

ELCA Task Force on Genetics
February 22-23, 2008
Spring Hill Suites, Chicago, Illinois

Minutes

Present: Linden Olson, Steven Ullestad, Frank Maenpa, Janet Williams, Per Anderson, Juliette Kahle, Bob Lebel, Yvonne Marshall, Pat Zerega, Ted Peters, Jerry DeWitt, Beletech Deressa, Paul Nelson, Richard Perry, Sandra Schlesinger, Carmelo Santos, Susan Martyn, Aana Marie Vigen, Robin Mattison

Excused: Jadon Berry, Judy Klusman, Mary Minette, Leland Glenna

CS Staff: Roger Willer, Ron Duty

The meeting was convened by Janet Williams.

Susan Martyn led devotions on texts from Deuteronomy 8 and Jeremiah 31. Discussion followed. Ted Peters led the task force in prayer.

Janet Williams noted that this meeting represents a transition between learning and reflecting, on the one hand, and deciding what we want to say to the church on the other hand. She reviewed the meeting agenda.

Task force members gave personal updates.

Richard Perry gave a PowerPoint presentation on race and genetics, which was followed by discussion.

Aana Marie Vigen, a new task force member, introduced herself to the task force, talked about her interests in biotechnology, and about her primary concerns that the ELCA should consider as it works on a social statement on genetics.

Frank Maenpa, also a new task force member, introduced himself to the task force and talked about what he saw to be the areas promise for genetics, as well as the chance that the social statement has to encourage people to have an informed conversation in the church about the promise and perils of the use of genetic knowledge and technology.

Jerry DeWitt gave a PowerPoint presentation about issues related to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agriculture, talking about both their advantages for growers who crop them and their potentially beneficial uses as well as the problems their use causes. Discussion followed.

The task force took a break for lunch.

Robin Mattison gave a presentation about the Bible and genetics. Her presentation focused on texts in Genesis 1-3, the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, Philippians 2, and Revelation 21. Discussion followed.

Juliette Kahle gave a PowerPoint presentation about how researchers create mouse models for genetic research, using her own doctoral research as an example. Robert Lebel gave a PowerPoint presentation about the genetics of cancer and its inheritance. Janet Williams gave a PowerPoint presentation about genetic counseling. All three presentations elicited questions and discussion.

The task force had an initial discussion about what should be in its study on genetics, and how it should address various audiences within the church. Important among the points on which there seemed to be general agreement was that the topic has a great deal of moral density (as well as informational complexity) which the study should both describe and help readers understand.

The task force recessed for dinner.

The task force reconvened on Saturday morning with an extended PowerPoint presentation on behavioral genetics by the Rev. Dr. Lindon Eaves of Virginia Commonwealth University,. Among his concluding observations were that the way we are thinking about genetics now may not provide the Rosetta stone about human genetic reality that we're looking for, and that genes are not destiny because of the way they interact with the environment and with human will. Eaves also brought to the fore a number of issues which genetic knowledge raises for religion, theology, and ethics to which the churches and pastors could helpfully respond.

The task force recessed for lunch.

Roger Willer reviewed the timeline for the task force's work between now and when the statement was considered for adoption by Churchwide Assembly in 2011, explained the role of the Writing Team in the process of drafting material for the task force to consider, and how task force members would be asked to assist the Writing Team. A Writing Team was named to include Per Anderson, Janet Williams, Leland Glenna, Susan Martyn, Roger Willer, and Ron Duty. It was noted that the Writing Team would convene shortly to organize work for doing the study, which will be reviewed and edited by the Task Force in an online meeting on May 3, 2008, and again in a face-to-face meeting September 12-14 in Chicago.

The task force considered again what the study should do and how it should approach its subjects by dividing into two groups, one focusing on human genetics, and another focusing on plants and animals. Then, task force members individually said what they think should be the one or two key things the study should consider.

Willer led the task force in prayer. Task force members were asked to write brief stories or vignettes involving an issue in genetics and to forward these to the Writing Team. The task force adjourned.