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# The cutting edge: how churches speak on social issues

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This volume is not easy reading. Taylor's prose has the propensity towards ivory-tower obscurity—which, ironically, he would likely critique in others! It should be most appealing to the seminarian or theologian who wishes to keep abreast of the ongoing contemporary hermeneutics debate and dialogue.

Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson  
Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church,  
Calgary, Alberta

## **The Cutting Edge: How Churches Speak On Social Issues**

Mark Ellingsen

Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993  
370 pp.

Forget about this book's title. The subtitle is more accurately descriptive of its contents. The book contains an analysis of the official statements on social issues that have been issued by the Christian Churches of the world over a thirty year period, ca. 1963–93. Those who are looking for a single reference book which catalogues churches' social statements and compares and contrasts them will want to own a copy of Ellingsen's work.

As is the case with too many reference works, the author's style is rather dry and analytical. However, it is to Ellingsen's credit that he has accomplished this project.

Ellingsen states that he put these pages together out of concern for ecumenical memory. His hope was to create a comprehensive picture of what has been said and argued, in the past, by socially conscious Christians around the world.

In carrying out his analysis, the author focuses on nine major social issues on which many churches have spoken out over the past thirty years. These issues are: 1. Apartheid and racism, 2. Economic development and unemployment, 3. Ecology, 4. Nuclear armaments and peace and war, 5. Divorce, remarriage and polygamy, 6. Abortion, 7. Genetic engineering, 8. Social justice, 9. Socio-political ideologies.

Those readers who are concerned with the ethical implications of the Christian faith will find this book valuable because it documents how various church bodies have responded to the nine areas listed above. This book will also speak to those who are interested in the correlation between the social statements of churches and their theological perspectives and cultural environments.

As a result of his analysis, the author draws some challenging conclusions which the reader may accept at face value or may want to do further

research using the appendix that takes up nearly half the book. Take, for instance, Ellingsen's observation that church social statements "... are determined more by denominational and confessional identification than by the context of a church body's theological or ethical perspective".

If the author's analysis is correct, then this book may potentially appeal to another group of readers. Besides the church historians and those concerned with the social gospel, this book may appeal to those who care about how future Christians will identify their similarities and differences, and in so doing shape the nature of their communities.

If you want a handy summary of your denomination's social statements over the past three decades, this book is for you. If you want to gain a global perspective on how church bodies have responded to certain social issues, this book will help. If you want a better grasp of the theological positions that inform and determine responses to social concerns, then this book can help you unravel that mystery too. If you fall into one of these groups, then you won't mind the fact that it reads more like a dictionary than a novel, and it may well become a valued reference tool.

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## **The Dancing Steward, Exploring Christian Stewardship Lifestyles**

Christopher Levan  
Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1993

*The Dancing Steward* seems an odd name for a book that is particularly directed to white, affluent, North-American men, although there is much food for thought even to those who do not fit this description.

Levan writes with an easy to read style in which anecdotes are interspersed with significant theological insights and biblical stories. The end of the chapters have sections for "Experiential Learning" and "Questions for Discussion" that have been designed not only for individual reflection but also in such a way that they may be employed as part of a group process.

Christopher Levan begins the book by painting a picture of celebrations that are a reflection of North-American prosperity and indulgence which have in some way trapped us so that we are unable to respond to the marginalized. The basic motivation for Levan writing the book is stated as, "Are you searching for an answer to the predicament of your affluence? After you've approached the third homeless person in as many blocks, do you ask 'What must I do?' It is in answer to that question that I have written this book" (p. 5).