars to offer an academic analysis of the church’s statements. At the end of each analysis, the experts look toward the future.

In addition to such publications, we seek to foster discussions of ethics in other ways such as...

**Church groups:** We strongly encourage church administrators, theology professors, and pastors to use these statements in their work with congregations, boards, and committees. Occasionally, we are asked to give seminars that focus on issues for which the GC has position statements. For instance, the Carmichael, California, Seventh-day Adventist Church asked one of us to give a lecture on the topic of stem cell research. Although no statement on this subject has yet been approved by the church, statements from the CVHLC on human cloning, Christian Principles for Genetic Intervention, and Human Gene Therapy were helpful in the discussion.

**Camp meetings, workers’ meetings, and seminars for lay and professional evangelists and chaplains:** Particularly relevant in these contexts are the following: Family Violence (1996 statement), Statement on Stewardship of the Environment, three statements on peace, How Seventh-day Adventists View Roman Catholicism, Guidelines for Engaging in Global Mission, Guidelines: AIDS Epidemic, Guidelines for Employee/Employer Relations, Relationships With Other Christian Churches and Religious Organizations, to name just a few.

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### **Encouraging Widespread Use**

We recommend that teachers, theological professors, and educational administrators look over the collected statements to find the ones that are relevant to their specific area of responsibility. The fact that such a wide range of topics has been addressed suggests that anyone could surely find a topic of interest to his or her work within the church.

Academy, college, and university teachers will find the statements listed below to be relevant in the following disciplines:

**Religion/Theology:** most of the statements.

**Science:** climate change, genetics, stewardship of the environment, human cloning, and human sexuality.

**Social Studies:** racism, homelessness and poverty, war and peace, human cloning, family, family violence, women’s issues, employee/employer relations, HIV/AIDS, and religious freedom.

**History:** calls for peace, racism, human rights, ecumenical movement, ethics and tobacco, abortion, religious extremism.

**Nursing, pre-med, biological sciences:** care for the dying, abortion, genetic therapies, reproductive technologies, birth control, HIV/AIDS, family violence, sexual abuse, and sexually transmitted disease.

One of us routinely interacts with teachers on a nearby academy campus. Recently, students were seen carrying around their “babies” (lifelike dolls). The senior Bible class teacher had assigned a unit in which the students researched the issues and expenses involved in planning a wedding, setting up an apartment, developing a budget, and having children. Which of the church’s statements might be relevant to this assignment? At least these: birth control, stewardship of the environment, family violence, abortion, pornography, and assisted human reproduction.

In conversation with the teacher one day, we toyed with the idea of including the reality that some of the “couples” in class would also end up in divorce court. In such a case, the teacher could also

## Statements, Guidelines, and Other Documents:

### Statements:

- Abuse and Family Violence
- AIDS
- Birth Control: A Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Consensus
- Caring for Creation—A Statement on the Environment
- Care for the Dying
- Climate Change
- Creation, An Affirmation of
- Competition
- Drugs
- Environment
- Stewardship of the Environment
- Family
- Family Violence
- Gambling
- Health-Care Institutions
- Homelessness and Poverty
- Homosexuality, Seventh-day Adventist Position Statement on
- Human Cloning
- Human Rights (50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of)
- Marriage
- Peace
- A Seventh-day Adventist Call for Peace
- Peace Message to All People of Good Will
- Pornography
- Racism
- Religious Extremism—A Danger to Religious Liberty
- Religious Freedom
- Religious Minorities and Religious Freedom: A Statement of Commitment and Concern
- Same Sex Unions
- Sexual Abuse (Child)
- Sexually Transmitted Diseases
- Smoking and Ethics
- Smoking and Tobacco
- The Role of the Ten Commandments in Public Life
- Tolerance
- 25th Anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on Religious Tolerance and Non-discrimination
- Women's Issues

### Guidelines:

- Abortion
- AIDS Epidemic
- Sexual Harassment
- Harassment
- Guidelines for Employer and Employee Relationships

### Other Documents:

- AIDS—A Seventh-day Adventist Response
- Christian Principles for Genetic Interventions
- Church-State Relations
- Female Genital Mutilation
- Gene Therapy
- Relationships with Other Christian Churches
- Considerations on Assisted Human Reproduction
- Ethical Foundations for the General Conference and Its Employees

use sections from the Church Manual on divorce and remarriage.

Recently, one of our colleagues served on the judges' panel for a health essay competition. Elementary and secondary students were invited to write on topics that they believed to be particularly relevant. One of the essays submitted was on abortion. It was clear that the student was unaware that the church had a statement on this topic. While we are not suggesting that the paper should have simply upheld the church's position statement on abortion, surely the writer should have been made aware of what the church teaches on this important matter.

Teachers and educational administrators often interact with their colleagues from state universities and other religious colleges. As they discuss and study various ethical issues, they can use the statements in their research and seminars, and make their colleagues aware that our church takes these issues seriously enough to offer guidance for members and for public policy-making.

In several cases, church administrators and ethicists have been contacted by other churches to ask, "What do Adventists believe about \_\_\_\_\_?" And reporters from various media have contacted the authors and church headquarters asking about the church's stand on a variety of issues.

Finally, more and more universities, colleges, and academies are incorporating service courses into the curriculum and/or requiring students to perform a certain number of hours of voluntary service. One academy recently "adopted" a trailer park. Each week, the students and faculty go to the park and help those who are unable to take care of their trailers and yard or to pay others to do so. Reading the church's statement on "homelessness and poverty" could help set the context for such work for both faculty and students.

We leave it to the church's teachers to exercise their creativity in the effort to make these statements come alive for our youth.

## Conclusion

We feel optimistic about the need, relevance, and usefulness of these church statements even though we understand why some would hesitate to encourage widespread exposure to them. Looking to the future, the church needs to consult on a regular basis with ethicists, theologians, medical personnel, and experts in other areas, since many of the current statements will require revision, and new statements may be needed as scientific research generates new ethical complexities.

If this article has done nothing more than draw attention to these statements, we've made progress. While we have focused on the use of these state-

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ments in educational contexts, the reader should recognize their broad applicability. While students may regard their study of the statements as a mere academic exercise, the applicability to their lives will very likely become real all too soon. Each of us will have to care for a loved one during his or her final days. Most of us will face the challenges of deliberating over matters of birth control, human sexuality, employee/employer relationships, and care for the environment, to name just a few.

Feel confident you will find relevant and helpful materials in the list of church statements at <http://www.adventist.org>. As we continue to challenge our students and the broader society with a witness of Jesus as Savior and Lord, these statements will serve our church and its members well.✍



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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Produced by the General Conference Communication Dept. and printed by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2005.
2. *Ibid.*, p. iii.
3. Jan Paulsen, "Serving Our World, Serving Our Lord," *Adventist World—NAD* (May 2007), p. 9.
4. Once you have accessed the main Website, you can link to the specific list of statements, guidelines, and other documents under the drop-down menu on the left side of the screen, entitled, "Adventist Beliefs."
5. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn, 1948), vol. 6, p. 154.
6. The reader can find these and other topics online at <http://www.llu.edu/llu/bioethics/documents/update193.pdf> (Race and Poverty) and <http://www.llu.edu/llu/bioethics/documents/update201.pdf> (Family Violence and Women's Issues).