



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER'S OVERVIEW & MATERIALS



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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ABOUT THIS STUDY CURRICULUM AND ELCA SOCIAL TEACHING

This study curriculum was created by the Task Force on Civic Life and Faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and published by the ELCA's churchwide organization as a critical step toward development of a social teaching statement. It is an invitation to learn what the task force has been discussing in regard to civic life and faith, including some of the most fraught questions of our time.

The curriculum invites participants to delve into the nature of politics, the meaning of the Scriptures, the purpose of government, the responsibility of congregations and church-related organizations, First Amendment issues, the relationship of faith-based living and civic life, connections between worship life and serving neighbor in society, the nature of citizenship, and other relevant topics. These are weighty and difficult discussions for people of faith!

Your participation matters as part of the work toward a social statement on civic life and faith. Social statements address the great social systems or most controversial issues of contemporary life. The ELCA does not have a comprehensive teaching and social policy document on civic life and faith. Yes, broad Lutheran parameters about faith and public life are sketched out in the ELCA's first social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (1991), [ELCA.org/socialstatements](https://www.elca.org/socialstatements). Several social statements, such as *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries* (2013), necessarily touch on governing institutions in society. The recent social message "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy" (March 2020) focuses on the purpose of government. Yet none of these teaching documents provides a comprehensive framework for the wide-ranging and complex issues associated with civic life from a standpoint of faith.

For these reasons, the 2019 Churchwide Assembly authorized both the brief 2020 social message focused on government and a later social

statement fully addressing aspects of civic life and faith. The resolution stated the need for "a means to probe for shared convictions and establish this church's comprehensive teaching" through development of a social statement. Social teaching governs the institutional witness of our church in public life and provides guidance for the everyday callings of individuals.

Your participation matters because ELCA social teaching is developed through a participatory and democratic process. This process is led by a task force seated by the ELCA Church Council and requires approximately five years of development including at least three formal points of feedback and comment from across the ELCA. This curriculum is one of those points.

Your use of and response to this curriculum will aid the task force as it considers what might be included in the draft social statement on civic life and faith that will be available for comment in 2024. The deadline for response to this study curriculum is Oct. 15, 2023.

As evident throughout this curriculum, the task force recognizes how Christians of good will can and do disagree about social issues. Though we are one in Christ and share many basic values such as neighbor love and neighbor justice, studying together can be difficult because social concerns, like political life, are complex and personal, with institutional and structural implications.

However, Scripture teaches that the Spirit of Christ is able to guide our discernment and deepen our insights (Romans 12:1-2). May this be so for all who use this curriculum.

Rev. Roger A. Willer, PhD.
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FACILITATOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY CURRICULUM?

WELCOME AND GRATITUDE

We welcome and sincerely thank you for serving as a facilitator for this study curriculum, an integral part of the ELCA's social statement formation process. In the politically polarized climate in which we live and practice our faith, it is no small thing to step up in this manner, serving as a facilitator to intentionally discuss and study how our faith and civic engagement are woven together. Your leadership is appreciated.

THE STUDY'S COMPONENTS

Each of the six Leader Guides (found below or on web page) is written for ease-of-use. You will note three font types:

- ***Bold, italicized*** text is directions for the leader.
- **Bold** sentences are meant to be read to the group. This content is not in the Participant Guide.
- In the Leader Guide, indented, standard font marked with a "PG" icon denotes material found in the Participant Guide. The participant material is provided in the Leader Guide as well so you do not have to switch between handouts.

Each session in the Leader Guide has a **supply list**. Some items are optional. Note that each Leader Guide provides a transcript of the video to disseminate to those who may have issues hearing its audio. We recommend having a few copies available at all sessions.

The sessions begin with a word of **welcome**. You will decide if it is read aloud by a volunteer or by yourself, or read silently.

The study curriculum includes a **conversation covenant** that all participants (and facilitators) will be asked to abide to, beginning with Session 1. Though you are welcome to adapt the covenant,

it is provided with the assumption that creating a covenant from scratch would require an entire session. Because new participants may join subsequent sessions, a review of the covenant is built into each of them. A poster-size printout of the covenant is available as an addendum in this material; connect four standard-size pages as directed and place the poster in your gathering space as a visible reminder of your agreed-upon expectations for respectful dialogue.

The six study curriculum sessions have been formatted to reflect that participation in this process is an act of faith. Each session begins and ends grounding the group in **Scripture, prayer, and praise**. You may use the opening devotion and closing prayer as printed or adapt them for your group, using your own words. Hymn suggestions are provided from a variety of hymnals used in ELCA churches.

All sessions contain some version of "**Hearing Each Other.**" During this time, individuals pair up to share stories and experiences that help us see one another first as children of God, not as foes at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Challenge participants not to pair up with a friend or family member, but instead to seek out someone they do not know or know sometimes to be of differing opinions. Naturally, the size and composition of the group and your congregation will affect how well and what people know about each other.

Sessions 2-6 have time for a brief **previous session review**. During this time, invite participants to consider how what was previously discussed connected to their engagements in their everyday lives since last meeting.

The **study** sections of the sessions may include a short Bible study, the video, and video discussion questions before and/or after. There may be more content than you have time to work through. You

are free to adapt the study for your needs and time. The **videos** serve as the primary learning component. The material presented may be familiar to some and new to others. Links to the videos are provided. Please test your video and sound before the session. When there are questions about something the video presenter said, the written transcript will provide quick reference for clarification.

Each session provides closing **reflection questions** and a time to share **reflections and insights**. A **summary** and **closing prayer** are also provided.

A very important component for each of the six sessions is the **Participant Response Form**. As previously noted, the feedback received from ELCA members is part of the social statement development process. Links to submit forms for each session are provided, but please make paper copies available for those who are not online. Decide as the facilitator how paper response forms will be collected and returned to the task force. You may leave them with individuals to return or collect them to be sent weekly or at the end of the study. Paper response forms may be scanned and emailed or sent by U.S. mail. Email and street addresses are provided in each session.

The six sessions are designed for roughly an hour together and are written to be completed in numerical order. The curriculum is adaptable for various settings including a midweek Lenten study, Sunday educational hour, online, and so on. Additional materials for longer or supplementary sessions are provided. These include eight **“On the Ground”** discussions. The formats of these vary, but all are real-world current-event examples of faith and civic engagement intersecting, meant for small- or large-group dialogue.

Each session also has **prompts for action outside the study group** and additional study resources to be found on websites and in books and articles. ELCA resources are highlighted whenever possible. Please note that Session 4 has additional, optional study material called **“Going Deeper.”** Any of this content may be explored individually or incorporated into the session for a longer study time.

Finally, each Participant Guide and Leader Guide will have **glossary** words. Some of these words are in common use but will be defined according to the scope of the curriculum. Other words may be familiar only to those with a theological background. A master glossary is found in the appendix.

MODELING RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE IN THE STUDY SESSIONS

Your task is to be an active facilitator, making sure all feel heard and respected.

When significant tensions or conflicts arise in your study group, consider directing the group to pause and review the covenant before resuming discussion. If participants are interrupting others or otherwise straying from the covenant, it is appropriate as the facilitator for you to remind participants that experiences and emotions can make talking together about difficult things challenging, but we do so as an exercise of faith, grounded together in the grace and love of God. When necessarily, request covenantal behavior be kept if there is inflammatory language, blame, false witness, interruption, unnecessary debate, or assumptions or generalizations about different groups. When necessary, redirect the discussion and move on.

You are a human and may also hold strong emotions and opinions. If you find yourself reacting instead of facilitating, set a robust example by being able to take responsibility for your behavior, apologize when appropriate, and move on together.

It is our deepest yearning that members of the ELCA can model talking together respectfully regardless of differences. With practice in these sessions, we hope that participants can continue to model that faithful engagement in a nation sorely in need of respectful dialogue.

May the Spirit of God work through you and participants as we seek unity as children of God regardless of our differences.

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH ST

Our commitment is to lift up words and actions that:

- Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them to do unto me.
- Model respectful and caring communication, without interrupting.
- Strive to understand each other's experiences.
- Speak honestly, as an individual and as a group.

STUDY GROUP COVENANT

up the body of Christ through

: do unto others as I expect

careful listening, without

ch other's insights and

individual rather than for

- Do not presume that others are a group.
- Utilize any technology carefully to avoid a distraction.
- Step up to share thoughts and allow others to share theirs.
- Be mindful of viewpoints.
- Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's blessing in the group and



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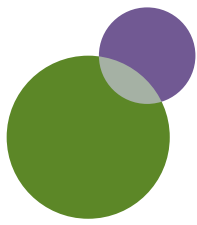
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COMPLETE GLOSSARY FOR ELCA STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

Book of Concord: A collection of writings from 1580, published on the 50th anniversary of the 1530 Augsburg Confession, that were subscribed to by some 80 princely and municipal governments and are generally understood as authoritative documents of the Evangelical/Lutheran movement. The most widely adopted include the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, and Luther's catechisms, but all have some status among today's Evangelical/Lutheran churches.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident. Among other things, he is known for his writings on the Christian role in civic engagement and was a key founding member of the Confessing Church. (See "Confessing Church.")

Cheap grace: A term from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship* that he describes as preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, as grace without discipleship, as grace without the cross, and as Christian faith without Jesus Christ, the living and incarnate one.

Christian nationalism: A cultural framework that idealizes and advocates fusion of certain Christian views with American civic life. This political ideology, whether explicit or not, includes the beliefs that the U.S. Constitution was divinely inspired and enjoys godly status, that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the U.S., that the nation holds a special status in God's eyes, and that good Americans must hold Christian beliefs. Proponents range from those who believe the U.S. should be declared a Christian nation (approximately 21% of the U.S. population) to those involved in more virulent strains that are openly racist, anti-democratic, or gang like. The symbols and ideology of Christian nationalism were widely evident during the Jan. 6, 2021, attempt to throw out certified U.S. election results.

Church: Multiple meanings, largely dependent on context. Fundamentally "church" is the event of God's presence wherever two or three are gathered (Matthew 18:30). In the Lutheran tradition this event is specifically identified with God's commands and promises in the proclamation of the word and distribution of the sacraments. In its widest sense the term is universal (catholic) describing all baptized believers in their individual capacity as followers of Christ trying to live faithfully in their various vocations. The term is used to designate large Christian bodies or institutions but also local congregations, as in "going to my church." In this study dedicated to the church's role in civic life, it most often carries the institutional meaning.

Civic engagement: Points to various ways in which individuals and institutions engage in public/civic life. Examples include voting, public service, street demonstration, contacting legislators, local service in volunteer agencies, and fervent prayer for government leaders.

Clericalism: The belief, policy, and practice maintaining the power of a religious hierarchy.

Common good: Has various philosophical definitions but is used here to denote what is beneficial for all or most members of a given community. In particular it conveys that seeking the general welfare of all members of the public is the purpose of government and is achieved, often imperfectly, through collective action, citizenship, and other forms of active participation in the realms of politics and public service.

Community of moral deliberation/discernment: A concept established in the first ELCA social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* and considered an element of the ELCA's identity into which our church must grow. The concept envisions the whole Christian community praying for each other, studying Scripture, and wrestling together toward moral understanding and action. This approach to doing ethics is ground-up, rather than top-down. Its roots are found in Reformation writings such as the Smalcald Articles of the Book of Concord that spell out the marks of the church, one of which is "the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters."

Confessions: Has wider meanings in Scripture and historical theology, but in this study it designates the ELCA's authorized teaching standards. (See "Book of Concord.")

Confessing Church: A movement for revival within the German Protestant churches that developed during the 1930s as resistance to the Nazi government's efforts to make the churches in Germany an instrument of brownshirt Christianity, that is, an instrument dedicated to National Socialist influence, policy, and politics.

Discernment: The practice of evaluating multiple factors found in an issue with the intent to make an appropriate response to the matter that is God-pleasing. It generally implies active theological or ethical reflection involving study, prayer, and dialogue. It seeks wisdom from God's Spirit in order to make decisions not according to one's individual desires but, as much as possible, according to God's will. For more read Romans 12:1-2. (See "Community of Moral Deliberation.")

Establishment clause: The first clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It states that government "shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion." This means that government cannot establish a state/national religion or impose any form of worship or devotion upon its citizens. It does not mean that a person's religious commitments cannot or should not enter and influence their public life, whether in the form of political activity or broader civic engagement. (See also "Separation of Church and State" and "Free Exercise of Religion.")

Ethics: The science and art of asking "What ought to be?" or "How then shall we live?" or "What is the good?" Ethics implies extended reflection and dialogue toward defining, negotiating, structuring, and critically engaging what ought to be, or what ought to be done. It is a practice toward determining who we should be, what we should seek, and what we should do as individuals and as a community. It analyzes a current, accepted moral structure or piece of it to determine its rationale or ways it should be altered. The terms "ethics" and "morals" are often used interchangeably, but see "Morality."

Faith: Has many meanings and uses, but the fundamental Lutheran emphasis is a trusting response to and trusting relationship with God. This relationship is expressed through means such as active participation in religious communities and attention to key teachings of the church universal.

Free exercise clause: The second phrase in the First Amendment, regarding government's relation to religious practice under the constitution. Unlike the establishment clause, it focuses on the relationship between faith and public/civic life. The first clause, prohibiting establishment of a state religion, clears the ground for the faithful to determine their own best way of exercising faith in their own public life. (See "Establishment Clause" and "Separation of Church and State.")

Law and Gospel: Expresses the key Lutheran emphasis that God's Word and work in human society occur under different means. "Law" is understood to have two forms: (1) as a directive and corrective for society (first, or civil, use) and (2) judgment on sin (second, or theological, use). The term "Gospel" is the good news of God's mercy, received in faith on account of Jesus Christ.

Luther, Martin (1483-1546): German priest, theologian, author, and professor. He was a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation and is the namesake of Lutheranism.

Mega-identity: Describes an interlocking set of identifications. Identifications include social descriptions such as being urban, rural, ethnic, religious, conservative, liberal. When these identifications cohere in a set that is semi-fixed and loaded with huge emotional stakes, they become a mega-identity that walls off people from others who don't share the same set of characteristics or beliefs.

Morality/morals: Originates from the Greek word "mores," which designated the binding customs of a culture or society related to what is good or right. It designates the existing or already negotiated moral structure. In every society, certain actions, goals, and character traits are considered moral, immoral, or some combination thereof, according to established norms. "Ethics" and "morals" often are used interchangeably, but see "Ethics."

Neighbor justice: Describes meeting neighbors' needs in public life. Though rooted in the biblical directive to "love your neighbor as yourself," it expresses how faith active in love requires seeking justice in relationships and in the structures of society.

Partisanship: Strong and sometimes blind adherence to a specific party, group, faction, set of beliefs, or set of personal characteristics.

Partisan polarization: As used in this study, a partisanship that so completely distinguishes its partisans from another group that the other group's beliefs and views are considered utterly opposite and most often inferior, dangerous to society, and unworthy of talking about together. The polarization is such that there is no value or respect for "those people." In everyday speech it is often expressed in the saying "my way or the highway."

Politics: From the Greek term "polis" for the city or place of the people, this designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about "who gets what, when, where, and how" to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish. It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing government that is intended to seek the common good. (See "Common Good.")

Priesthood of all believers: The view elaborated in the Reformation that all baptized Christians enjoy equal spiritual status in the sight of God, with equal capacity to have faith, pray, give witness, and do what is God-pleasing. See, for instance, 1 Peter 2:9: "You are ... a royal priesthood, a holy nation."

Quietism: As used here, describes a passive, withdrawn attitude or practice toward public or civic affairs. This withdrawal may be intentional policy or simply a practice, but both are characterized by quiet acceptance of the civic status quo and avoidance of political engagement. This approach to public life has a long track record among many Lutherans even though it was not evident in the Reformation period.

Separation of church and state: Usually a shorthand for the establishment clause that forbids state-sponsored religion. The specific meaning of the phrase is contested. For example, many people, including religious people, believe it means that religious convictions and politics should flow in completely separate streams. (See "Quietism.") The ELCA constitution, on the other hand, endorses institutional separation with functional interaction and argues that the church as a civic body should avoid partisanship but engage in civic life because God calls people of faith to join God's activity there.

Sin: Expresses the human proclivity for being in opposition to God. Sin is variously described as disobedience, lack of trust, self-centeredness, pride, or complacency, among other things. Sin occurs in an individual's thoughts and actions but also is expressed in organizations, institutions, and systems. In the last three cases, it is often termed "structural sin."

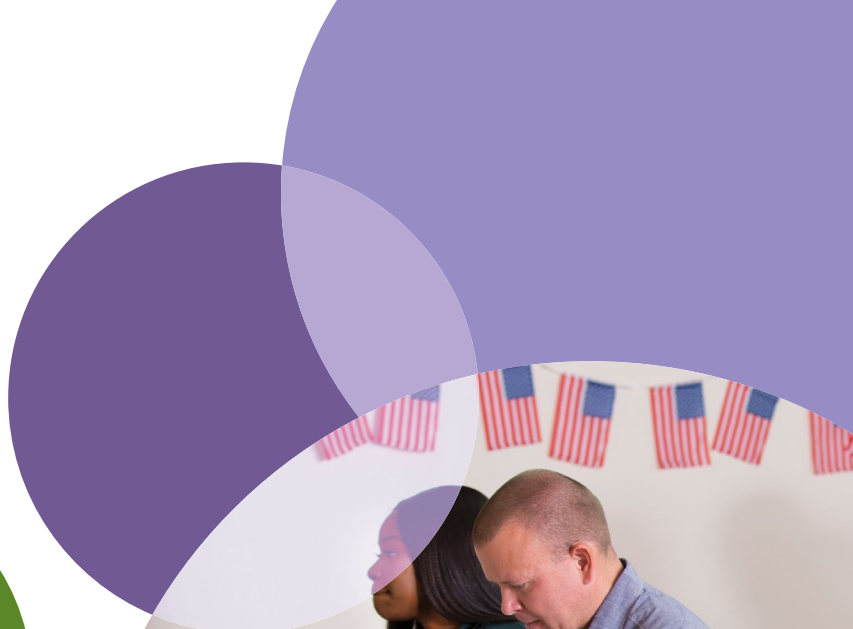
Theology: Can indicate academic or abstract reflection, but use of the term in this study refers to faithful talk about anything related to God. Every person of faith, therefore, engages in theology when expressing thoughts about God, the church, God in relation to civic life, etc.

Three estates: Used to designate the broadest divisions of social hierarchy in Christendom (Christian Europe) from the Middle Ages to early modern Europe. There is some variation in meaning, depending on the time and locale invoked. In Reformation thinking, the three overarching divisions (estates) were identified as the church, the government, and the family (which included all economic functions).

Two kingdoms: A traditional theological term from the Reformation regarding the proper distinction of God's activity in the world: through secular means, such as government, versus God's gracious activity in the church. ELCA teaching describes this as God's two ways or two hands rather than as two kingdoms. God's "right hand" conveys the tangible power of God's love and forgiveness to people of faith, which stirs us to forgive others, to express mutual love and care, and to strive for justice. God's "left hand" works through human roles, structures, and institutions to foster the social well-being of the people and the world God creates. The ELCA teaches that God's two ways of governing are both necessary and interrelated. The institutions of government and church are distinct but have appropriate functional interaction.

Vocation: in this study, refers to a calling from God that comes both as gift and task. The ELCA understands baptismal vocation as fundamental; it is God's saving call lived out in joyful response through service to the neighbor in daily life. This overarching vocation is expressed in multiple callings (or specific vocations) such as being a responsible citizen, parent, student, worker, etc.

Word: Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom God's message to us as both Law and Gospel reveals God's judgment and mercy. The ELCA constitution holds that the Word is expressed in creation and in the history of Israel but is centered in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament are the written Word of God in the sense that they are inspired by God's Spirit speaking through the authors as they record and announce God's revelation centering Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 1



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in America



SESSION 1: HOW IS GOD’S INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP LIVED OUT IN A DEMOCRACY?

Discerning together as people of grace: an introduction to social statements, the study, civic topics, and the gift of unity as God’s people in dialogue, even when there is disagreement.

SUPPLIES

- Participant Guide (one per person)
- Covenant Handout and Affirmation (one per person) – As an alternative, or in addition, the Overall Leader’s Guide provides a poster size version printable on any standard printer.
- Pens
- Electronic device with video cued up: <https://vimeo.com/788799781>
- Participant Response Form (link provided for online response; print copies for participants who prefer paper)
- Hymnals (optional)
- Piano or other accompaniment (optional)
- Video transcript (optional for the hearing-impaired)
- Consider sharing with group or discussing one of the On-the-Ground case studies.

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

Welcome participants to this study. Introduce yourself. Read together the opening paragraphs in the participant handout:

PG We are disciples of Jesus Christ who happen to live in a democracy, although God’s people have lived under every kind of government. Whatever the type, followers of Christ have had to figure out how to serve God, our highest authority, within that society. Being civically engaged is vital for disciples because through government many of the needs of our neighbors are met—or ignored.

For these reasons, in 2019 the Churchwide Assembly—the ELCA’s highest legislative body—authorized development of “an ELCA social statement on government, **civic engagement** and the relationship of church and state” in order to “probe for shared convictions and establish this church’s comprehensive teaching” on this important question. This study invites you into that conversation.

OPENING PRAYER

Invite participants to pray, using this or your own prayer:

Blessed Trinity, you call your people to responsible citizenship for the sake of your world. Help us to be faithful disciples who care as you do about the common good. We give thanks for the aspirations of this society toward democracy and justice for all, even while admitting our fears and acknowledging failures. Be with each of us as together we study these topics relevant to civic life and faith. May our thoughts and words be honest, insightful, and faithful. In all that we say and do, may we strengthen each other as siblings in Christ. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

“How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God’s people to live together in harmony!” (Psalm 133:1 GNT).



HYMN SUGGESTIONS

PG

- "O God of Every Nation" (ELW 713, LBW 416)
- "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (ELW 841, LBW 562)

HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

Arrange participants into groups of two or three. Read, or have read aloud the following paragraph, then invite participants to read the Scripture:

PG

The old adage advises us never to discuss "religion, politics, or sex," but this study invites participants to engage in two of the three! Yes, talking about our differences may open up controversy, which can be scary and difficult. However, controversy is not new in the church. The good news is that we don't all have to agree to be God's people together; our unity and core Christian identity are already given to us by God. Acts 15 illustrates an early church controversy and makes clear that our unity derives from God's grace alone.

Acts 15:1-2, 6-7, 11

¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."
²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ... ⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ...

¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Invite the one-on-one groups to share thoughts on one or two of these questions. Remind them to just share and listen; this is not about convincing someone else but about hearing each other. Then switch roles. Set a timer for two or three minutes, for instance, to alert partners when to switch. Participants may pick which prompts they answer.

- Why does or doesn't it surprise you that there was "no small dissension and debate" (read "sharp controversy") among the first generation of Jesus' followers?
- Do you regard controversies in your congregation differently when you remember that "we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will?"
- Peter's words show how Christian unity is a gift from God in Christ rather than a result of everyone agreeing. How does this affect your view of what unites people in your congregation?
- What controversial issues related to civic life and faith might challenge your group?

PG

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

PLAY VIDEO (16 minutes long)

<https://vimeo.com/788799781>

Make sure all can see and hear the video.

Provide a transcript for participants who are hearing-impaired. Explain that each session of this study will feature a video with a member of the ELCA Task Force on Civic Life and Faith exploring a key idea.

PG Key goals of this video:

- To help you understand the fundamental ELCA commitment that, as we talk together about tough social issues, we form a **community of moral deliberation**.
- To explain how this study will inform the social statement.
- To give you a sneak preview of the other sessions in this study.
- To help you understand why talking about civic life or "**politics**" is very hard today.
- To introduce you to the idea of a conversation covenant.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the video, discuss the following in small groups. Shuffle groups if size allows.

- PG**
1. Why do you think your involvement is important to the social statement process?
 2. Name one key point you recall about the church being a community of moral deliberation.
 3. Identify one experience of partisan polarization in your life.
 4. Spell out one idea about a conversation covenant that you find important.
 5. When talking about polarizing topics, what helps you to feel heard and respected?
 6. What things are most important to your personal identity? How do or don't you relate to the idea of a "mega-identity" that walls people off from others?

- PG**
7. Rev. Willer defines politics as how we conduct human government for the common good. How do you imagine our society would look if there were zero politics and no means of influencing governmental structures?

CREATING A CONVERSATION COVENANT

Read the following or invite volunteers to read it for the group:

PG

A covenant is different from a contract, which governs a transactional exchange of goods, services, funds, etc. Covenants are about establishing a certain kind of relationship, and they are deeply rooted in Scripture (recall God's covenants with Noah and with Abraham in Genesis).

Baptism is a covenant God makes with us, promising that "the one who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). The person being baptized, or their parents and sponsors, also makes promises, as a grateful response to God's love. United by baptism, God's people sometimes make promises to one another about their relationship during any activity.

A covenant for relationship during conversation honors God's call that we talk together honestly. It is a commitment to seek the truth together in a respectful way, guided by Jesus' command to love one another. Such a covenant allows participants to share perspectives, receive new facts, come away with fresh insights, and consider what we might do together as God's people.

Refer to the covenant handout; as an alternative refer to the poster size version found in the Facilitator's Overview, which is printable on any standard printer. Invite participants to read or solicit a volunteer to read the covenant aloud, then explain:

This template is based on one that members of the ELCA Task Force created and then promised to keep during their conversations. They have found these promises enable the sharing of ideas from different perspectives, and in tense moments it reminds them how difficult conversations can be done as God's work.

Provide time for people to review silently the covenant to govern the study sessions. Ask if there are any questions or comments, then invite everyone to affirm the covenant. Text for a ritual of affirmation is on the handout and is meant to be used as the concluding devotion.

SEND (5 minutes)

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

As we have seen, we are engaged in a challenging but important study. Because God is at work in society, we need to figure out how our civic life expresses our discipleship. God blesses the challenge before us: to discern how to love our neighbor (including those who disagree with us) as an expression of our love of God. On your Participant Guide you see the titles of the other topics in this study.

PG The remaining sessions will help us think about these important questions:

Session 2: How Do Christians Talk Together About Controversial Civic Issues?

Session 3: What Are Lutheran Views on Civic Life?

Session 4: What Are Our Objectives in American Democracy?

Session 5: What's Faith-Based Living Got to Do With Civic Life?

Session 6: How Do We Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord in Civic Life?

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

Pass out copies of Participant Response Form and point out link for online response in Participant Guide.

In this session, as with the next five, you will have a chance to share your thoughts with the task force as part of the social statement development process. The feedback form is in your hands now or available online. Please complete one version. Members of the task force are committed to read and review all responses, looking for patterns in the suggestions, comments, and ideas.

Complete the response form either online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZMYB6VZ> or on paper. Scan and email your paper form to civicsandfaith@elca.org or send it by U.S. mail to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Attn: Civics and Faith, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Your feedback will be read by the task force as part of the social statement development process.

PG

Conclude with these or similar words, then remind participants of the next session:

Thank you for your presence and participation today, for thinking and talking together, and for your commitment to holy conversation.

CLOSING PRAYER

Close in prayer using your own words or the following:

Gracious God, you have created us for good as the body of Christ. Grant us courage to live and speak together as a reflection of your love. Fill us with hope for the future. Guide us to go in peace and to love and serve you in our community. Amen.

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

WEBSITES

Visit the website for the "civic life and faith" social statement at ELCA.org/civicsandfaith.

PG

Read the ELCA social message "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy" and other social teaching statements at ELCA.org/socialstatements.

BOOKS

Klein, Ezra, *Why We're Polarized* (Avid Reader Press, 2020).

PG

Lowi, Theodore J., Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth A. Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere, *American Government: Power and Purpose* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2021).

GLOSSARY (Note: some words are used only in the video.)

Civic engagement: This phrase points to various ways individuals and institutions engage public/civic life. Examples include fervent prayer for governmental leaders, voting, local service in volunteer agencies, street demonstrations, contacting legislators, public service, and many others.

Common good: While this term has various descriptions in philosophy, the use here is the general idea of what is beneficial for all or most members of a given community. In particular it is assumed that seeking the general welfare of all members of the public is the purpose of government and is achieved, if often flawed, in collective action, citizenship, and other forms of active participation in the realms of politics and public service.

Community of Moral Deliberation/Discernment: A concept established in the first ELCA social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. Expresses how the whole Christian community shares in the responsibility of praying for each other, studying scripture, and wrestling toward moral understanding and action. It is a ground-up way of doing ethics in the ELCA rather than top-down. The first social statement specifies this practice as an element of the ELCA's identity into which our church must grow. Its roots are found in Reformation writings—such as the Smalcald Articles—that spell out the marks of the church. This mark is “the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.”

Discernment: The practice of evaluating multiple factors found in an issue with the intent to make an appropriate response to the matter that is God-pleasing. It generally implies theological or ethical reflection that involves study, prayer, and dialogue. It is a practice that seeks wisdom from God's Spirit in order to make a decision not according to our own desires but as much as possible according to God's will. See Romans 12:1-2.

Mega-identity: An interlocking set of identifications, such as being urban, rural, ethnic, religious, conservative, liberal, that is loaded with huge emotional stakes and has become semi-fixed as an identity to the point that it walls off people from others who don't share the same set of characteristics or beliefs.

Partisanship: The strong and sometimes blind adherence to a specific party, group, faction, set of beliefs, or personal characteristics.

Partisan Polarization: A partisanship that so completely distinguishes itself from another group that the other's beliefs and views are considered utterly opposite and most often inferior, dangerous to society, and unworthy of talking about together. The polarization is such that the value of and respect for “those” people is absent. A common descriptor: it's my way or the highway.

Politics: A term from the Greek (the polis) that designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in the community. It is the activity through which people make decisions about “who gets what, when, where, and how.” It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing government that is intended to seek the common good.

Theology: While this term can indicate academic or abstract reflection, the use in this study refers to faith's expression when talking about anything related to God. Every person of faith, therefore, does theology when expressing thoughts about God, the church, etc.

SESSION 1 VIDEO SCRIPT

God's peace to you and welcome to the first session of a study curriculum being used across the ELCA. I am Pastor Roger Willer, director of the process that is bringing you this 6-session exploration about civic life and faith. Now you may think it's great or you may think it is a big mistake to be talking about the relationship of Christian faith to civic life, about "politics and the church." The thing is, from the earliest days, followers of Jesus have had to work out faith's relationship to power and government. We have many examples in scripture.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus redirects the trick question by simply acknowledging there is a foreign, conquering government. In Romans, Paul affirms the Roman government as it is supposed to be "God's servant for your good," but in Revelations, that same government is pronounced a beast. Three different takes on discipleship and government!

On one point, however, the scriptures are consistent—God is active in human society seeking good for all, and calls his people to join in. Micah 6:8 puts it clearly: For "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Seeking justice and loving kindness in a wholistic way includes some form of being active in civic life. Engaged citizenship is not the only way to love the neighbor, but scripture suggests it is an essential part of doing so. In a democracy, it is only through political activity that many of our neighbors' needs get met, or don't!

The ELCA Constitution recognizes this. It directs our church to "Work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction." Institutional separation with functional interaction is part of serving God's mission in this society.

For these reasons, the 2019 Churchwide Assembly authorized a brief social message focused on government (already done) and a social statement addressing all aspects of civic life and faith, as a means to "probe for shared convictions and establish this church's comprehensive teaching...." Since the ELCA develops its social teaching through a democratic, participatory process, this study invites you to learn and to contribute to that process.

In this video, I want to:

1. Help you understand the fundamental ELCA commitment that we talk together about tough social issues as a Community of Moral Deliberation.
2. Explain how this study is part of the process leading to a social statement.
3. Give you a sneak preview of the other sessions in this study.
4. Be clear about why talking about civic life or "politics" is extremely hard today; and,
5. Introduce you to the idea of a Conversation Covenant.

In our society, one's "personal identity" is huge, huge. And whatever you think about the "finding yourself" billion-dollar industry, every human is concerned about self-identity and one's personal political views naturally are part of identity. But while political and other identifications matter, the Christian faith teaches that our fundamental identity is rooted in baptism. "By water and the Word, God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ. We are united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ, anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joined in God's mission for the life of the world."

Each person, of course, has political, racial, gender, sexual, ethnic, urban/rural and a host of other identifications. They matter! Christ's church celebrates identification diversity as a gift from our Creator. BUT the identity that gives us unity as Christians is God's free gift of mercy that makes us God's forgiven people

and enables us to talk together as Christian siblings. Our unity is not in our ability to find agreement. Our church's teaching highlights these key ideas in calling this church to be a Community of Moral Deliberation.

In our church, what we teach about social issues is established in official documents created through a democratic, participatory process, though being a community of moral deliberation. The process involves lots of study and lots of people. Social statements are made official by a churchwide assembly—held every 3rd year—as the primary decision-making body of our church. Every assembly is comprised of voting members from synods across the U.S. The social teaching they adopt sets “forth this church’s theological and ethical understanding and establish[es] policy regarding individual and corporate Christian responsibility in the world.”¹

The current work to create a statement on civic life and faith was initiated by the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Here you see the individuals on social statement task force, members selected by the ELCA Church Council. It is composed of rostered leaders and lay people, with a wide range of relevant professional and firsthand experiences. This study curriculum is provided by the task force as one step in the five-year process of creating a social statement.

The study provides for your participation and input directly to the task force. A response form is included for every session, allowing you to comment.

I won't go into great detail about each of the additional sessions now projected on your screen. But you can see the study covers a lot of territory: practices for addressing controversy; Lutheran themes for civic life; 1st amendment issues, the aspirations, successes, and failures of our constitution; the relationship of faith-based living and civic life; and connections between congregational life and serving the neighbor in society. Whew—that's a lot packed into six sessions. But again, you are asked to share your feedback to all of it so the task force can hear you.

As we explore civic life and faith, one of the first things to face is what we mean by “politics,” and here we return to the idea of identity. Humans instinctually live with a sense of “us versus them.” Think about the sports world and the sustained rivalries in which fans identify with “their” team against all others—it's a matter of group identity and belonging. I live in the Chicago area, so it's the Bears versus the Packers or the Cubs versus the St. Louis Cardinals.

Likewise, our activity in civic life is deeply influenced by group identity. Today the word “politics” is often used interchangeably with “partisanship;” it is used to mean cutthroat, nasty, despicable behavior.

But in its original, nonjudgmental meaning, politics merely describes a necessary fact of human life. There are politics as early as Cain & Abel! The term politics, originating in Greek, describes the necessary activity of deciding how to govern life in the community (the polis) for the common good. It is about figuring out “who gets what, when, where, and how” so that all may flourish. Politics involves both competition and cooperation. It is the unavoidable art of guiding or influencing government and intended to help lead to good for all. **This** is how we will use the word throughout this study.

But we must acknowledge there is a huge social problem today: partisan polarization. There have always been those who identify as liberal, moderate, or conservative. But now these political commitments often are being linked as never before with other identities such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, urban or rural, or cable news preferences. Today, these are what we can call “mega-identities.” Loyalty to an interlocking mega-identity has become so oversized that it walls people off from others who don't share the same set of beliefs. These mega-identities have taken on huge emotional stakes. All I have to do is say gun rights, immigration, Fox News, or MSNBC and it sparks “us versus them.”

Here's one striking illustration.ⁱⁱ

In 2010, 49% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats strongly objected to the idea of a child marrying someone from the "other" party. In 1960, it was only 5%! Fear about who marries who is now linked to "my safety, my identity," and the threat of "them."

It is no wonder that talking together even as Christian siblings about "civil life and faith" is scary. In your congregation and mine, many people want to avoid it altogether. Maybe that includes you or those close to you. So we must acknowledge that partisan polarization is real, it affects you and me, and it's here to stay for the foreseeable future.

So what do we do as God's people knowing that **God** calls us to talk together, even when it's challenging? How do we do it?

Most fundamentally, we cling to the Christian's core identity. More than anything else, our identity is as God's forgiven people. It is God's gift of unity that empowers us to talk together respectfully. This makes possible charitable listening as a witness to God's love, a model for how people of various perspectives, from even polarized views, can seek to understand why someone thinks differently. It is also a witness to God's love when someone points out claims that, intentionally or not, are demeaning to other people or groups. Charitable listening does not accept derogatory claims against other people, but it does listen to why others hold other views. Respectful and charitable listening helps all of us see God's world—and each other—through God's eyes.

Helpfully, there are practices for respectful dialogue and charitable listening. To that end, this session and the next one focus on practices for talking together. For example, at the end of today's session you will be introduced to and asked to commit to a conversation covenant. There are ways to have holy conversations. But first, it's your turn to discuss ideas that have caught your attention in this presentation.

On behalf of the ELCA task force, welcome to the study and thanks for your participation!

i From P&P (2018), p14.

ii Iyengar, S., Sood, G., Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76(3), 405–431.]

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

Our commitment is to lift up the body of Christ through words and actions that:

- **Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as I expect them to do unto me.**
- **Model respectful and careful listening, without interrupting.**
- **Strive to understand each other's insights and experiences.**
- **Speak honestly, as an individual rather than for a group.**
- **Do not presume that others speak on behalf of a group.**
- **Utilize any technology constructively and not as a distraction.**
- **Step up to share thoughts, then step back to allow others to share theirs.**
- **Be mindful of viewpoints not represented.**
- **Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in the group and our civic life.**

COVENANT RITUAL OF COMMITMENT

(Leader reads standard font; **participants read bold font.**)

Our faith teaches that there is one body of Christ and one Spirit,

One hope in our calling,

One Lord, one faith, one baptism.

One God and Parent of all, who is above all, through all, and in all,

And through whom, even as we are one in Jesus Christ,

We acknowledge our varied identities and views.

Holy Spirit, as we bind ourselves to this covenant, help us to listen.

We commit to hear one another,

To make room for every voice and every heart's concern.

We commit ourselves to seek to understand and respect one another.

Holy Spirit, as we engage in conversation, help us to express ourselves honestly.

We commit to bring our own voices as we are able,

With our words, with our body language, and with our silence,

Whether with conviction or confusion, but always with respect.

Holy Spirit, as we explore civic life and faith, help us to remember we are one in Christ.

We commit to ask honest questions, to assume the best of one another,

to follow the Golden Rule, to treat one another as we would want others to treat us.

We commit ourselves to value community with one another,

Even when there is tension and discomfort.

We ask for your grace, dear God, to keep this covenant we have made,

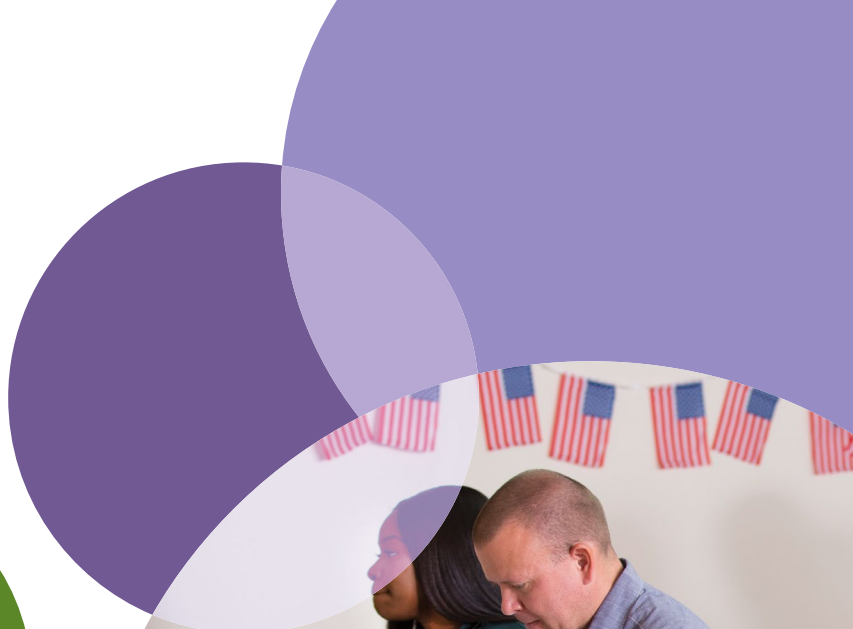
And for forgiveness when we stray from it.

We pray for hearts and minds that are open to one another

And open to your presence in our midst.

In the name of Jesus we ask this.

Amen.



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 2



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



SESSION 2: HOW DO CHRISTIANS ADDRESS CONTROVERSIAL CIVIC ISSUES?

Discerning what we believe individually and as a Church.

SUPPLIES

- Participant Guide (one per person)
- Covenant Handout (one per person)
- Pens
- Electronic device with video cued up: <https://vimeo.com/788800552>
- Participant Response Form (link provided for online response; print copies for participants who prefer paper)
- Hymnals (optional)
- Piano or other accompaniment (optional)
- Video transcript (optional, for the hearing-impaired)
- Consider sharing with group or discussing one of the On-the-Ground case studies.

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

Welcome participants to the second session of the study. Introduce yourself to new attendees. Then read together the welcome paragraphs in the Participant Guide:

PG Dealing with controversial issues is a significant challenge for all of us. Whether on social media or in face-to-face conversations, rhetoric can grow heated, straining friendships and family ties. Even when we would rather avoid controversy and stay at peace, we know the stakes of some issues are too high to ignore.

In this session, we will explore elements for constructive engagement when addressing controversial issues as a **community of moral discernment**. Looking at the history of the church and examining contemporary examples, we can learn from the successes and mistakes of the church's more-than-2,000-year history of engagement with critical issues. From that history, six elements emerge as particularly helpful: (1) understanding the issue as objectively and unbiasedly as possible, (2) listening to different voices close to the issue, (3) praying for clarity of mind

to discern the Spirit's wisdom, (4) discerning together how the Holy Scriptures illuminate the issue, (5) acting with the boldness of love and the humility of faith, and (6) confessing how even our best efforts fall short as we acknowledge that everything ultimately depends on God's grace.

CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

Read the following:

Those six elements of constructive engagement can empower Christians like us to see controversy as an opportunity to practice our faith principles. It is an opportunity to bracket our biases, hear each other, and discern together. Let's take a moment to review the group covenant together. The point of these study groups is not to make members of one opinion but to model respect and Christian love, as we are one in Christ, with many voices and views. How do you think we as a [congregation/ministry group] can facilitate engagement with critical issues in ways that avoid the toxicity and divisiveness that permeates so much of our world?

Review the covenant. Check in about how well the covenant was kept in the first session and anything that needs to be reinforced.

Invite participant volunteers to read the opening prayer and Scripture. Lead the opening litany, then sing all or part of a hymn if appropriate for your gathering space.

OPENING PRAYER

PG

A prayer from Martin Luther:
Dear heavenly Father, say something. I will gladly remain silent and be a child and student. If I ruled my life with my own knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, I would have been sunk long ago. Therefore, dear God, you guide and direct it. I will gladly forsake my point of view and understanding and let you rule alone through your Word. Amen.¹

SCRIPTURE

PG

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen

the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:1-18).

PG

LITANY (Adapted from *This Far by Faith*)

Leader: Have mercy on us, O God, according to your loving kindness. In your great mercy, wash away our iniquity and cleanse us from our sin.

All: Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew a right spirit within us.

Leader: Uphold us by your Spirit so that we may live and serve you in newness of life.

All: Restore to us the joy of your salvation, and sustain us with your Spirit. Amen.

PG

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- “O God of Light” (ELW 507)
- “Ubi caritas et amor/Where True Charity and Love Abide” (ELW 642, WOV 665)
- “Bind Us Together” (TFF 217, WOV 748)
- “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (ELW 656, WOV 370)
- “God Is Love” (ACS 1041)

PG

¹ Thomas McPherson, *Prayers of the Reformers* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2017), 51.

HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

Invite participants to pair up with someone they don't know well or know to be often of differing opinions regarding current events. Invite one to speak while the other listens, taking turns back and forth.

- PG • Recall, as you are willing, how disagreements and differing beliefs were dealt with when you were young:
 - (1) Among the adults in the household where you were raised.
 - (2) By your childhood friends, neighbor kids, and classmates.
 - (3) Among your extended relatives.
 - (4) In your faith community, if applicable.
- How do you think these early experiences shaped you and your ways of addressing conflict and differences as an adult?

PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

Ask participants to share observations from the time between group sessions.

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Refer participants to the Scripture printed in the opening devotion. Offer a moment for everyone to review it silently. Then read and discuss the following:

- PG • Consider what happened to Peter according to Acts 11. The animals that Peter was told to “kill and eat” were forbidden foods. That prohibition was not a human invention; according to Leviticus 11, those dietary restrictions had been given by God through Moses. Likewise, the rite of circumcision had been mandated directly by God to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17. In fact, God had decreed that “any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of

his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14).

PG

Therefore, what Peter was asked to do in this vision was very significant: to eat what God had said was unclean to eat and to “make no distinction between them [the uncircumcised] and us [the circumcised]” (Acts 11:12). This was extremely controversial! Yet it was clear to Peter that this change was from God. Therefore, he convinced other leaders of the early church to embrace that change, namely that “what God has made clean, you must not call profane” (11:9) and that “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11:18).

- Peter and the other leaders of the early church had to discern whether this vision and its instructions were truly from God. What criteria can we use to determine whether new insights and interpretations accord with God's will?
- Peter asked, “Who was I that I could hinder God?” How might our current level of polarization and vitriol hinder God's mission in the world?
- What rules seem unchangeable in your church, community, profession, country, and so on? What purpose do they serve?
- Are there any sacred rules or interpretations that God might be calling us to rethink or even change?
- Do you think God's mind can be changed? Can the meaning of sacred texts change over time?
- God's instructions to Peter changed Christianity forever. How do we balance faithfulness to tradition with openness to new possibilities inspired by the Holy Spirit?

PLAY VIDEO (19 minutes long)
<https://vimeo.com/788800552>

Make sure all can see and hear the video. Provide a transcript for participants who are hearing-impaired.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the video, discuss the following in small groups.

PG

1. Remember a time when a group you were part of had to engage in a controversial issue. What did you learn from the process? What was helpful and what wasn't? Did you use any of the elements listed in the video? How did you use them?
2. Reflect on an experience when you saw the church engage in a controversial issue in a way that you thought was helpful. What was the issue? How did the church address it? What was helpful about the approach?
3. Consider how you think the Holy Scriptures can shed light on controversial issues. What teachings or passages from Scripture have you found to be particularly helpful when dealing with controversial issues?
4. What resources do you rely upon for expert analysis and unbiased understanding of controversial issues?
5. What are ways to listen to the different voices that are close to an issue? How can we hear and seek to understand perspectives that are radically different from our own?
6. How do people of faith address opinions that encourage hatred, violence, or prejudice?

SEND (5-10 minutes)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Invite original participant pairings to group together again. Discuss the following:

1. Reflect on the strengths, weaknesses, and gifts of your specific church community. Are there any current civic issues that your community of faith is particularly well-placed to engage in a helpful way? Which ones? How can you begin to address them?

GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

As time allows, invite participants to share what new insights they have gained from today's session about practicing faith in the world.

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

Engaging civically and addressing controversial political issues is difficult, but it is an expression of our Christian love in the public sphere. As fallible, finite, and sinful creatures, we know that we will never arrive at a place where we hold all truths. Controversial issues will not be solved because we have convinced everyone else to do what we think is right. Only God knows what is right. Nonetheless, we trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we give our due diligence to understand, listen, pray, discern, act, and confess, even as we understand we are not saved by our works but by the grace of God, in whom our faith rests. Our discipleship asks us to join others with different views, creeds, and backgrounds in heeding the call of the Spirit to testify humbly and boldly to what we have found in our careful process of discernment.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

Pass out copies of the Participant Response Form and point out the link for online response in the Participant Guide.

In this second session, you again have a chance to share your thoughts with the task force as part of the social statement development process. Please complete either a paper or online version of the Participant Response Form, knowing that your responses will be read by members of the task force.

Complete the response form either online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/95S8LQK> or on paper. Scan and email your paper form to civicsandfaith@elca.org or send it by U.S. mail to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Attn: Civics and Faith, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Your feedback will be read by the task force as part of the social statement development process.

PG

CLOSING PRAYER

Close in prayer, using your own words or the following:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. ("Evening Prayer," *ELW*, p. 317)

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

PROMPTS FOR ACTION OUTSIDE THE STUDY GROUP

PG

- As a group, compile and curate a list of news outlets that you find particularly trustworthy. Make sure you include sources from different ideological viewpoints (e.g., conservative, liberal, libertarian, progressive, etc.). Divide them into two categories: those that are good about describing the facts without bias and those that offer reasonable analysis from an ideological standpoint.
- Organize events where you invite experts on controversial issues important to your community to participate in dialogue panels. Plan them as an opportunity to model respectful listening as you hear directly from people on different sides of an issue, and set them up not as a debate or with goals to convince others but to help people understand different perspectives.
- Establish a regular prayer group where people from different ideological camps come together to pray for the well-being of the community without directly engaging in debates on issues.

WEBSITES

Book of Faith Initiative 4-Fold Method of Reading Scripture: <https://tinyurl.com/24czs7wh>

The Kettering Foundation: Dedicated to identifying and practicing what it takes to make democracy work as it should through responsible citizenship, robust democratic practices, and working together to address common problems. www.kettering.org/

Braver Angels: A national movement to bridge the partisan divide, bringing conservatives and progressives together on equal terms to understand their differences, find common ground where it exists, and help the country we all love find a better way. braverangels.org/

Baylor Public Deliberation Initiative: A set of helpful guiding principles for public deliberation on difficult issues, offered by Baylor University. www.baylor.edu/pdi/index.php?id=966174

BOOKS

Birch, Bruce C. and others, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

Schade, Leah D., *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019).

GLOSSARY (Note: Some words are used only in the video.)

Civic engagement: Points to various ways in which individuals and institutions engage in public/civic life. Examples include voting, public service, street demonstration, contacting legislators, local service in volunteer agencies, and fervent prayer for government leaders.

Community of Moral Deliberation/Discernment: A concept established in the first ELCA social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* and considered an element of the ELCA's identity into which our church must grow. The concept envisions the whole Christian community praying for each other, studying Scripture, and wrestling together toward moral understanding and action. This approach to doing ethics is ground-up, rather than top-down. Its roots are found in Reformation writings such as the Smalcald Articles of the Book of Concord that spell out the marks of the church, one of which is "the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters."

Politics: From the Greek term "polis" for the city or place of the people, this designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about "who gets what, when, where, and how" to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish. It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing government that is intended to seek the common good.

SESSION 2 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Greeting in Christ. My name is Carmelo Santos. I serve in the Office of the Presiding Bishop as director for Theological Diversity and Engagement and am the associate director for the Civic Life and Faith Task Force. The focus of this second study session asks how Christians in the Lutheran tradition address controversial issues in healthy and constructive ways.

Before getting into the how, let's remind ourselves of the why. That is, why should Christians and churches give attention to civics or politics? After all, for many, church is meant to be a place of peace, a refuge where people can take a break from the bickering and toxicity that permeates so much of society, focusing instead on God and spiritual matters. There is also the idea that religion and political matters should never be related to one another, because any connection is a violation of the principle of the separation of church and state.

We must be careful about how we relate religion and political questions, but as we discussed in the first session of this study, there are good reasons for the church to thoughtfully address public issues. In the last session, Pastor Willer explained that politics is a basic fact of human life, "the ordering, the governing of life in community." In the Bible, the word of God addresses the political when it calls upon the community of faith to seek justice and to look after the well-being of the most vulnerable members of society—the poor, widows, orphans, foreigners, and outcasts. Politics is simply the means by which society addresses those issues collectively.

In worship we are gathered as a church, forgiven, fed, and sent into the world to do God's work, including the work of civic engagement and politics. It is "God's work, our hands."

Of course, we do God's work in our individual vocations as farmers, ranchers, scientists, teachers, students, janitors, lawyers, day laborers, politicians, as parents, caregivers, as neighbors and friends, etc. But we also engage in God's work when we take the time to study important issues that affect our communities, our nation, and our planet. Lutherans teach that government is a gift from God, but it is our shared responsibility as citizens to demand that this gift is used for its intended purpose, namely for the common good. Christ's command to love our neighbors is often fulfilled through politics and citizenship, especially in a democracy.

So, how then should we as Lutheran Christians engage controversial issues in civics and politics? There are two things to keep in mind.

First, consider that if issues are controversial, it is because they are important; otherwise people would say, "Who cares?" Faithful practices, when used properly, can provide helpful insights about how to navigate these difficult situations. After all, faith is not just about what we do in church but about the totality of life as illuminated by the living word of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, if issues are controversial, it is because they are not easy to figure out. That is hard to remember when we have strong convictions and feelings in favor (or against) one side of an issue. If both sides are passionate about an issue, then it is worth asking ourselves why. The answer cannot be simply because the other side is stupid or evil. That simplification can be hard to avoid in practice, but when we do, the results are powerful—as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. showed when he sought to love one's enemies in the context of the civil rights movement in the U.S.

With that in mind, let us explore practices that help people engage constructively when addressing controversial issues. The practices can be summarized by the words understand, listen, pray, discern, act, and confess. These are not sequential steps but elements in the church's process of spirit-led and Scripture-rooted communal moral deliberation.

First, we must try to understand the issue. Let's face it, sometimes we think we understand the problem when we only have an opinion about it without knowing the facts. Here are some helpful questions:

- What are the basic facts and circumstances? (At this point, avoid delving into motivations or intent; just describe actions, behaviors, and consequences.)
- How did we get here? (What is the history of the issue?)
- Who are the experts on this issue? What are they saying? On what basis?
- What do we know about the quality of our sources? What are other sources saying?
- What are different possible interpretations of the facts?

Research in the neuroscience of emotions highlights the important roles that emotions play in guiding our reasoning and even in the way we perceive things. Emotions are important for wise decision making, but we should be mindful of the ways our perceptions are shaped by how we feel about our past experiences and expectations about the future. It's useful to postpone our initial judgment in a spirit of curiosity.

Second, we must listen carefully to the voices of those closest to the issue and of those most directly affected by it. This easily can be overlooked. Here are some questions to ask:

- Who are those with firsthand experiences or most affected?
- Who are the acknowledged experts? (Who are the specialists who have done the careful, painstaking work of investigating the issue and analyzing it as objectively as possible without the noise of partisan politics or the media's penchant for sensationalist frenzy?)
- Who are the voices being ignored, excluded, or ridiculed? What do they say?
- How are you and your community directly affected by the issue? How might that be the lens through which you view the issue and how you and your community listen to the differing voices?

In prayer, we lift up to God our troubling questions, concerns, joys, sorrows and perplexity. In turn, God speaks wisdom and provides us with new insights, vistas, perspectives, and possibilities. Prayer is saying, as Jesus taught us, "thy will be done." The point of prayer is not to bring God to our side of a controversy but to humbly invite God's wisdom to guide us. It opens a space where our spirit can listen to God's Spirit. Prayer is individual and communal.

The next element for communal moral deliberation is discernment through the study of the Holy Scriptures. God's voice, the living voice of the gospel, addresses us when we prayerfully approach the difficult task of studying the scriptures in their context while asking how they might be relevant to ours. As Psalm 119 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (105) The light doesn't dictate where exactly to go; the light allows us to see the terrain in front of us more clearly so that we can make a responsible decision on how to proceed.

Like prayer, interpreting the Scriptures involves the community. It benefits from the accumulated wisdom of the church, including things like social statements and contributions from the global church. It is not uncommon for people who are equally faithful and sincere to arrive at different conclusions from their scriptural discernment. Rather than suppressing such differences, we can learn from each other. For example, there are four Gospels in the New Testament rather than just one; they don't agree in every detail even while all four point to Christ.

The church is called to action, to be a transforming yeast. We must realize that sometimes members of the same congregation will come to different conclusions about how they are called to act. And this is okay; we must respect each other's sincere processes.

This is especially important for clergy to observe. Preachers, in particular, have a captive audience from the pulpit. What they say often carries a lot of weight for many people. Therefore, care must be taken to not use the sermon as a “bully pulpit” to push for a particular side of an issue. That does not mean that preachers should say nothing; in some instances, to remain silent is to encourage evil and betray the concrete demands of love-of-neighbor. It simply means to stay close to the Word and use the sermon as intended: to proclaim good news and shed light on issues facing the community and the world. There are other forums where pastors and other church leaders can share how they see an issue and where their own discernment has led them. In those contexts, people can push back, ask questions, and share their own responses. Church leaders bear responsibility for guiding the church in its discernment and moral deliberation processes thoughtfully.

Nothing that we do is free from the corrupting power of sin. Even the greatest acts of sacrificial love and kindness carry with them the marks of sin’s subtle influence. We confess that we are sinners and saints at the same time, all the time! If there is anything holy in us, it is from Christ, that we claim only by faith. We must be alert to the unintended consequences of our acts and to the ways we contribute to oppression and error. This is true of all people, even if we ourselves belong to an oppressed group or, especially, when we think we are fighting evil. All action must begin and end with confession because of the germ of sin in all of us.

In summary, we seek understanding, we pray, we discern, and we act boldly with faith, love, and hope. We confess and ask God’s forgiveness for the ways in which we inadvertently participate in the same injustices we are trying to remedy. Everything depends on grace. Thanks be to God.

Remembering these means, we can now be aided by examples of how the church has engaged controversial issues throughout history.

The church has been dealing with controversial civic and political issues from its origins. As one example, the Reformation movement from which the Lutheran branch of Christianity emerged was intimately involved in the political issues of 16th-century Europe.

The reformers pushed for schools to be open for boys *and girls* regardless of their social status or economic means. They crafted legislation to develop community chests to tend to the needs of the poor, they lobbied the nobility for reforms on behalf of the peasants (even when it didn’t end well), They fought for religious freedom and greater political autonomy across Europe. There was both progress and failure in these efforts. Often the reformers allowed their great passion for defending the truth to outweigh their duty to do so with love of enemies. We must learn from their mistakes as well as from their successes.

The Lutheran reformation is not just a European affair; it is a global movement. There are many inspiring examples from around the global Lutheran church modeling how controversial issues in civics and politics are being addressed effectively from the perspective of faith and love-of-neighbor. There is much that we can learn from each other.

For example, Lutheran Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee, during her country’s civil war, “organized the grassroots movement *Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace*, which held meetings at which Christian and Muslim women jointly presented a non-violent message of peace.”² They called out the men who were driving the violence and notified them that they were going to be fasting for peace; their fast included abstaining from sexual intimacy. Soon there was peace!

On the other side of the Atlantic and south of the U.S. border during the terrible civil wars and dictatorships in Central and South America, Bishop Medardo Gomes of the Lutheran Church in El Salvador famously coined a “Theology of Life” to counter the “Squadrons of Death” and the culture of violence that were wreaking havoc on the people. Once, a group of soldiers went to the Lutheran cathedral in El Salvador to arrest the bishop for

² Leymah Gbowee: Facts,” Nobel Prize, www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2011/gbowee/facts/.

his denunciations against the violence of the state. Since he was not there, they took with them a cross from the sanctuary and put it in prison. Ever since then, that cross is known as “la cruz subversiva”—the subversive cross.

From within the ELCA we can also gather many inspiring examples of how Lutherans are not afraid to engage in controversial issues in civics and politics as a way of practicing faith active in love. There is, for example, the fierce work by Native American Lutheran leaders, such as the late Rev. Marlene Whiterabbit Helgemo, to repudiate the doctrine of discovery, the legal basis used to expropriate lands from Native Americans.

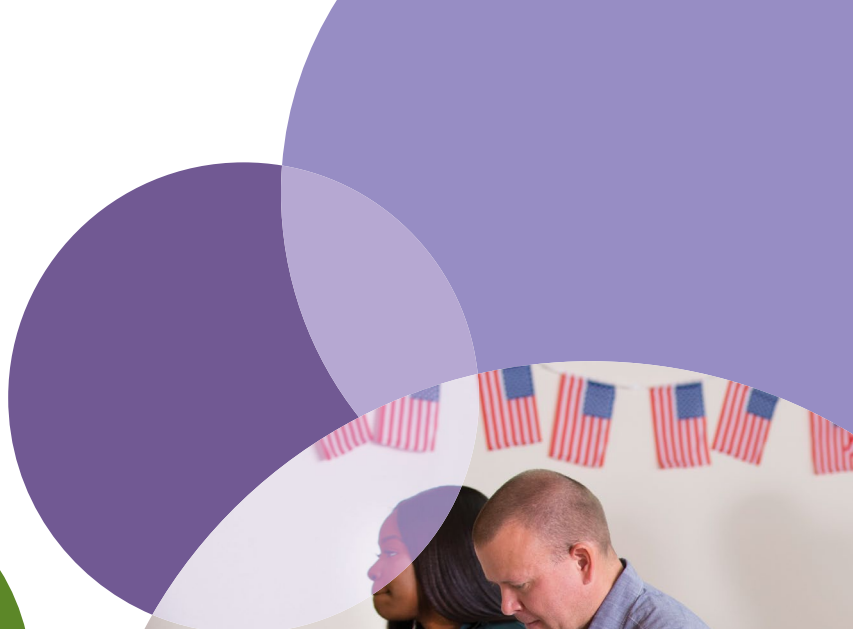
There are those working for the humane treatment of migrants and refugees, through agencies like Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, the ELCA’s *AMMPARO* (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities) as well as the network of Lutheran Social Service agencies. Others advocate for the rights of farmers and for solutions for ranchers affected by severe drought. Others, like Lutherans Restoring Creation, find creative ways to address the consequences and causes of climate change. There are so many more examples, often being done by anonymous, everyday heroes like you and your congregation, that embody the healing love of Christ in the world in small but powerful ways.

We don’t all agree on the issues and we don’t all agree on the best ways to address them; that’s why they are controversial. But we agree that we are called to love our neighbors as testimony of that love with which we ourselves have been loved and transformed. We commit to discerning together as a community of moral deliberation, seeking to understand what it means for each one of us in our particular settings to heed Jesus’ call to love our neighbor, including in the public sphere.

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

Our commitment is to lift up the body of Christ through words and actions that:

- **Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as I expect them to do unto me.**
- **Model respectful and careful listening, without interrupting.**
- **Strive to understand each other's insights and experiences.**
- **Speak honestly, as an individual rather than for a group.**
- **Do not presume that others speak on behalf of a group.**
- **Utilize any technology constructively and not as a distraction.**
- **Step up to share thoughts, then step back to allow others to share theirs.**
- **Be mindful of viewpoints not represented.**
- **Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in the group and our civic life.**



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 3



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



SESSION 3: WHAT ARE LUTHERAN VIEWS ON CIVIC LIFE?

Discerning common Lutheran theological themes regarding civic life.

SUPPLIES

- Participant Guide (one per person)
- Covenant Handout (one per person)
- Pens
- Electronic device with video cued up: <https://vimeo.com/788802177>
- Participant Response Form (link provided for online response; print copies for participants who prefer paper)
- Hymnals (optional)
- Piano or other accompaniment (optional)
- Video transcript (optional, for the hearing-impaired)
- Consider sharing with group or discussing one of the On-the-Ground case studies.

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

Welcome participants to the third session of the study. If there are any new attendees, introduce yourself. Then read together the welcome paragraphs in the Participant Guide:

PG From our church's beginnings in 16th century German lands, the reformers who inspired and shaped Lutheranism sought to be both active followers of Christ and engaged members of social and political communities. Some consider our spiritual and worldly lives to be radical opposites. Others imagine a rigid hierarchy where religious concerns are more important than worldly needs. The Lutheran tradition has resisted these extremes, offering a vision that God works through human hands and commits to the flourishing of our shared lives.

The Lutheran reformers arrived at this vision by spending time with the stories of God and God's people in the Bible. We see in Scripture a God who wants to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

While sharing much in common with the larger Christian tradition, the reformers also crafted unique theological vocabulary to describe and understand God's work in and through the world. In the household and the sanctuary, the family room and the courtroom, Lutherans believe that God is living and moving. As Luther modeled in the catechism, we continually ask, "What does this mean?"

CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

Read the following:

As emphasized in Session 1 and Session 2, it is especially important that Christians model civil discourse and engagement in the political sphere today. Our civility is a witness to God's love and grace amid the differences, division, and disagreements of a complicated world. Remembering this, let's review the group covenant together.

Review covenant. Check in about how it has gone in the two previous sessions. If there have been challenges, share observations about recommitting to the conversation covenant. Then read the following:

We are one in Christ but with many voices and views. When confronting issues from the public sphere, let us agree that we don't have to agree. The covenant is about how we talk and listen together in a holy way that respects how others come to a different point of view. Here, we give space for disagreement, wonder, and new understandings. The point of this study is not for members of ELCA faith communities to agree on every issue, but to engage in civil discourse on faith matters related to our civic engagement.

Invite participant volunteers to read the opening prayer and Scripture. Lead the opening litany, then sing all or part of a hymn if appropriate for your gathering space.

OPENING PRAYER

PG Gracious God, through your prophets you awaken us to your desire for justice and the common good. May justice roll like a river, and righteousness and integrity like an ever-flowing stream. Drive us out into costly service for the sake of others. Give us strong hearts and voices to satisfy your desire for justice for the most vulnerable and oppressed. Inspire us to engage in the good trouble of the gospel, following the example of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

SCRIPTURE

PG "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:23-24).

LITANY (Adapted from *This Far by Faith*)

Leader: God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,

All: You have brought us this far along the way.

Leader: In times of bitterness, you did not abandon us,

All: But guided us into the path of love and light.

Leader: In every age you sent prophets

All: To make known your loving will for all humanity.

Leader: The cry of the poor has become your own cry;

All: Our hunger and thirst for justice is your own desire. (From *This Far by Faith*)

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- "Let Justice Flow Like Streams" (ELW 717, TFF 48, WOV 763)
- "Let Streams of Living Justice" (ELW 710)
- "God of Grace and God of Glory" (ELW 705, LBW 415)
- "Caninemos con Jesús" (ACS 1061)

HEARING EACH OTHER

(5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

Invite participants to pair up with someone they don't know well or someone who often holds different opinions on current events. Invite participants to recall examples of positive and negative conversations around the intersection of faith and politics by reading the following:

On your Participant Guide, you'll find a two-sided box labeled "Positive Experience" and "Negative Experience." In each one, jot down a few notes that only you will see, recalling face-to-face or digital conversations in which political issues were discussed. If possible, recall a positive example of people airing different opinions, in which no one made assumptions about others' beliefs, people were given time to reflect, and genuine concerns were shared and heard. Then, recall a less

congenial discussion in which people felt dismissed or lectured, the conversation turned aggressive, or difference of opinion divided people.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCE
NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE

Give participants a silent minute to recall these two experiences and note them in the boxes on their Participant Guide. Then, invite the pairs to talk with one another, taking turns answering the questions in their handout:

PG With your discussion partner, reflect upon the similarities and differences in your experiences.

- How did it feel to emerge from a healthy conversational experience? How did it feel to emerge from an unhealthy conversational experience? What sticks with you from each experience even after some time has passed? How did the conversation change the relationships between people involved in it?
- Many people have felt heightened anxiety after negative experiences discussing polarizing issues. How does it feel remembering the negative incident now?
- How do you view this experience through the lens of your faith? What responsibility do you feel to have conversations with people with whom you disagree? How does your faith shape how you respond and react to people with differing opinions? What dangers, if any, do you see in avoiding difficult discussions with those with whom you disagree?

- How do you think your experiences have shaped your outlook on civic matters and what can, or cannot, be discussed in the church or among people of faith?

PG

PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

Ask participants to share observations from the time between group sessions.

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read Deuteronomy 16:18-20:

¹⁸“You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people.

¹⁹You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. ²⁰Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Discuss the following questions in the Participant Guide:

- In Deuteronomy, Moses spoke to the Israelites before they entered the promised land. His instructions spelled out boundaries within which the people were to live to remain faithful to God. Why does or doesn't it surprise you that the passage includes directions for local government?
- Imagine that the prophets could communicate God's will to us in our current time and place. What might they tell us about how our discipleship should look in life and in politics?

PG

PLAY VIDEO (15 minutes long)
<https://vimeo.com/788802177>

Make sure all can see and hear the video. Provide a transcript for participants who are hearing-impaired.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the video, discuss the following in small groups. Shuffle groups if size allows.

PG

1. Lutherans understand sin as both individual and societal, and understand themselves as simultaneously sinful and righteous. If there are no “good people” or “bad people,” and if our sins are woven into societal systems, how then should we respond to injustice in societal systems?
2. In the 16th century, talk of “kingdoms” was common, but this is no longer the case. How would you update the word “kingdom” to match our modern experience in a democratic society?
3. Lutheran tradition frequently emphasizes God’s working through the coercive power of laws (God’s “left hand”). This suggests that everyone in society, including even the most faithful Christians, need the law for correction and guidance. What does this teach about human beings and our sin? How might recognizing the power of sin in ourselves help our mutual dialogue in a polarized time?
4. At one extreme we fear overzealous and misguided movements, just as the reformers worried about violent rebellions and war. At the other extreme we worry about passivity and excessive deference to those in authority, the kind of complacency that lets injustice and oppression run rampant. Which threat—passivity or misguided activity—worries you more, and why?
5. Before the Reformation, religious callings were celebrated careers whereas household work, average jobs, and public service were regarded as inferior. Lutheran thinking in the Reformation radically reshaped how we value work and service in the world. Today, public service (especially elected office) is perhaps again considered far from holy. How might this contribute to a disconnect between faith in God, discipleship, public service, and even voting?

6. Conversations about **politics**, government, and civic life can be contentious and make us uncomfortable. Would you prefer your church community to be a place that risks tough conversations and discernment, or a place that avoids political and social conversations that might highlight difference? What are the perils of each option?

PG

SEND (5-10 minutes)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Invite the original participant pairings to reunite.

1. What ideas do you have for connecting our reforming Lutheran theological and historical inheritance with the challenges we face today?
2. What opportunities do you find invigorating and exciting as you understand your calling in our shared civic life?

PG

GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

As time allows, invite participants to share what new insights they have gained from today’s session about practicing faith in the world.

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

As Lutherans, we bring specific ideas to people’s understanding of government and civic life, ideas that are both gifts and challenges to live out. The world is full of sin, but it remains God’s world; God is present and active in its every corner. God’s right hand transforms hearts toward faith while God’s left hand pushes and cajoles us through laws and boundaries. Both hands seek the same outcome—a fulfilling life for all. Government or the political estate is affirmed as God’s gift, but its purpose is to provide safety and to order life. When it does not, it should be challenged. Our Lutheran heritage has too often valued comfortable patience when uncomfortable action was required.

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

As simultaneous saints and sinners, we are called by God to discern the truth together and join in civic work that lifts up the good of all.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

Pass out copies of the Participant Response Form and point out the link for online responses in the Participant Guide.

In this third session, you again have a chance to share your thoughts with the task force as part of the social statement development process. Please complete one version, knowing that your responses will be read by members of the task force.

PG Complete the response form either online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/XZYYN8R> or on paper. Scan and email your paper form to civicsandfaith@elca.org or send it by U.S. mail to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Attn: Civics and Faith, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Your feedback will be read by the task force as part of the social statement development process.

CLOSING PRAYER

Close in prayer, using your own words or the following:

Gracious God, in Christ you tear down the barriers that keep us from knowing your love. Today we give thanks for the insights and inspiration our Lutheran heritage brings to our civic lives. Forgive us for the times when we have valued comfortable patience over the uncomfortable action required. Help us to claim our vocation of citizenship and to make the gift of government serve the safety and flourishing of human life, as you intend. This we ask you, the governor of all creation. Amen.

WEBSITES

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America social message, "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy": [ELCA.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-messages/government](https://elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-messages/government) PG

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Carty, Jarrett A., *God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017). PG

Gorski, Philip S., and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

GLOSSARY (Note: Some words are used only in the video.)

Book of Concord: A collection of writings from 1580, published on the 50th anniversary of the 1530 Augsburg Confession, that were subscribed to by some 80 princely and municipal governments and are generally understood as authoritative documents of the Evangelical/Lutheran movement. The most widely adopted include the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, and Luther's catechisms, but all have some status among today's Evangelical/Lutheran churches. **Bonhoeffer, Dietrich:** German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident. Among other things, he is known for his writings on the Christian role in civic engagement and was a key founding member of the Confessing Church. (See "Confessing Church.")

Cheap grace: A term from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship* that he describes as preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, as grace without discipleship, as grace without the cross, and as Christian faith without Jesus Christ, the living and incarnate one.

Christian nationalism: A cultural framework that idealizes and advocates fusion of certain Christian views with American civic life. This political ideology, whether explicit or not, includes the beliefs that the U.S. Constitution was divinely inspired and enjoys godly status, that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the U.S., that the nation holds a special status in God's eyes, and that good Americans must hold Christian beliefs. Proponents range from those who believe the U.S. should be declared a Christian nation (approximately 21% of the U.S. population) to those involved in more virulent strains that are openly racist, anti-democratic, or gang like.

Civic engagement: Points to various ways in which individuals and institutions engage in public/civic life. Examples include voting, public service, street demonstration, contacting legislators, local service in volunteer agencies, and fervent prayer for government leaders.

Clericalism: The belief, policy, and practice maintaining the power of a religious hierarchy.

Community of Moral Deliberation/Discernment: A concept established in the first ELCA social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* and considered an element of the ELCA's identity into which our church must grow. The concept envisions the whole Christian community praying for each other, studying Scripture, and wrestling together toward moral understanding and action. This approach to doing ethics is ground-up, rather than top-down. Its roots are found in Reformation writings such as the Smalcald Articles of the Book of Concord that spell out the marks of the church, one of which is "the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters."

Law and Gospel: Expresses the key Lutheran emphasis that God's Word and work in human society occur under different means. "Law" is understood to have two forms: (1) as a directive and corrective for society (first, or civil, use) and (2) judgment on sin (second, or theological, use). The term "Gospel" is the good news of God's mercy, received in faith on account of Jesus Christ.

Luther, Martin (1483-1546): German priest, theologian, author, and professor. He was a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation and is the namesake of Lutheranism.

Politics: From the Greek term "*polis*" for the city or place of the people, this designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about "who gets what, when, where, and how" to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish. It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing government that is intended to seek the common good.

Priesthood of all believers: The view elaborated in the Reformation that all baptized Christians enjoy equal spiritual status in the sight of God, with equal capacity to have faith, pray, give witness, and do what is God-pleasing. See, for instance, 1 Peter 2:9: “You are ... a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

Theology: Can indicate academic or abstract reflection, but use of the term in this study refers to faithful talk about anything related to God. Every person of faith, therefore, engages in theology when expressing thoughts about God, the church, God in relation to civic life, etc.

Three estates: Used to designate the broadest divisions of social hierarchy in Christendom (Christian Europe) from the Middle Ages to early modern Europe. There is some variation in meaning, depending on the time and locale invoked. In Reformation thinking, the three overarching divisions (estates) were identified as the church, the government, and the family (which included all economic functions).

Two kingdoms: A traditional theological term from the Reformation regarding the proper distinction of God’s activity in the world: through secular means, such as government, versus God’s gracious activity in the church. ELCA teaching describes this as God’s two ways or two hands rather than as two kingdoms. God’s “right hand” conveys the tangible power of God’s love and forgiveness to people of faith, which stirs us to forgive others, to express mutual love and care, and to strive for justice. God’s “left hand” works through human roles, structures, and institutions to foster the social well-being of the people and the world God creates. The ELCA teaches that God’s two ways of governing are both necessary and interrelated. The institutions of government and church are distinct but have appropriate functional interaction.

Word: Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel reveals God’s judgment and mercy. The ELCA constitution holds that the Word is expressed in creation and in the history of Israel but is centered in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament are the written Word of God in the sense that they are inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through the authors as they record and announce God’s revelation centering Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

SESSION 3 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Greetings! My name is Anthony Bateza, and I am a pastor in the ELCA and religion professor at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

It is an honor to be with you as we continue discussing the relationship of Christian faith, politics, and our lives together in congregations and communities. In previous sessions, we introduced the purpose of this study and provided some tools for having difficult conversations about important issues. Today we will ground our reflections in Lutheran soil by asking “What are Lutheran views on civic life?”

We will discuss both the gifts and ongoing challenges of our Lutheran heritage, looking to history and theology for guidance on how to authentically embody our values in communities across the ELCA.

As we approach these questions as Lutherans, we have a number of valuable sources to draw from: chief among them, the biblical witness and *The Book of Concord*, which presents for us the church’s wisdom and provides a true witness and valid interpretation of our common faith. Along with these texts, we also draw from the diverse collection of individuals and contexts where Lutherans and others have sought to faithfully live out their commitment to God in their civic and political communities.

As a Luther scholar, I am, not surprisingly, really interested in Martin Luther! But despite the obvious historical connections, I believe we are drawn back to dear Brother Martin because his 16th-century ideas and experiences remain insightful and inspiring in our own time.

In confirmation classes and adult education hours, sitting around a table for coffee, or hiking along trails at Lutheran camps, people are drawn in by the details of Luther’s life. Moved by an undeniable intellect and his unquenchable passion for God’s people, Luther labored to remove the burdens and tear down the barriers keeping people from experiencing the love of God in Christ. Instead of a cruel or distant judge, Luther found in the Bible and the message of the gospel the story of a loving God, a God always at work, calling out injustice, forgiving sinners, and reconciling the world.

We know that spiritual, material, and political features of our lives can be distinguished even if they are not always easily separated. While trying to reform the church, Luther relied on governmental protection and celebrated the proper functioning of government. In his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer, for example, Luther interprets the petition where we ask God for our “daily bread” as a request for all the necessities of our lives: food, clothing, good relationships, and a good government with “upright and faithful rulers.”

One of the theological ideas that emerged is often called the teaching about God’s “two kingdoms” or “two governments.” Luther spoke about God’s kingdoms in different ways depending on the situation and challenges that confronted him.

Sometimes he used this “two kingdoms” language to describe God’s two ways of moving and guiding the world, thinking about God as using God’s right and left hands. With God’s right hand, we are persuaded and transformed, often in unpredictable and invisible ways that hearts and minds are reshaped. With God’s right hand, for example, faith is given, as we come to know, love, and trust God because of what God does in and through us.

With God’s left hand, the movement is less smooth and more confrontational. We feel the tension between what God demands and our own conflicted desires. God’s left hand pushes, cajoles, and forces us through laws, boundaries, and other means.

Luther also used this “two kingdoms” language to describe how the church and the government operate in different ways. In the church, God uses the Word and the Gospel to bring sinners to their forgiveness in

Christ. In the government, by contrast, laws constrain and judges convict, and the threat of punishment by figurative and literal swords is wielded in order to preserve peace, a needed check for people who might devour one another if left to their own devices.

Concerns about sustaining peace and avoiding the brutalities of war was not an idle fear for the reformers. They saw firsthand how princes and rulers can abuse their power, exploiting their subjects for selfish gain. Conversely, they also saw the horrors that come when people take up arms against the authorities and how the burdens of war are so often borne unequally by the most vulnerable—the poor, widows, children.

In the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530, we are reminded “that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God,” meaning that Christians can and should take on positions of leadership and service in civic affairs.

In times of abundance, through good leaders and rulers like Moses, David, or Luther’s Elector Frederick, God’s benefits and care are easy to see.

While facing cruel tyrants like King Herod, knowing what it means to see and follow God can be more difficult. At the end of the day, the Confessions acknowledge that there are times when the command of a political authority ought not be obeyed (AC XVII).

Sometimes we have all-too-easily sided with those in power and needed courageous souls like Dietrich Bonhoeffer to call us away from “cheap grace” and toward that costly discipleship that Christ demands.

Sometimes calls for moderation have promoted justice, but we know that, at other times, we have valued comfortable patience when uncomfortable action was required.

Lutheran beliefs and practices have always sought a sense of balance, neither over- or undervaluing our labors in life to challenge injustice and improve political arrangements.

We continue to keep our eyes and ears open for God’s calling, both as we gather in prayer in churches and on street corners, walking down the aisle toward the altar, or marching down the street for justice.

The Lutheran tradition gives us the chance to confess our mistakes and to try again, and it provides us with wonderful tools for understanding this calling.

One framework has been the Lutheran teaching about God’s Three Estates. The spiritual estate, or the church, is tasked with proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed, bringing together God’s people to hear the message of forgiveness as we are nourished by word and sacrament.

The government or political estate is also valued and preserved by God to maintain earthly justice and enable the flourishing of people everywhere.

Finally, the reformers placed both our family relationships and our economic life together under the household. Here we are loved and cared for, called to use the resources God has provided for the care of others.

The shape these estates take vary. There is no divine mandate that we must organize our religious communities, political institutions, or intimate familial relationships in one way or other.

Indeed, the great diversity and variety of these arrangements among all people of the earth can be inspiring as we are reminded of how far and wide God’s care for all continues to reach. All have been created in God’s image, and all are protected and loved by a God who continues to act through our earthly institutions and relationships.

In whatever form, there is good and bad to be found, and behind it all we find a God working for our good in ways that can appear brilliantly clear or painfully opaque.

In our church, we recognize these complexities of God's action and our action. While we rightly say that we are about "God's Work. Our Hands.," we do not pretend to have all the answers about what God is up to or what we should do next.

This can be a breath of fresh air in a polarized political environment, when battle lines are clearly drawn and some speak with unflappable certainty about the best policies for our future.

As Lutherans like to put it, we are simultaneously sinners and saints. Our pull towards presumption and confidence is checked by our need for correction and confession. Our pull towards fear or acquiescence is checked by our need to do good works and continue our daily struggle against sin and injustice.

At our best, Lutherans embody a spirit of shared deliberation and authority. Fragments of this can be found in our commitment to the priesthood of all believers, our resistance to the idea that any one of us could stand above the other given ultimate and final equality of all as we stand before our God.

The shared work of instruction, correction, and reflection marked one of the biggest breaks from certain kinds of clericalism and hierarchies in Luther's time. Likewise, our congregations and communities can serve as places of genuine deliberation. Marked with the cross of Christ, we are freed from having to save ourselves or prove ourselves, and so we are freed for open and honest conversation about our hopes, fears, aspirations, and ideals. These touch all aspects of our lives, every corner of our religious, political, familial, and economic relationships.

And our deliberation and wrestling does not keep us from action. Lutheran Services in America remains one of the largest private service providers in the nation, a \$23 billion network of agencies and caregivers that reaches 1 in 50 people in the country each year.

Lutheran advocacy offices are spread across the country, working together with congregations, coalitions, and political leaders to address issues such as hunger, poverty, racism, and care of God's creation.

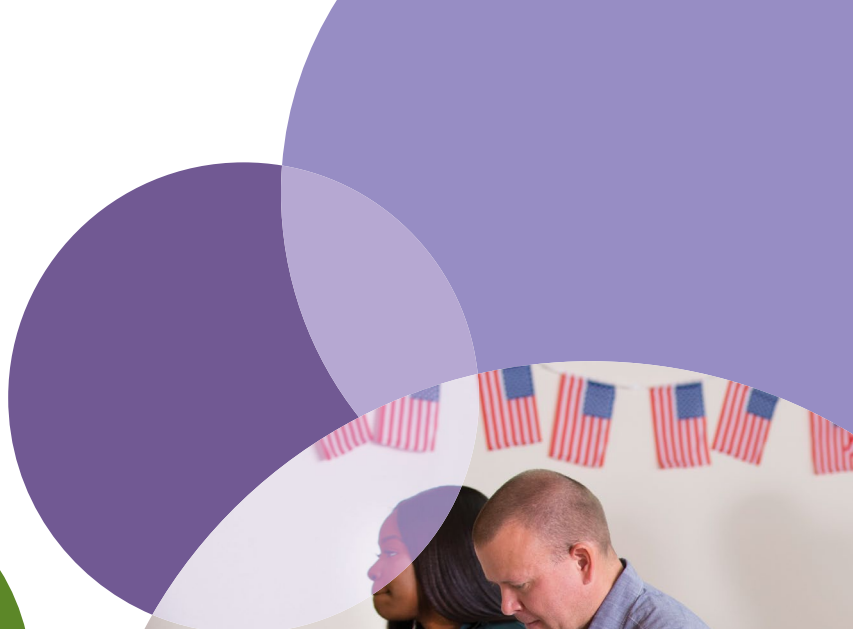
Luther could not have imagined where we would be today, as people living in a democracy with opportunities and challenges so different from his 16th-century political world. And so, it is up to us, working together in community, to sort out what needs to be lifted up and what should be set aside.

I thank you for taking on some of that work in this study, as you come together in a spirit of respect and charity, out of a shared commitment to the power of God's love and the need to see that love embodied in our lives as the political creatures that we are. Thank you for coming together in this space, and I look forward to being inspired by your questions, responses, and ongoing efforts to live lives of worth and service as siblings in Christ and neighbors to all.

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

Our commitment is to lift up the body of Christ through words and actions that:

- **Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as I expect them to do unto me.**
- **Model respectful and careful listening, without interrupting.**
- **Strive to understand each other's insights and experiences.**
- **Speak honestly, as an individual rather than for a group.**
- **Do not presume that others speak on behalf of a group.**
- **Utilize any technology constructively and not as a distraction.**
- **Step up to share thoughts, then step back to allow others to share theirs.**
- **Be mindful of viewpoints not represented.**
- **Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in the group and our civic life.**



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 4



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



SESSION 4: WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES?

Discerning the goals of our evolving constitutional democracy.

SUPPLIES

- Participant Guide (one per person)
- Covenant Handout (one per person)
- Pens
- Electronic device with video cued up: <https://vimeo.com/788804731>
- Participant Response Form (link provided for online response; print copies for participants who prefer paper)
- Hymnals (optional)
- Piano or other accompaniment (optional)
- Video transcript (optional, for the hearing-impaired)
- Consider sharing with group or discussing one of the On-the-Ground case studies.

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

Welcome participants to the fourth session of the study. If there are any new attendees, introduce yourself. Then read together the welcome paragraphs in the Participant Guide:

PG

In this study we wrestle with what it means to be disciples of Christ in a democracy—to serve God as citizens, as residents, and as a community of faith. The purpose of today's session is to better understand our objectives in the U.S. democracy—how the Constitution established our government, how government functions, and what the Constitution has to say about religion and the “separation of church and state.” These are historical and **political** questions, but we will also examine them from a biblical and theological perspective.

This ELCA study is about the faithful response of the church and its members to God's power, presence, and calling in government and **civic engagement**. The ELCA is a church in America, so we invite you to think about issues of U.S. government and civic participation from a biblical and theological point of view.

As in our prior sessions, the topics may reveal differences in what we believe and understand about the goals of our democracy, the purposes of government, and the role of God and God's people in government and civic life.

CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

Read the following:

Today's discussion may spark debate and disagreement. That's OK! We don't have to agree on everything in order to be people of God together. Respectful disagreement and the faithful effort to understand others' perspectives can deepen our unity in Christ. We seek to understand how others might see things differently. By participating in this session, we again affirm our commitment to the conversation covenant: to listen and speak honestly and respectfully, to be guided by Jesus' command to love each other, and to be mindful of the presence of God with us and at work in these conversations.

Review the covenant. Check in about how it has gone in previous sessions and how to continue in a respectful manner.

Invite participant volunteers to read the opening prayer and Scripture. Lead the opening litany, then sing all or part of a hymn if appropriate for your gathering space.

OPENING PRAYER

PG Creator of all, we thank you for the opportunity to gather in study. Open our minds and hearts. By the power of the Holy Spirit, unite us in faith, hope, and love. Help us to be faithful to the gospel and to walk humbly with you. Grant us your peace as we grow in wisdom and understanding. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

PG ¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (Philippians 2:1-4).

LITANY

PG Leader: In our relationships with each other, let us have the same mindset as Christ,
All: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to use to his advantage.
Leader: Instead, he made himself nothing, taking on the nature of a servant in human likeness,
All: And humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.
Leader: Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name,
All: That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord, to the glory of God.
Amen.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- "God Is Here!," verses 1, 4 (ELW 526, WOV 719)
- "Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service" (ELW 712, LBW 423)
- "Oh, Freedom" (TFF 208)
- "Faith Begins by Letting Go" (ACS 1004)

PG

HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

Invite participants to pair up with someone they don't know well or know to be often of differing opinions regarding current events. Remind participants to listen respectfully when one is speaking and then to switch roles. Participants may choose which questions / story prompts to answer, alternating turns as time allows.

On your Participant Guide, you'll find a two-sided box labeled "Positive Experience" and "Negative Experience." In each one, jot down a few notes that only you will see, recalling face-to-face or digital conversations in which political issues were discussed. If possible, recall a positive example of people airing different opinions, in which no one made assumptions about others' beliefs, people were given time to reflect, and genuine concerns were shared and heard. Then, recall a less congenial discussion in which people felt dismissed or lectured, the conversation turned aggressive, or difference of opinion divided people.

- Consider the beliefs regarding civic engagement and political viewpoints of the people who raised you, whether parents, grandparents, or some other caregiver. Without mentioning your political affiliation, talk about how you either accepted their beliefs as your own or how your beliefs became different from theirs. If you have grown or adolescent children, nieces, or nephews, what trend do you see in the next generation? Will they hold views similar to yours?

PG

- What are a few things government provides that you appreciate in your everyday life? (Consider anything from paved roads to controlling air traffic to administering Social Security.)
- Recall a class on civics or government in high school or even earlier. What do you remember about it? Why did or didn't it provide enough of a foundation for you to become an engaged citizen?

PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

Ask participants to share observations from the time between group sessions.

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read Micah 6:6-8:

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Form small groups of three or four people to discuss the following questions in the Participant Guide:

1. Those to whom these words were first directed probably liked to think of themselves as right with God because of a checklist of done deeds—including offerings and sacrifice. The calf makes the sacrifice on the altar; our sacrifice is shown through justice, kindness, and humbleness. The wording reflects that it is not always our default manner to live out those ideals. What challenges do you face in living out these ideals in a polarized time?
2. These well-known verses don't give much support to public displays of religiosity; instead, they push believers to a life of

faith lived out in everyday interactions. Consider the culture war battles over displaying the Ten Commandments in public spaces, placing Christmas trees in state capitol buildings, and so on. How might this Scripture inform your stance on such matters?

3. Based on this passage and the greater canon of Scripture, what do you think God's expectations for life in community are?
4. If this passage were our only directive for forming a government, what would that government look like?

PLAY VIDEO (18 minutes long)
<https://vimeo.com/788804731>

Make sure all can see and hear the video. Provide a transcript for participants who are hearing-impaired.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the video, discuss the following in small groups:

1. How has this video changed your understanding of the often-used phrase “**separation of church and state**”?
2. IF the founders of American democracy could have seen two and a half centuries into the future, what, if anything, do you think they would have done differently as they began their experiment in sovereignty by the people?
3. In a pluralistic society, a Lutheran Christian might campaign for an atheist candidate for religious reasons because that candidate supports legislation on issues a person of faith might prioritize, such as hunger. Given that our country's governing documents were never meant to detach people's faith from their civic and political engagement, how do you think so many Americans came to misunderstand faith and politics as being separate?
4. Given what you heard in the video and know about Christian principles, are there things that you think can only be, or best be, addressed by government? If yes, why?

5. Consider government officials or others in public life who speak openly about their faith or who base political platforms on a specific set of religious beliefs. How do the **Establishment** and **Free Exercise Clauses**, Scripture, and Lutheran theology inform your opinion on this?
6. When dealing with an individual's participation in the governmental process, such as voting, amendments to the Constitution have always expanded the right to participate (extending it to people of color, women, young adults) and never contracted it. On Christian principles, has the Constitution gotten that right? Do you think that there are challenges to political participation now, and how do you believe those should be addressed?
7. Consider the First Amendment's religious clauses. How might our country be different if the government were not mandated to be secular, if it had the power to establish a state religion? What does it mean to you to live in a pluralistic society, in which government cannot favor a single religion over other religions and all people may express their faiths—or no faith—as they choose? How do these ideas harmonize or conflict with your understanding of Scripture and Lutheran theology?

SEND (5-10 minutes)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Invite original participant pairings to group together again. Discuss the following:

1. If you've arrived at a new understanding of how our governing documents were formed, how might that affect your faith life in the civic and political realms?
2. How might you navigate disagreements with other Christians on how to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God when our differing convictions spring from common values?

GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

As time allows, invite participants to share whatever new insights they have gained from today's session.

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

In a secular democracy, no less than in other forms of government, God and God's people can be at work through government and civic engagement. Religious pluralism was built into our U.S. Constitution to guard religious expression. The Constitution's Establishment Clause exists to keep the government from endorsing one religion over another, and the Free Exercise Clause ensures that we can worship God (or not) in the manner we wish. These important provisions not only protect our ability to practice our faith but also protect our neighbors of religious minority, or of no religion. Even without these protections, our faith would be alive in our political activity and civic engagement. Our Scripture and theology inform our personal stances on issues and candidates as we seek to live out our baptismal calling to address the needs of our neighbors.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

Pass out copies of the Participant Response Form and point out the link for online response in the Participant Guide. Read the following to participants:

In this fourth session, you again have a chance to share your thoughts with the task force as part of the social statement development process. Please complete one version, knowing that your responses will be read by members of the task force.

Complete the response form either online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HYSK2NF> or on paper. Scan and email your paper form to civicsandfaith@elca.org or send it by U.S. mail to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Attn: Civics and Faith, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Your feedback will be read by the task force as part of the social statement development process.

CLOSING PRAYER

Close in prayer, using your own words or the following:

Most just and merciful God, in this age of change, conflict, and doubt, you are Lord of all—both church and world. We thank you for your presence with us, uniting us in faith, hope, and love through Christ. We thank you for open minds and hearts where there are differences. Keep us faithful to the gospel and grant us your peace as we continue to work out your purpose for us at home, with our neighbors, as a community of faith, and as members of the wider communities of town, state, nation, and world. Help us to walk humbly with you during this study and always. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

PROMPTS FOR ACTION OUTSIDE THE STUDY GROUP

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- Use the Session 4 Going Deeper Handout for personal reading or group discussion after reading the ELCA social message “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy.” [ELCA.org/socialmessages](https://www.elca.org/socialmessages)
- Read and discuss the United States Constitution. [constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution](https://www.constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution)
- Read and discuss the Articles of Confederation. www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/articles-of-confederation
- Read and discuss The Federalist Papers. [guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text](https://www.guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text)

WEBSITES

Visit [iCivics.org](https://www.icivics.org) for civics education resources for students and families, and Civics Flash Cards (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) to test your knowledge of U.S. history and government.

PG

BOOKS

Amar, Akhil Reed, *America's Constitution: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2006).

PG

Chemmerinsky, Erwin, *Constitutional Law: Principles and Policies* (New York: Wolters Kluwer, 2019).

Cleve, Van George, *We Have Not a Government: The Articles of Confederation and the Road to the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Lupu, Ira C., and Robert W. Tuttle, *Secular Government, Religious People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

Pasewark, Kyle A., and Garrett E. Paul, *The Emphatic Christian Center: Reforming Christian Political Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

GLOSSARY (Note: Some words are used only in the video.)

Civic engagement: Points to various ways in which individuals and institutions engage in public/civic life. Examples include voting, public service, street demonstration, contacting legislators, local service in volunteer agencies, and fervent prayer for governmental leaders.

Establishment Clause: The first clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It states that government “shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion.” This means that government cannot establish a state or national religion or impose any form of worship or devotion upon its citizens.

Free Exercise Clause: The second phrase in the First Amendment, regarding government’s relationship to religious practice under the Constitution. Unlike the Establishment Clause, this phrase focuses on the relationship between faith and public/civic life. The first clause, prohibiting establishment of a state religion, clears the ground for the faithful to determine their own best way of exercising faith in their public life.

Politics: From the Greek term polis, for the city or place of the people, this designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about who gets what, when, where, and how to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish. It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing government that is intended to seek the common good.

Separation of church and state: Usually shorthand for the Establishment Clause that forbids state-sponsored religion. The meaning of the phrase is contested. For example, many people, including religious people, believe it means that religious convictions and politics should flow in completely separate streams. (See “Quietism.”) The ELCA constitution, on the other hand, endorses institutional separation with functional interaction and argues that the church as a civic body should avoid partisanship but engage in civic life, because God calls people of faith to join God’s activity there.

SESSION 4 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to Session 4 of this study on civic life and faith. I am Pastor Pamela Hoh, an ELCA pastor and mission developer at Hope Lutheran Church in Troy, N.Y. As a member of the ELCA churchwide board, I serve as the liaison between the board and the task force for civic life and faith in the ELCA.

In today's session, we are examining the objectives of democracy in the United States. We're going to look at the history of the United States Constitution and how it shapes our form of government. We're also going to talk about religion in the Constitution, including the First Amendment. But before doing any of that, let's start with the theological and biblical principles that provide a framework for how we can approach these topics.

Christians believe that God is present everywhere, at all times, and is all-powerful. As believers, our ultimate commitment is to respond to God's love in Christ through God's command to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly" with God. Because God is everywhere present, faith should be all-encompassing.

This ELCA study is about the faithful response of the church and its members in matters of government and civic engagement. We are a church in the United States, so we invite you to think about issues of our government, our church, and civic participation from a biblical and theological point of view. It is important to remember that civic participation isn't only involvement in government or politics but includes the full range of engaging in public life and service to community. The next session is devoted to that wider view.

Government is one important part of civic participation. Let's talk now about the history of our Constitution and how it shapes our form of government.

The United States Constitution, adopted in 1787, is the governing document of our democratic republic. It establishes the core structure of the federal government and places certain limitations on government authority. It even establishes procedures for its own revisions.

However, the Constitution was not the first governing document. The Articles of Confederation, adopted in 1777, came first, serving more like a treaty between the states. Under the Articles of Confederation, the federal government had little power to enforce its decisions. By 1787, it was clear that the United States was in danger of not surviving under the Articles. There were 13 sovereign states, often at cross-purposes with each other. There were not united states; they had often conflicting policies as well as different currencies. The financial, commercial, and military future of the young country looked grim.

The 1787 Constitution created a much stronger national government consisting of three branches with distinct roles and powers—executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The Constitution gave some powers to the states, designated other powers to citizens of the country regardless of the state in which they live, and acknowledged Indigenous sovereign governments.

The Constitution, in other words, made the contemporary United States possible. The authority of the national government enabled the country's westward expansion, its international leadership, its military prowess, predictable and productive business relations across state borders, and much more. You may believe that the country has not always used what the Constitution made possible properly. You may think that the "grand bargain" of the Constitution's framers preserving slavery was a bargain that should not have been made. You can point out that the country has not done well by Indigenous peoples who were here before Europeans, or that our international influence has not always been exercised for good. Those are separate and important things to consider and discuss. Here, the point recognizes both the aspirations embedded and that we are the nation we are—for good and ill—largely because of the range and power of the possibilities spelled out by the Constitution.

The ratification of the Constitution was also radically new. It was not imposed by a monarch, a sovereign state, or a religious authority. It was ratified “by the people.” That had no precedent in world history. Though voting was almost exclusively limited to free white men, the Constitution was voted on. The vote provided its ratification and authority. Without the civic participation of the vote, there would have been no Constitution and no United States in a form recognizable to us. This vote was close in many of the 11 original ratifying states, but it made the people sovereign.

Sovereignty of the people in the Constitution did not mean the majority ruled after its adoption. Limits on what the federal government could do were designed in part to limit what any majority could do. The process for amending the Constitution—other than through constitutional conventions—requires a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress and the affirmative vote of three quarters of state legislatures. The federal judiciary is not elected at all.

In Congress, representation in the House of Representatives is based on the populations of states; in the House, the majority rules. But in the Senate, each state, regardless of population, has two senators, giving the least populous states a far larger per-person representation than more populous states. Because the Electoral College bases each state’s number of electors on its total Congressional seats, citizens in less populous states have a greater per-person influence on presidential elections as well.

The sovereignty of the people—consent of the governed—is a value explicit in the Constitution and its very adoption. You might think of this as both an actual value and an aspirational one. The history of amendments to the Constitution has been in the direction of expanding participation in the political process. When dealing with individual participation in government, such as voting, amendments to the Constitution always expanded the right to participate—to people of color, women, young adults—and never contracted it. Each of these amendments recognized that there were people “governed” without their “consent.” That is, the aspiration of the Constitution had not been fully realized. In the case of Black Americans, the Reconstruction amendments essentially said that the 1787 Constitution’s actual “grand bargain” to preserve slavery got wrong who “we, the people,” should be.

This brief constitutional history is not biblical or theological. Take a moment now to think, as Christians, about whether the Constitution made the best calls. What do you think it means that the Bible does not provide either a model for a democratic republic or the “consent of the governed”? What do you think it means that the American Revolution was fought against a monarchy, which is a form of government present in Scripture?

Next, let’s look at religion in the Constitution. Religious pluralism was built into the body of the 1787 Constitution through its prohibition of religious tests for holding public office. That was ahead of the curve since, in 1787, 11 of the 13 states had religious qualifications for public officials. Two examples of the impact of this can be seen in Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Many consider them among America’s greatest presidents, yet they did not belong to any church as adults. A religious test would have left America without their service as president.

Religious pluralism was also built into the First Amendment, which is part of the Bill of Rights. It was ratified in 1791, several years after the ratification of the main body of the Constitution. It begins with the following two clauses: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The first clause—“shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”—is known as the “Establishment Clause.” This clause was cut from the same cloth as the Constitution’s prohibition against religious tests for public office. It means that the government cannot establish a state church or religion or endorse one church or religion over others.

The second clause — “shall make no law...prohibiting the free exercise” of religion — is known as the “Free Exercise Clause.” It means that the government cannot prohibit individuals from worshiping in the manner each sees fit, within certain limits.

The Free Exercise Clause was also cut from the same cloth as the Establishment Clause. If government by the people could not establish a religion, it was also true that government by the people could not prohibit citizens from practicing their religion. If religious faith is a person’s most important and encompassing commitment, a government of, by, and for a free people cannot prohibit a person’s worship.

Together, the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause give a preference and presumption for self-determination in matters of religion.

Finally, let’s examine the famous phrase “separation of church and state” and what that means for us as Christians. We haven’t mentioned this phrase when talking about the Constitution because it’s not in the Constitution! It is usually shorthand for the Establishment Clause — that the government “shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion.” Many people, including religious people, wrongly believe it also means that religious convictions and politics should flow in separate streams, as if mixing them would pollute each. In this line of thinking, on one hand, God and religion should never be mentioned in a governmental or political context. On the other hand, government or political matters should never be discussed in churches or other houses of worship. Of course, certain Christian denominations such as the Amish prohibit their members’ political involvement based on theological reasons, but the Constitution does not require or even recommend it.

The Establishment Clause means that government can’t impose a form of worship on its citizens. It means that, politically, citizens are sovereign, not the state or a specific religion. It does not mean that a person’s religious commitments cannot or should not enter their public life, whether in political activity, in broader civic engagement, or by informing one’s stance on issues and voting choices. If religious commitments could not enter public life, that would negate the free exercise of religion guaranteed by the Free Exercise Clause.

The relationship between the state and religion created by the Establishment Clause is much narrower than the relationship between faith and public life, including political life, created by the Free Exercise Clause. These two relationships are connected but not entwined. In fact, prohibiting the establishment of a religion clears the ground for the faithful to determine their own best way to connect faith with their own public life; it opens space for self-determination.

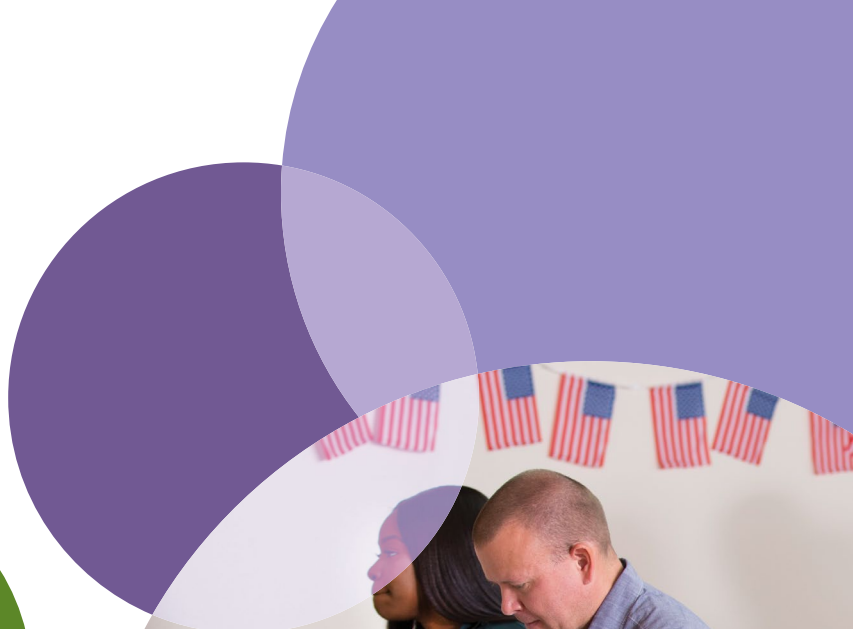
Take time now to think about these reflections about American democracy theologically, biblically, and historically. If God is always everywhere present, and is all-powerful, doesn’t it make sense that faithful persons should be actively engaged in a realm in which God is present and active? If our faith is our ultimate and all-encompassing commitment, shouldn’t we as religious people be guided by the public implications of our faith? Is it possible to love our neighbor, have hope for creation, and do justice without civic participation and political life?

Now it’s time for you to think and talk together about what you have heard here. On behalf of the ELCA task force, thank you for your participation!

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

Our commitment is to lift up the body of Christ through words and actions that:

- **Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as I expect them to do unto me.**
- **Model respectful and careful listening, without interrupting.**
- **Strive to understand each other's insights and experiences.**
- **Speak honestly, as an individual rather than for a group.**
- **Do not presume that others speak on behalf of a group.**
- **Utilize any technology constructively and not as a distraction.**
- **Step up to share thoughts, then step back to allow others to share theirs.**
- **Be mindful of viewpoints not represented.**
- **Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in the group and our civic life.**



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 5



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



SESSION 5: WHAT'S FAITH-BASED LIVING GOT TO DO WITH CIVIC LIFE?

Discerning the callings of discipleship, both corporate and individual.

SUPPLIES

- Participant Guide (one per person)
- Covenant Handout (one per person)
- Pens
- Electronic device with video cued up: <https://vimeo.com/788805985>
- Participant Response Form (link provided for online response; print copies for participants who prefer paper)
- Hymnals (optional)
- Piano or other accompaniment (optional)
- Video transcript (optional, for the hearing-impaired)
- Consider sharing with group or discussing one of the On-the-Ground case studies.

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

Welcome participants to the fifth session of the study. If there are any new attendees, introduce yourself. Then read together the welcome paragraphs in the Participant Guide:

PG In previous sessions we addressed why we consider our calling as Christians to include civic engagement and participation in government. In the fourth session we explored how the U.S. form of government opens up that kind of engagement through the First Amendment. Today's session addresses the actions we as individuals and as a church might seek for the common good, alongside others in the public sphere. Differing experiences and beliefs mean we as God's people may end up taking different individual action in striving for what we consider the common good for our communities and society. However, it is still our joy and challenge to discern together, seeing new perspectives and encouraging each other to take action. In response to God's mercy, we are called to serve God through love and service to neighbor, including in civic engagement.

CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

Read the following:

While these study groups serve a purpose in the ELCA's process of developing a social statement, the sessions should also provide a safe and healthy practice of working together with people who may have different experience with and opinions about significant issues in the civic realm. Gathered in faith, we continue to do our best to model productive and respectful conversation and to ask for and grant forgiveness when we stumble. Let's take a moment to review the conversation covenant together.

Review the covenant. Check in about how it has gone in previous sessions and discuss any steps needed to keep the study group on track.

Invite participant volunteers to read the opening prayer and Scripture. Lead the opening litany, then sing all or part of a hymn if appropriate for your gathering space.

OPENING PRAYER

PG Lord God, you call your people to honor those in authority. Help us elect trustworthy leaders, participate in wise decisions for our common life, and serve our neighbors in local communities. Bless the leaders of our land, that we may be at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 77)

SCRIPTURE

PG ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

LITANY (based on psalm 67)

PG Leader: O God, let your way be known upon Earth,
All: And your saving health among all nations.
Leader: Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
All: For you judge the peoples with equity and guide all the nations.
Leader: People of God, let your light shine forth,
All: That God’s reign of peace and justice may flourish.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- PG**
- “This Little Light of Mine” (ELW 677, TFF 65)
 - “All Who Love and Serve Your City” (ELW 724, LBW 436)
 - “We Come to the Hungry Feast” (ELW 479, WOV 766)
 - “Lord, You Give the Great Commission” (ELW 579, WOV 756)
 - “Wind and Cold Roar”/“Corre el viento” (ACS 1010)

HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

Invite participants to pair up with someone they don’t know well or know to be often of differing opinions regarding current events. Participants may pick which prompts they answer.

- Share three things most central to your identity.
- Share, if you know, where your ancestors came from (whether they were native to this soil or immigrated from another continent by choice or force) and what challenges they faced regarding the freedom to worship God and live out their faith.
- Do friends, neighbors, co-workers—people outside of church—know you are a person of faith? Is it important to you that they do or don’t know? How might someone know of your faith if it was unspoken?

PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

Ask participants to share observations from the time between group sessions.

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read from Martin Luther’s Large Catechism on the Ten Commandments from the Book of Concord:

The Eighth Commandment: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. **PG**

²⁶⁰Therefore this commandment is given first of all that every one shall help his neighbor to secure his rights, and not allow them to be hindered or twisted, but shall promote and strictly maintain them, no matter whether he be judge or witness, and let it pertain to whatsoever it will. ...

²⁸⁵Thus we have now the sum and general understanding of this commandment, to wit, that no one do any injury with the

tongue to his neighbor, whether friend or foe, nor speak evil of him, no matter whether it be true or false, unless it be done by commandment or for his reformation, but that every one employ his tongue and make it serve for the best of every one else, to cover up his neighbor's sins and infirmities, excuse them, palliate and garnish them with his own reputation. ²⁸⁶The chief reason for this should be the one which Christ alleges in the Gospel, in which He comprehends all commandments respecting our neighbor, Matt. 7:12: Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. ...

²⁹⁰There are comprehended therefore in this commandment quite a multitude of good works which please God most highly, and bring abundant good and blessing, if only the blind world and the false saints would recognize them. For there is nothing on or in entire man which can do both greater and more extensive good or harm in spiritual and in temporal matters than the tongue, though it is the least and feeblest member." (Luther, Martin, *The Book of Concord: The Large Catechism*, bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/)

Discuss the following questions in the Participant Guide:

1. How would you explain why Luther connected not bearing false witness with the common good?
2. How might Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment shape your understanding of civic engagement and participation?
3. What are some concrete ways that everyday civic engagement can help a neighbor, as Luther wrote, secure rights, not allowing them to be hindered or twisted?
4. How do you draw the line between speaking out against injustice and not speaking ill of friend or foe? What kinds of wrongs are you likely to speak up about in the spirit of reformation that Luther noted?

PLAY VIDEO (11 minutes long)

<https://vimeo.com/788805985>

Make sure all can see and hear the video. Provide a transcript for participants who are hearing-impaired.

Key Ideas in the Video:

- Christian discipleship is an active call to love our neighbors, live in community, and seek the common good.
- This call to discipleship is integral to our identity as children of God.
- Quietism is a passive acceptance of the social status quo. It is not faithful, because it allows the powerful to exploit those with less power.
- Christian nationalism is a political ideology and is neither faithful to Christ nor patriotic. It idealizes and advocates the fusion of certain Christian views with loyalty to one's country and encourages enforcing upon the nation a particular and harsh understanding of certain Christian principles.
- Faithful civic participation lies between the two extremes of quietism and **Christian nationalism**. It includes participation in the political realm, such as voting or serving in public office. But it also includes nonpolitical civic engagement such as working with others to make one's community better for all.
- Christian discipleship encourages activity in the political realm because it is exercised in everyday life. Christians are called to civic engagement and political participation as a means to express our love of God by actively loving our neighbor. We do not do this to make God love us or to earn our way into heaven, but because God loves us first and includes us in God's work for justice and peace.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the video, discuss the following in small groups. Shuffle groups if size allows.

PG

1. How do you think the importance attached to a political candidate's religious identity or lack thereof has changed in your lifetime?
2. Lutheran identity, which emphasizes salvation through God's grace, has sometimes inadvertently emphasized that because we can't do anything to earn salvation, we shouldn't do anything at all in response to God's love. How does or doesn't the experience of being freed from earning your salvation inspire you to discipleship? Are there times you would simply rather be told what you have to do?
3. In our current political context, what issues are likely to drive Lutherans into the trap of quietism?
4. How would you explain voting and running for office as acts of discipleship to a nonreligious friend?
5. Christian nationalism clearly manipulates Jesus' teachings. Why do you think we have seen a surge in Christian nationalism in recent years?
6. How can Christians appropriately support political movements and legislation in line with biblical teachings about care for the vulnerable, feeding the hungry, and so on, without becoming partisan?

SEND (5-10 minutes)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Invite original participant pairings to group together again. Discuss the following:

1. There are many arenas where religious and government entities and funding interact: chaplains in the military, public hospitals, and police departments; immigration services; disaster relief; adoption and foster care; hunger relief; and so on. Most of us grumble from time to time about paying taxes, but what are a couple things funded by taxes that are important to you as a person of faith? Why do or don't you consider those things when paying taxes?
2. Quietism can be found in churches whose leadership fears that the congregation will get upset that their church is "being too political." How can you appropriately encourage your church leadership and members to be active in the world and address wrongs done to neighbors?

PG

GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

As time allows, invite participants to share what new insights they have gained from today's session about practicing faith in the world.

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

Today we've focused our attention on civic participation as one way our discipleship unfolds in the world. Dr. Cornel West, the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair at Union Theological Seminary, has said that "justice is what love looks like in public." We know that, as Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our active participation in our communities—at the local, state, and national levels—is one of the ways we can love God by loving neighbor.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

Pass out copies of the Participant Response Form and point out the link for online response in the Participant Guide. Read the following:

In this fifth session you again have a chance to share your thoughts with the task force as part of the social statement development process. Please complete one version, knowing that members of the task force have committed to reading all responses as they look for patterns of suggestions, comments, and ideas.

PG

Complete the response form either online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/D8VJLMZ> or on paper. Scan and email your paper form to civicsandfaith@elca.org or send it by U.S. mail to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Attn: Civics and Faith, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Your feedback will be read by the task force as part of the social statement development process.

CLOSING PRAYER

Close in prayer, using your own words or the following:

Holy God, out of your great love for the world, your Word became flesh to live among us and to reconcile us to you and to one another. Rekindle among us the gift of your Spirit so that we seek to live in unity with all people, breaking down the walls that divide, ending the hostility among us, and proclaiming peace to those who are near and to those who are far away; through Christ Jesus, in whom we all have access in the one Spirit to you, both now and forever. Amen. (From Sundays and Seasons, sundaysandseasons.com.)

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

PROMPTS FOR ACTION OUTSIDE THE STUDY GROUP

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- Join the ELCA's advocacy efforts. Start here: ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Advocacy/Get-Involved

- Visit ELCA's advocacy resources at ELCA.org/resources/advocacy
- Join or create a social justice group in your congregation to help guide your members toward increased social engagement. Decide together on a handful of issues to become involved in.
- Invite your synod's Lutheran state public policy staff to host a forum or preach during worship to inform members of the advocacy work being done on their behalf.

PG

WEBSITES

Repairers of the Breach is a nonpartisan not-for-profit organization that seeks to build a moral agenda rooted in a framework that uplifts the deepest moral and constitutional values to redeem the heart and soul of our country and addresses the moral public concerns of our faith traditions regarding how our society treats "the least of these." breachrepairers.org

PG

BOOKS

Denker, Angela, *Red State Christians: A Journey Into White Christian Nationalism and the Wreckage It Leaves Behind* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022).


Höpfl, Harro, ed., *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

King Jr., Martin Luther, *Why We Can't Wait*, Books Vooks, booksvooks.com/why-we-cant-wait-pdf-martin-luther-king-jr.html.

Madsen, Anna M., *I Can Do No Other: The Church's New Here We Stand Moment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2019).

Tranvik, Mark D., *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

PG



Christian nationalism: A cultural framework that idealizes and advocates fusion of certain Christian views with American civic life. This political ideology, whether explicit or not, includes the beliefs that the U.S. Constitution was divinely inspired and enjoys godly status, that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the U.S., that the nation holds a special status in God's eyes, and that good Americans must hold Christian beliefs. Proponents range from those who believe the U.S. should be declared a Christian nation (approximately 21% of the U.S. population) to those involved in more virulent strains that are openly racist, anti-democratic, or ganglike. The symbols and ideology of Christian nationalism were widely evident during the Jan. 6, 2021, attempt to throw out certified U.S. election results.

Civic engagement: Points to various ways in which individuals and institutions engage in public and civic life. Examples include voting, public service, street demonstration, contacting legislators, local service in volunteer agencies, and fervent prayer for governmental leaders.

Partisanship: Strong and sometimes blind adherence to a specific party, group, faction, set of beliefs, or set of personal characteristics.

Politics: From the Greek term *polis*, for the city or place of the people, this designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about "who gets what, when, where, and how" to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish.

Quietism: As used here, describes a passive, withdrawn attitude or practice toward public or civic affairs. This withdrawal may be intentional policy or simply a practice, but both are characterized by quiet acceptance of the civic status quo and avoidance of political engagement. This approach to public life has a long track record among many Lutherans even though it was not evident in the Reformation period.

SESSION 5 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

I'm Mindy Makant, a member of the social statement task force. I am a theology professor and an ELCA deacon currently serving as the dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina.

Today's session asks the question of what Christian discipleship has to do with civic or political life.

When I first began graduate school, my sister asked me what I was studying. When I told her "theology and ethics," she responded, "Ethics sounds boring!"

We often hear "ethics" and think of lists of do's and don'ts. But ethics—at least in the Christian tradition—is not a list of forbidden or required behaviors. It is not our dentist reminding us to floss our teeth or our mothers insisting we write thank-you cards—valuable as those may be!

Rather than a list of rules, ethics is another word for discipleship; it is an ongoing communal process of engagement. Ethics is an active concept—like love. It is something we do as we strive to be faithful. This means that what one group of people discerns as faithful for one place and time can look different from what another group of people discerns as faithful for another place and time; it is not decided once and for all.

However, the fact that ethics isn't a set of rules does not mean anything goes. Jesus gives us a lens we can use. Lutherans understand our primary lens to include a call to love our neighbor, live in community, and seek the common good.

The challenge — which is always invitation and opportunity — is discerning how we best love our neighbor, live in community, and seek the common good together. Though we may agree that these are good things to do, we do not always agree on how this can be accomplished.

When John Kennedy ran for president in 1960, he tried to assure Americans that he would maintain an "absolute wall of separation" between his Roman Catholic faith and his actions as president of the U.S. This was understandable. No Roman Catholic had ever been elected to such a high office, and there was widespread concern—among Protestants anyway—that a Roman Catholic president would function as a puppet of the Pope. Separation of church and state "mattered" in a new way for many voters because there was a real possibility that someone who understood faith and ethics from a Roman Catholic perspective might be elected to our highest office.

In practice, though, it is not so simple. I am not a Christian in one box and a member of my community in another. Each of us have complicated identities—I am white, female, middle-aged, educated, from the South, cisgender, heterosexual, married over 30 years; my husband and I have raised two kids and have entered the grandparenting phase of our lives. I'm an academic, and I serve as a deacon in the ELCA. I'm also a citizen of the U.S., of North Carolina, of a small city and an even smaller neighborhood. All of these particular "parts" create my identity, and at some level all the parts are interconnected. I cannot excise any one part of my identity. Nor should I. I also should not assume my experience is the only one.

A concrete example of why our social identity—and the social identity of those in positions of power—matters.

In 2017 my husband and I were moving out of a parsonage and buying our own home. We found a house we

absolutely loved. It had a huge, screened-in back porch, was walking distance to our city's downtown but not on a busy road; it was the right size for our family, etc. We were in the realtor's office, signing papers. In the paperwork there was a list of ten "rules" related to community standards. Rule #2: "This home shall be neither owned nor occupied by anyone not of the white race."

Y'all, this was 2017. I nearly threw up. There was no way we were signing it. And, of course, it was illegal. It should have been changed in 1964. And, had the house last sold in the late 50s or early 60s maybe—maybe—I could have chalked it up to that. But the house was last sold in 1983. The current owners had signed the same statement.

We walked out. We bought our second-choice house, further out of the city and without any such restrictions.

But the point is what had been perceived in the past as good—at least by the majority of white voting members of our community—is now, thanks be to God, seen as an abhorrent failure to see the face of God in our neighbor.

I was not yet born in 1964. But I give thanks to my elders who were and who were active, political, in the best sense, in local, regional, and national platforms to engage in the politics of the civil rights struggle. My world has been different—more varied and, at least in some ways, more faithful—because they did.

And yet, we are not there. This is not the kingdom of God. And until Jesus comes back, bringing the kingdom with him, we have plenty of work to do. Which is where civic and political engagement come in.

Sometimes—maybe even most of the time—when people insist that we should keep politics out of the church, it isn't "politics" that is the problem. The word "politics" comes from the Greek word polis, which means city. Politics is about how we choose to govern and order our public lives together. Anytime a group of people come together for a common cause, we are engaging in politics. In a congregation "politics" includes the way we elect folks to serve on council or how we structure church committees. It is about how we make decisions about our shared, common life. The "politics in church issue" problem is actually about partisanship. Church is not without politics but is a space that offers teaching and conversation that helps us wrestle with how to engage faithfully in all of the political arenas of our lives. It is not a space for party loyalty.

Thomas Aquinas, one of Christianity's great theologians, suggests a helpful way of talking about discernment and actions of discipleship in civic life. Aquinas spoke a lot about virtue in everyday life. And he offered what we might call a "Goldilocks principle." Doing well—virtue—is about being neither too much nor too little.

An easy example: courage is a virtue, it is a good thing, something we want to develop in ourselves and in our children. A lack of courage renders us too afraid to act. But an excess of courage leads us to take unnecessary risks and can cause harm. The Goldilocks principle can act something like the bumpers in the bowling alley. We have a pretty wide path in the middle, with lots of room to veer left or right, but we don't want to end out in the gutter on either side.

Civic engagement is not just about active participation in the political sphere. It includes all of the ways we engage in our communities—coaching youth sports, volunteering in a soup kitchen, choosing to shop at your local farmers market, helping elderly or sick neighbors. Civic engagement can take on any number of forms, but it is always active.

A lack of civic engagement on the part of people can lead to a form of quietism that opens the door for harm to be done to my neighbor. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed this when he called out the "polite racism of white liberals" who were afraid of the world changing too fast. A lack of engagement can also be a refusal to accept responsibility. How many bumper stickers are sold after each election declaring that the driver is not responsible for the current state of affairs because they didn't vote for x or y?

But on the other side, a civic engagement that imposes a particular understanding of faith, or merges faith and patriotism—often mixed with racism—leads to a dangerous Christian nationalism that is neither Christian nor patriotic. (Some of you discussed this issue in Session 2!) Christian nationalism is not Christian, because it equates a particular human government with God’s will, something Jesus rejects. It is not patriotic, because it attributes divine inspiration to the Constitution, which itself rejects all references to divine authority. This identification of Christian principles with this nation is not about faithfulness to Jesus but about power and a fear of the loss of power.

The Lutheran commitment to loving the neighbor, living in community, and serving the common good invites us beyond quietism but not into a nationalism or equating faith with partisanship. It invites us to explore our calling in the public, political sphere, whether that be to serve in elected office, to advocate for issues that matter to us, or to being an active part of an educated electorate.

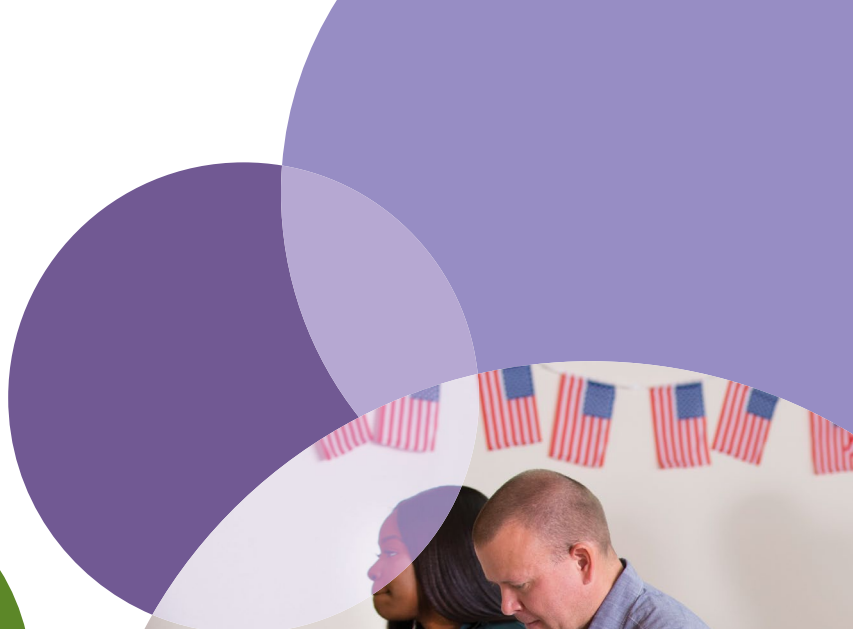
Lutherans are theologically “because/therefore” people. What this means is that we do not believe that we are required to do any particular works in order to save ourselves. Because there is nothing we can do to add to—or subtract from—the saving work of Jesus, therefore we are free to spend our energy on behalf of the neighbor, in the service of the common good.

We do not teach that Jesus will be angry or condemning if one chooses not to engage in civic or political life. But we also believe that we are, in fact, called by God to do so. It is one of the ways God invites us to cooperate with God for the sake of the world God so loves.

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

Our commitment is to lift up the body of Christ through words and actions that:

- **Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as I expect them to do unto me.**
- **Model respectful and careful listening, without interrupting.**
- **Strive to understand each other's insights and experiences.**
- **Speak honestly, as an individual rather than for a group.**
- **Do not presume that others speak on behalf of a group.**
- **Utilize any technology constructively and not as a distraction.**
- **Step up to share thoughts, then step back to allow others to share theirs.**
- **Be mindful of viewpoints not represented.**
- **Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in the group and our civic life.**



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 6



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



SESSION 6: HOW DO WE GO IN PEACE TO LOVE AND SERVE THE LORD IN CIVIC LIFE?

Discerning the callings of discipleship, both corporate and individual.

SUPPLIES

- Participant Guide (one per person)
- Covenant Handout (one per person)
- Pens
- Electronic device with video cued up: <https://vimeo.com/788806942>
- Participant Response Form (link provided for online response; print copies for participants who prefer paper)
- Hymnals (optional)
- Piano or other accompaniment (optional)
- Video transcript (optional, for the hearing-impaired)
- Consider sharing with group or discussing one of the On-the-Ground case studies.

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

Welcome participants to the sixth session of the study. If there are any new attendees, introduce yourself. Then read together the welcome paragraphs in the Participant Guide:

PG The foundation of our Lutheran identity is built upon the understanding that salvation is a gift of God not earned by our good works, political rightness, or moral purity. Secure in God’s love and grace, we are then freed to live our lives in response to that love, in worship and service to God and God’s creation.

Worship is the starting point for our faithful response. In worship, we relearn that we are the body of Christ, that we are at work in the world as the hands, feet, and mouth of our Lord. We believe God is present not just in our buildings where we worship but in all corners of the world—and within us, as well. Therefore it is logical that our faith will be lived outside our church walls, including in our civic engagement, as we seek to live out our baptismal promises to “strive for justice and peace in all the world.”

Invite participants to think about the reasons they come to worship and to jot down a couple ideas in the box.

What are your reasons for coming to worship?

CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

Read the following:

During times of political and social upheaval and polarization between peoples, it is especially important that Christians model civil discourse and engagement in the political sphere in ways that reflect God’s love and grace amid the differences, division, and disagreements of a complicated world. Let’s take a moment to review the conversation covenant together.

Review the covenant. Check in about how it has gone in previous sessions and how you can end positively. Then read the following:

By now, you understand that not everyone will agree on any given issues outside the most basic statements of faith. Let us agree that we don't have to agree. Our faith equips us for a life of discernment. For our final session, we ask you to recommit to modeling holy conversation in a way that respects how others come to a different point of view and give space for disagreement, wonder, and new understandings. The point of these study groups is not to make members of ELCA faith communities of one opinion but to model civility, because we are one in Christ, with many voices and views.

Invite participant volunteers to read the opening prayer and Scripture. Lead the opening litany, then sing all or part of a hymn if appropriate for your gathering space.

OPENING PRAYER (Adapted from *All Creation Sings* and ancient prayer.)

PG Sovereign God, your Son, Jesus, lived within the structures of society. Empower us to be courageous disciples and responsible citizens. Grant that our life in the public realm be grounded in love for our neighbors, care for the vulnerable, and respect for the common life we share. Keep us working and praying for the day when your justice will roll down like waters and your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Replenish our strength and stir up our hope as we look for signs of your coming reign. Grant your church wisdom and boldness in times of quiet and times of trouble. Fill us with the peace that passes understanding—the peace of Jesus Christ, our Savior. **Amen.**

SCRIPTURE

PG “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink

of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27).

LITANY

Leader: People of God, we are called to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

All: Yet we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Leader: Let us turn our hearts toward those who hunger in any way, that all may know your care.

All: We pray for peace and justice in the world, the nations and those in authority, the poor and oppressed.

Leader: God, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

All: Now raise us up as the body of Christ for the world. Amen.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (ELW 841, TFF 296, LBW 562)
- “Go to the World” (ACS 991)
- “The Church of Christ, in Every Age” (ELW 729, LBW 433)
- “God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind” (ELW 400)

HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

Invite participants to pair up with someone they don't know well or know to be often of differing opinions regarding current events. Invite one to speak, the other to listen. Then switch roles. Set a timer for two or three minutes, for instance, to alert partners when to switch. Participants may pick which prompts they answer.

- **Tell a story about a time you became friends with someone whom you previously disliked or who held opposing**

views on a significant issue. How did it come to be? What surprised you?

- Describe how it feels in your body when you are having a heated discussion with someone about a polarizing issue.
- Consider your deepest longings for the future of humanity. If you could gift one thing to the generation not yet born, what would it be and why?
- How does coming to in-person worship shape you and help you face what the week may hold?

PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

Ask participants to share observations from the time between group sessions.

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read Luke 10:25-37, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan":

PG ²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper,

and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Form small groups of three or four people to discuss the following questions in the Participant Guide:

- The parable of the Good Samaritan would have been shocking to its original audience. The Samaritans and Jews had a long-standing hostility that grew from political and religious differences. Telling a story with the hero being Samaritan would have flipped all understanding of "them" versus "us." What might such shocking kindness and compassion from "them" toward "us" look like in our country?
- Jesus' telling of this story surely invites us to be vulnerable for the sake of others, especially showing hospitality to enemies, those with whom we have historically lived in opposition. At the risk of sounding naïve, consider some of the most hated people in recent American history. Why do or don't you think the terrible events of 9/11 could have been avoided had the attackers had been invited into relationship with the people they hated?
- How does it change your potentially hostile engagements with others to hear that the answer to "Who is my neighbor" is "the one you want to avoid or the one who hates you"?
- Being followers of Christ naturally leads us to challenge the cultural and political factions that can box us in and divide us: we are not "red" or "blue" but God's children. In that freedom, we don't have to always like each other or agree on much beyond our basic understanding of faith in God. We don't have to restrict our message or efforts in the world fainthearted positions that won't offend anyone. What does it mean to you that you are free to stand up for what you believe is right through your faith-based lens?

- A recent study¹ found that, in churches, synagogues, and mosques, there is a higher-than-average rate of friendships formed across disparities in income. That is in keeping with religious belief lived out in practice. Those same countercultural instincts can also help bridge other differences, including ideological and political polarization. With that in mind, how do you think our church can be a model for civil civic engagement?
- What will Jesus' command to "Go and do likewise" look like in your civic life?

PLAY VIDEO (12 minutes long) | <https://vimeo.com/788806942>

Make sure all can see and hear the video. Invite participants to jot down notes on the chart in their Participant Guide. The empty column signifies how different parts of worship may relate to how we are sent into the world. Emphasize to participants that there are no wrong answers.

WORSHIP COMPONENT	WORSHIP ELEMENT * **	EXPLANATION	HOW THIS MAY RELATE TO OUR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
GATHERING	Invocation	Calling on God's presence in our gathering.	
	Congession and Forgiveness	Asking for forgiveness for when we have sinned and fallen short as individuals or in the structures of society. Living in a spirit of humility and forgiveness; letting go of resentment.	
WORD	Liturgy: Kyrie, Hymn of Praise, Prayer of the Day	"Kyrie eleison" means "Lord, have mercy," a cry for help. The Hymn of Praise gives thanks to God. The Prayer of the Day or collect typically summarizes of the theme of the readings.	
	Scripture Readings	God's word from prophets, letters, poetry, law, gospel, wisdom sayings, and accounts of joys and struggles in the early church.	
	Sermon	Proclamation, explanation, and application of God's word to everyday life.	
	Creed	Statement of faith and grounding in our shared belief.	
	Prayers of the People	Prayers are directed to life in the church and in society. Prayers give thanks and seek healing, faith, inspiration, wisdom, and comfort.	
	Hymns (in all components)	Voices are raised together, expressing all our joys and pains.	
MEAL	Sharing the Peace	A sign of our unity, shared with all people.	
	Offering/Offertory	Gifts to God that support the church and its work in society.	

¹ Raj Chetty, et al., "Social Capital I: Measurement and Associations with Economic Mobility," Nature, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04996-4>.

	Lord's Prayer	Taught to disciples by Jesus, the prayer invites us to approach God with familiarity as we pray for our needs and forgiveness.	
	Preface/Sanctus ("Holy, Holy, Holy"), Words of Institution, Distribution	We gather all people around Jesus' table. Eucharistic hospitality is practiced, affirming that all people are loved by God.	
	Post-communion Canticle ("Thank the Lord") and Prayer of Thanksgiving	We thank God for the grace we have been given.	
SENDING	Blessing and Dismissal	We are sent in thanksgiving for service in God's world.	

*Not an exhaustive list.

** Though the elements may be similar in Lutheran churches across the globe as well as in other Christian assemblies, there is rightfully much diversity in their expression. Worship of God is naturally shaped by the culture and context of worshippers.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the video, discuss the following in small groups. Shuffle groups if size allows.

- PG
1. When you listen to the words of the prayers of the people, you might notice that some of the things prayed for are tall orders: peace, the end of suffering, for all to be fed, and so on. Why do you think this is important?
 2. Hatred, animosity, and division have always existed in the world, including in the time and space Jesus was born into, lived in, and was hung on a cross in. How does the current time feel different from other eras of your life?
 3. Our faith is lived out in the world, so when the world or our country has problems and challenges, we have problems and challenges too. If you were a pastor, how would you decide which potentially divisive topics to address in a sermon? Should there be anything churches cannot talk about? How do you react when you disagree with something said in prayers, biblical readings, or a sermon?
 4. As the video points out, there have been many examples of churchgoers who engaged in very un-Christlike activities that harmed others. How do you gauge where to draw the line between respecting differences of opinion and condoning opinions and actions that are hateful, dangerous, or threatening to our democracy?
 5. Part of our baptismal calling is to "strive for justice and peace in all the world." Most people don't automatically relate their faith to their interactions on social media. How do you see your faith and this calling lived out in your online presence?
 6. Repeating inaccurate, polarizing news is a form of the false witness named in the Eighth Commandment. How do you think churches should address the challenge of modern technology that has likely contributed to people's rising mistrust of news media and each other? How does your discipleship factor into your news media choices?
 7. Advocating for issues (especially those connected to biblical commands that relate to hunger, justice, economic insecurity, refugees, and so on), being an informed and active voter, serving in elected office, and praying for our elected officials can all be considered acts of discipleship. How do you see each of these examples of civic participation as arenas in which to reflect God's love and grace in a complicated world? How do you relate them to what we see, do, and hear in worship? Why do you think civic participation as it relates to our discipleship as followers of Christ has often been ignored or disregarded?

SEND (5-10 minutes)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Invite original participant pairings to group together again. Discuss the following:

- PG
1. What ideas do you have for fostering productive dialogue in this congregation as a model for the ministry of reconciliation?
 2. How do you understand your belief and faith in God to be intertwined with your civic participation? How has this study changed your understanding of the civic engagement of the Christian?

GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

As time allows, invite participants to share what new insights they have gained about practicing faith in the world from today's session.

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

We believe that, because there is no aspect of life in which God is not present and active, we are called to live out in society the faith we practice in worship. Civic engagement is inspired by our faith—faith grounded in an understanding of God's love and grace. As children of God, we draw no distinction between the different aspects of our lives; our civic engagement is an extension of our discipleship. Our challenge to love our neighbor (including our enemy) is a continuation of our love of God. Our words posted on social media become our prayers. Our worship at church is taken into the world through our civic engagement; our concern for the hungry, the vulnerable, and the oppressed; and our interaction with all God's children. We are called, gathered, then sent to live our faith in the world.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

Pass out copies of Participant Response Form and point out link for online response in Participant Guide.

In this final session, you again have a chance to share your thoughts with the task force as part of the social statement development process. Please complete one version, knowing that your responses will be read by members of the task force.

PG

Complete the response form either online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DL69SHR> or on paper. Scan and email your paper form to civicsandfaith@elca.org or send it by U.S. mail to Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Attn: Civics and Faith, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101. Your feedback will be read by the task force as part of the social statement development process.

CLOSING PRAYER

Close in prayer, using your own words or the following:

Gracious God, you have bundled us together in life and given us gifts—the gift of your church gathered and sent, the gift of government for the safety and flourishing of human life, and the gift of each other. May this study, the conversations that formed it, and the social statement that will grow from it be a blessing to a nation and people in need of healing. May the servants of your church, guided by the Holy Spirit and gathered around the love of Jesus Christ, reflect that love in a world in need, in the unity of our mission of the good news in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

PROMPTS FOR ACTION OUTSIDE THE STUDY GROUP

- PG • Read about the “One Small Step” movement from the creator of StoryCorps, Inc. Create a “Small Steps” group in your congregation that meets periodically, with the goal of forming friendships among people of opposing viewpoints as a model for bridging divides.
- Form current-events small groups that meet (perhaps over a meal) for moral deliberation and considering different responses to current societal issues. Consider partnering with another faith group or denomination to enrich interaction among diverse groups.

ARTICLES

PG “The Church in the Public Space. A Study Document of the Lutheran World Federation” (2021), www.lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-church-public-space-study-document-lutheran-world-federation.

Ninke, Rebecca, “Loving Your Neighbor, Your Enemy, and God,” Sparkhouse Blog, Nov. 3, 2020, <https://blog.wearesparkhouse.org/loving-your-neighbor-your-enemy-and-god>.

WEBSITES

The “One Small Step” Project from StoryCorps—coming together in conversations to feel less torn apart: <https://storycorps.org/discover/onesmallstep/>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s “Publicly Engaged Church” page: ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church

BOOKS

Brubaker, David R., *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization* (Fortress Press, 2019).

Erlander, Daniel, *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism As a Way of Life* (Fortress Press, 2020).

SESSION 6 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

In many of our congregations, at the end of the worship service, the pastor or assisting minister proclaims some version of “Go in peace; serve the Lord!” And the gathered congregation responds, “Thanks be to God!” We say “go in peace,” but how do we live that out? What does it mean to go in peace and serve the Lord in our often-challenging civic life?

For ELCA Lutherans, worship is the central act of the church. Established by Scripture and reaffirmed by our confessional documents, worship of God is the means by which the word is proclaimed, sacraments are given, forgiveness is announced, and the mission of discipleship is reinforced for our witness and service in the world.

Almost everything we do in worship, from the gathering to the sending, prepares us to join God’s activity in our world. The dynamic movement of the liturgy may allow us to relax in God’s mercy but always, and at every turn, prepares us to be sent forth into the world to work for justice and peace.

Thus, none of the elements of worship exist in isolation from the rest of our lives. And rightfully so: as God’s people, the body of Christ, we live out God’s ministry in civic life just as Jesus did—in our vocations, our families, our relationships and interactions with others, and our civic engagement—not inside the church building. We are a people who do not stay but are sent.

But do you ever wonder how 30 or 300 people sitting in the pews can come away with different ideas of how to live out faith? There’s no one way to incorporate faith into our civic life, but what we practice in worship can inform and be incorporated into the rest of our lives.

First, we must acknowledge that church is inherently a countercultural place. We are in but not of the world, so in worship we practice seeing the world differently. In church, you might walk in and sit down next to a stranger or even someone you strongly disagree with. You greet them with a gesture of peace. You hear things in the Scriptures and sermon that you wouldn’t hear anywhere else. You say and do things that would seem strange in another setting.

The order of our worship generally consists of four components—gathering, word, meal, and sending—that are common to Christian churches around the world. Though these components are much the same, there is much diversity in their expression. Unity in Christ, not uniformity in practice, is emphasized.

Within those four components of worship are different elements of the service in which we believe the Holy Spirit is present, all of which rightfully are shaped by local culture and tradition.

First, we invite God’s presence in our worship, and most often continue with the confession and forgiveness, when we acknowledge the presence of sin. We begin our time together not bragging about what we got right but confessing where we missed the mark as we consider what implications our sins have for others. We are invited to release resentment for those who have wronged us as we acknowledge God’s forgiveness, freely given for our own shortcomings. This process invites a sense of humility before God and in the world. Our faith is not in our own infallibility, but in God’s grace. The pastor then declares God’s forgiveness.

The service of the Word includes the liturgy with Kyrie (which means a cry for help and strength) and the Hymn of Praise to God. This can come in many different forms, whether in an elegant church building or around a campfire. A prayer is followed by the readings—which may include Old Testament and Psalm readings from the Hebrew Bible, a New Testament reading, and a Gospel reading. Many of our Scriptures reflect the holy struggles our ancestors in the faith had in figuring out how to apply faith to life outside of worship, just as we have been doing in this civic study.

The sermon that follows is also the proclamation of God's word, though some hit the mark better than others! The declaration of the love of God shown through Christ crucified and risen is the foundation of all preaching. Life is claimed, even in the midst of death, discouragement, and sorrow, with words that typically aim to be informative spiritually while offering relevant tie-ins for the application of faith.

The sermon, of course, is the obvious place to address current matters related to our civic engagement as followers of Christ. But not surprisingly, many pastors fear doing just that. As one mentor told me, if everyone loves your sermon week after week, you're probably not doing your job. But this is a challenging line to walk because of how members may react when preachers address controversial issues. The phrase "separation of church and state," of course, was never meant to mean that our faith shouldn't inform our voting, civic engagement, stances on issues, and so on. While it is not the preacher's role to tell you which candidates or party to vote for, it is the calling of rostered leaders to connect Scriptures and our understanding of law and gospel to contemporary issues, including those touching on civic engagement.

An immediate response to the hearing of the Word is the confession of faith in the triune God through one of the creeds of the church.

Likewise, prayers follow where the congregation lifts up special concerns from the local to the international, gives thanks to God, prays for those in authority, and remembers those who have died. The prayers of the people reflect the bridge between worship and world.

Before moving into the meal, the peace is shared. This is a sign of our unity, grounded in the peace of the Lord, and a symbol of our intention to live into it, both in worship and beyond.

The offering is collected, both the monetary collection and the symbolic offering of ourselves. The funds contribute to the support of the church and are generally also shared to address human need in many forms.

And then, Holy Communion. It is a shared meal, instituted by Jesus before his death on the cross. We practice eucharistic hospitality, affirming that all people are created in the image of God, opening the table to all believers, and sharing Christ's meal with friends, strangers, and those with whom we disagree. We understand it is Christ's table, not our own.

Integrated into all four components of worship are hymns in which we sing our praises and laments, often echoing words from Scripture. We join our voices with the heavenly chorus, understanding that we are part of something larger than ourselves that transcends that moment in time and space.

The dismissal from the service sends us in thanksgiving from what we have received from God into service to God's world.

We've got our work cut out for us.

For thousands of years people have been figuring out how to live together. Even figuring out how to worship together has triggered division! The rise of polarization, distrust, and contempt for those who do not think as we do is certainly not a new phenomenon, but technology and other social dynamics of our era have given it a new ferocity in our daily lives. These elements aren't going away, so we need to learn to live with each other during difficult times in a way that reflects our faith in God as the undergirding of all our lives.

How? We must remember that it is the good news in Jesus Christ that unites us.

As followers of Christ, we have been invited into a way of seeing the world through the lens of our faith. It is not the easiest path! It is not a means of earning God's love. But it is our baptismal calling. We are to "live among God's faithful people; hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper; proclaim the good news

of God in Christ through word and deed; serve all people following the example of Jesus; and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”

To follow this calling, we must resist scorn and hatred of those who do not think, look, act, or vote just as we do. We must also remember that, for instance, some slaveholders, Nazi leaders, Klan members, and people who committed atrocities against Native American children at boarding schools were regular churchgoers. We can't assume that church attendance automatically sends us out as good citizens; we are challenged to consider how our faith is alive and whether our words and deeds, including in our civic engagement, align with Christ's teachings.

We benefit when we worship God together with people of conflicting views and opinions, remembering we are all fallible human beings. I hope your participation in this study has helped you consider how faith relates to discipleship within a democracy and civic life in an always-complicated world. On behalf of our task force, I express our appreciation for your commitment of time and civil conversation.

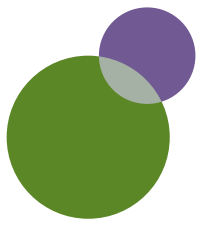
A thank-you to you if you have been filling out your response form through each session. If you haven't, I remind you to fill out a response form today. The task force wants to hear what ELCA members think!

In closing, I say, “Go in peace and serve the Lord in your civic life!”

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

Our commitment is to lift up the body of Christ through words and actions that:

- **Follow the Golden Rule: do unto others as I expect them to do unto me.**
- **Model respectful and careful listening, without interrupting.**
- **Strive to understand each other's insights and experiences.**
- **Speak honestly, as an individual rather than for a group.**
- **Do not presume that others speak on behalf of a group.**
- **Utilize any technology constructively and not as a distraction.**
- **Step up to share thoughts, then step back to allow others to share theirs.**
- **Be mindful of viewpoints not represented.**
- **Fervently seek the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing in the group and our civic life.**



ON THE GROUND: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY VERSUS NATIONAL IDENTITY

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

INTRODUCTION

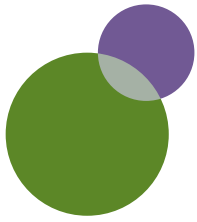
Lutherans believe their identities are found in God. In baptism we are marked with the cross of Christ, which binds us to God and neighbor in love. But we live in the world through a diverse and often messy mix of important relationships—family, friends, and fellow members of religious and civic communities. When the facets of our identity intersect, sometimes we wrestle with our identity as Christians versus our identity as people with different historical, legal, political, and cultural connections.

Since the arrival of European settlers and colonizers in North America through the founding of the United States and into the present time, the role of religion and ideas about God’s providence have fueled conflict and presented radically contrasting visions for life in this country. Some have drawn on the language of freedom and blessing to paint a picture of liberation flourishing in a new land. Others have noted the bitter contradictions between the divine peace proclaimed in Scripture and the realities of theft, enslavement, forced assimilation, and sanctioned violence in our national history.

These different visions have been revealed in current debates about “Christian nationalism.” Put simply, Christian nationalism in the United States of America describes a set of beliefs and practices where Christianity holds a central and necessary role in the country’s founding and a continued role in sustaining its values and future. Faith and patriotism are dangerously conflated. This movement often comes packaged with the idea that the survival of the nation and the church are yoked together, such that some version of dominant Christianity is necessary for the United States to continue, and faithful citizens are seen as battling against other religious and nonreligious traditions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What expressions of Christian nationalism have you noticed in recent events, either on the national stage or among your family, friends, and neighbors?
2. If somebody announced during a Bible study or church function that the United States is a “Christian nation,” how would you interpret this statement? What is an appropriate Christian response?
3. Christian identity has been claimed by political movements as varied as the Ku Klux Klan, the German National Socialists, antiapartheid activists in Namibia, and civil rights activists in the U.S. How do you faithfully assess when Christian identity can be appropriately yoked with a movement?
4. How should Christians distinguish between Christian nationalism and other forms of patriotism or civic pride?
5. How does the Lutheran teaching about God’s “two kingdoms” or “two governments” support or undermine Christian nationalism? Why is or isn’t there ever a time when one’s civic identity should overtake one’s Christian identity?



ON THE GROUND: COUNTY SUPERVISOR WEIGHS INDUSTRIAL-SCALE SOLAR DECISIONS

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

INTRODUCTION

Wendy wasn't sure how she should vote. The following week, she and the other county supervisors would consider a one-year moratorium on industrial-scale solar projects. From the phone calls and emails she had been receiving, she knew that many of her constituents supported the moratorium. Some—in fact a very vocal group—preferred that the county ban such projects long-term.

The issue came to a head when the investor-owned utility that had operated a coal-fired power plant in their rural county for 75 years announced its intention to close the plant and replace at least half its generating capacity with a large, industrial-scale solar project. The company emphasized that the project was in full compliance with existing zoning laws and aligned with the company's commitment to transition as quickly as possible from fossil fuels to a clean-energy future.

Wendy could see both sides of the issue. On the one hand:

- Given the rapid onset of climate change, the United States needed to transition away from fossil fuels and toward renewables as quickly as possible. Wendy loves her grandchildren and thinks often of their future in a changing climate.
- The new solar facility would restore at least half the tax base that would be lost when the coal-fired power plant closed, thereby lessening the long-term burden on county taxpayers.
- Electricity from the solar arrays would be generated during peak hours, when electricity demand is high, and complement wind energy generated.
- Three of the county's larger farms would benefit from substantial annual land-lease payments to host the solar arrays on their land for the next 20 years.

On the other hand:

- Many of Wendy's constituents worried that this industrial solar project would take agricultural land out of production and thus harm the county's agricultural base.
- Though installation of the solar panels would create many construction jobs in the short term, the facility would not replace the 40-50 jobs lost with the coal plant closure.
- To her constituents' irritation, the power generated by the solar arrays would be transported over high-voltage lines to urban communities in other states and not all consumed locally. However, this was nothing new; the coal-fired plant exported its power in the same way.
- The electric utility would likely seek to recover the construction costs for its new solar facility through a rate increase, and even small rate increases were felt by those with the lowest incomes.

On Sunday, sitting in her usual pew in the Lutheran church where she had been baptized, confirmed, and married, Wendy found herself pondering the larger context of these arguments:

- Loss of farmland is a serious concern, but its primary cause, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Farmland Information Center, is not renewable energy development but urban sprawl.¹ No one was complaining about the beautiful new neighborhoods going up where there were once rows of corn.
- American agriculture is enormously productive, and many boast that American farmers “feed the world,” yet at least 40% of U.S. corn production is used to produce ethanol for gas tanks. Most of the rest becomes silage for animal feed, a step away from food on plates or milk in glasses.
- Wendy suspected that some opposition to the solar project was due to the threat electric cars pose to the ethanol industry. The three farmers who would host the solar facility were engaged in traditional row-crop production. They had done the math and determined that they could make more money by leasing their land for solar energy production than by growing corn and beans for ethanol and biodiesel.
- Wendy also suspected that some opposed the facility because only a few farmers in their county would benefit directly from the project. In contrast, many farmers benefited from hosting wind turbines on their land, which explained why there was greater support for large wind farms.

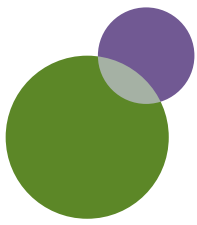
As Wendy pondered how to vote on the moratorium, she wrestled with three key questions:

- To whom is she accountable—the present generations who elected her and expect her to represent their interests or the future generations who would benefit from the reduced greenhouse gas emissions and less expensive renewable energy produced by the solar facility?
- To what extent should county-level officials make decisions that support or hinder the national expansion of renewable energy, given the federal government’s recent commitment to increase the amount of renewable energy powering the U.S. economy?
- What constitutes leadership by elected officials? Is it simply a matter of discerning the opinions of constituents, or can it include taking unpopular stands for good reasons?
- Did the ELCA have any guidance for her as she considered her responsibilities as a county supervisor?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What considerations should affect Wendy’s vote?
2. How should Wendy’s faith be woven into her decision?
3. What would you choose to do if you were her?
4. Have you had similar issues where you live?

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), “[Farms and Land in America](#),” February 2022; Farmland Information Center, “[Farms Under Threat: The State of the States](#),” American Farmland Trust, 2020.



ON THE GROUND: FAKE NEWS AND FALSE WITNESS

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

INTRODUCTION

The success of the Reformation was enabled by innovations in the printed word. Gutenberg’s printing press allowed for reformers to respond quickly to challenges and share ideas with readers near and far. Martin Luther and other Reformation leaders made strategic use of educational and controversial writings, often paired with evocative images, to impress their ideas upon people. The power of words heard and received is a central conviction in Lutheran theology; we believe that, through the Holy Spirit, the Word continues to shape us.

This soaring and inspirational hope for the word is often harder to see in our civic life, especially now, when divisive and dishonest words do more to shape our lives together, instruction seems less important than outcome, and “truth” is often reduced to whatever will turn out voters or demonize opponents. How do we, as people of faith, understand and respond to these polarizing trends?

“A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on.”

—C.H. Spurgeon, *Gems From Spurgeon* (1859)

The Eighth Commandment:
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

—Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*

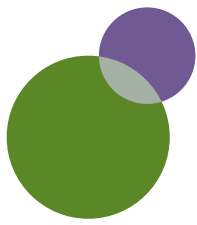
CASE STUDY

Imagine the following scenario:

As you gather for Sunday dinner with your extended family, your cousin begins to talk loudly about the threat to the nation posed by right-wing extremists. “You didn’t see the story on MSNBC last night?” he shouts. “You really missed something! Let me send you this webpage I just read; it lays out their real strategy to capture liberals and construct labor zones, sending the Texas National Guard into California to set up a puppet government.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Fake news is a form of false witness, a sin named in the Eighth Commandment. When we confess our sins in worship, we ask God to “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name.” Do you find it easier to notice when others are bearing false witness than to notice when you are? How can we check and correct ourselves?
2. Many people don’t connect our commandment against bearing false witness with believing or spreading political lies or half-truths. How likely are you to accept false witness related to politics when it comes from media or a person you agree with politically? How has social media affected your inclination to spread unsubstantiated claims as truth?
3. Social scientists often talk about social and emotional barriers. Social barriers relate to our individual experiences related to gender, ethnicity, culture, economic conditions, and so on. Emotional barriers relate to how we feel. For example, if you feel angry or threatened, your brain won’t process information in the same way as if you feel calm. What social and emotional barriers do you encounter when you challenge false witness in the form of misunderstandings, lies, conspiracy theories, and so on? What are your ideas or best experiences on how to discuss difficult topics in ways that deescalate polarization?
4. When you are corrected or challenged about something you’ve said, written, or shared on social media that is, at best, unverified or, at worst, false witness, how do you respond? How would you respond if your pastor quietly or publicly asked you to stop spreading certain information because doing so constituted false witness?
5. What might Luther’s suggestion to see our neighbor “in the best possible light” mean for our political discourse? How do we draw the line so that we don’t tolerate injustice or condone evil?
6. A recent topic of public discourse that has triggered great polarization relates to whether children are taught all aspects of American history in school—the good as well as the bad. How do you relate this debate to our Lutheran understanding of false witness?
7. Do you think Christian education should be limited to biblical stories and church history, or can your congregation be a forum for critically evaluating factual statements from media and personal contacts?



ON THE GROUND: GENERATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS OF PUBLIC POLICY

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

This is the story of 896 W. Leavy Street in Chicago, Ill.

The first couple to live at 896 W. Leavy were Magnus and Emma Olson. Their respective families had both immigrated from Norway to the United States in search of a better life after their rocky family farms couldn't be divided up any further. Magnus' parents found work in a factory; eventually, they were able to rent a safe, cozy apartment.

Upon graduating from high school, Magnus was drafted into the Navy and served honorably in World War II. He returned home to a grateful nation and married Emma, his high school sweetheart. Through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the “G.I. Bill”), Magnus and Emma were able to purchase the newly built home at 896 W. Leavy. As the babies came, they felt as if they were living the American dream.

Magnus and Emma had many happy times at 896 W. Leavy. After many years, however, they heard talk about the neighborhood being “in decline.” Many of the families who had raised their children together after the war were selling their homes and moving to the suburbs. Magnus and Emma decided they should use the equity they had built up in 896 W. Leavy to buy a bigger home that would be a better investment. When the aging couple decided to move into senior housing, they sold the home in the suburbs and used the proceeds to help pay for their grandchildren's college costs, proud that all of them were able to continue their education.

The next couple to call 896 W. Leavy home were John and Gloria Luther. Both were descended from ancestors who had survived slavery. Their parents were born in the South and, as part of the Great Migration, had moved to Chicago in search of a better life for their children.

John had served in the U.S. Army and, shortly after the war ended, returned to Chicago with an honorable discharge. John noted that he was treated respectfully when fighting for democracy in France but felt like a second-class citizen back in the U.S. After he and Gloria married, they lived with her parents. When they approached a bank to inquire about a mortgage, benefits of the G.I. Bill were not extended to John because of his skin color.ⁱ Thousands of African American veterans received the same treatment.

Eventually John and Gloria entered a contract for deed with the real estate company that had purchased 896 W. Leavy from the Olsons. The company priced the home much higher than they had paid Magnus and Emma. The interest rate was exorbitant, and if a payment was missed, the company could take the house back. This was all in the contract, but to John and Gloria, its terms seemed like the only option if they wanted to raise their children in a single-family house.

John and Gloria's family grew and thrived at 896 W. Leavy. The parents penciled the heights of their children on a length of wood trim just as Magnus and Emma had with their children. The steep contract payments prevented John and Gloria from saving, but they made the deal work until John was injured on the job and let go. Gloria's wages weren't enough to cover the contract payments. Tragically close to the end of their contract, John and Gloria were evicted from their house and left with no equity.ⁱⁱ They moved in with an adult daughter while John mended. With support from their children, they think they can retire and move into a subsidized apartment. But they grieve not being able to leave the house or funds from its sale to their children. Instead, they are relying on them for support.

The house at 896 W. Leavy sat vacant for a while. A burst pipe caused significant damage. The house was sold to investors who had been quietly taking over the neighborhood by tearing down small homes and building trendy houses in the same footprint. As developers moved in, costs went up and families moved out.

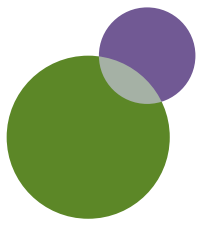
Now 896 W. Leavy is leased by four unrelated young professionals, none of whom is married or can afford to rent, much less buy, property on their own. Drinking coffee over the house's granite kitchen counter, they discuss their varying levels of student and credit card debt. Daycare and diapers just don't fit into the budget.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The same G.I. Bill that helped build a middle-class white America was denied to Black America. What other effects do you think systemic inequality have had on education, physical and mental health, redlining, crime, civil rights and so on?
2. Share, as you are willing, the impact of generational wealth on your family.
3. What role does the church have in naming injustices from the past that affect us today?
4. What role does the church have in correcting injustices from the past that affect us today?

i Martin, David, "Some Black Veterans Were Denied G.I. Bill Benefits After World War II. Some Lawmakers Want to Correct the Historical Record.," CBS News, December 27, 2021, www.cbsnews.com/news/g-i-bill-revival-black-veterans-congress/.

ii Moore, Natalie, "Contract Buying Robbed Black Families in Chicago of Billions," National Public Radio, May 30, 2019, www.npr.org/local/309/2019/05/30/728122642/contract-buying-robbed-black-families-in-chicago-of-billions.



ON THE GROUND: MIGRANT WORKERS

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how much we depend on the labor of essential workers. The heroes of the early pandemic were not only the scientists who developed a vaccine in record time but also the average people working in grocery stores, those harvesting and processing food, and those caring for our sick and elderly. Many of the hands that feed and care for us are migrants’ hands. Despite the debt of gratitude we owe to those who do some of the hardest, lowest-paid essential work, our society continues to vilify immigrant workers. Often they are treated as a problem to be solved rather than human beings who deserve the same respect and dignity as anyone else.

Imagine a member of your congregation is a young woman, the mother of two small children. For the last five years she has been productively employed as a migrant worker in a meatpacking facility. A recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid on another meatpacking facility resulted in more than 100 workers being arrested and deported, leaving her feeling panicked about her immigration status. As a teenager, she was sexually assaulted by gang members, and her grandmother, with whom she lived, sent her to the U.S. They both felt that the only way of keeping her safe was for her to leave the country, even if this meant coming to the United States illegally. Because she was a minor when she arrived, a cousin connected her with an immigration attorney to help her apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status to avoid deportation. A significant amount of money was paid to the lawyer, who told the young woman that she had submitted her application to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. But later, watching the news, she learned that the lawyer had defrauded her and many other clients, keeping the money but never submitting the application paperwork. Everything is in limbo.

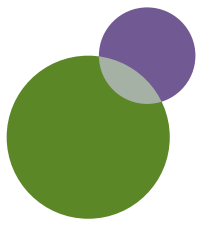
Her primary concern now is for her children should she be arrested and deported. Because they were born in the U.S., they are citizens. She reached out to her pastor, who convened a group of church members to discern how the congregation might best help her. In researching her situation, the group discovered that there are many other cases like hers in their community. Understanding the seriousness of leaving one’s family and country, the contribution that migrants make to society, and the terrible anxiety of living in limbo, they wonder how they might advocate for people in similar situations. They have named their group the Leviticus 19:34 Committee: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do or don’t you believe it appropriate for the church to get involved in this issue? Do you consider it political, or biblical, or both?
2. What are appropriate ways for the church to be involved?
3. What principles should guide the church if it decides to advocate for U.S. residents who lack legal immigration status?

ELCA RESOURCES ON MIGRATION

- The ELCA's "Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities" strategy (AMMPARO; in Spanish, *amparo* means "the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage"), [ELCA.org/AMMPARO](https://www.elca.org/AMMPARO).
- The ELCA's social message "Immigration" (1998): download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ImmigrationSM.pdf.
- ELCA World Hunger, "Migration Policy: Hunger Policy Podcast December 2021," blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/immigrationpodcast/.
- Learn about accompanying migrant children and families through the Guardian Angel Program as the physical presence of the church in the courtroom, vimeo.com/157458987.



ON THE GROUND: SEPARATION OF CHURCH (CHOIR) AND STATE

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

Your church choir has been invited by a local civic group to sing at an annual food pantry fundraiser. In prior years this event rotated among some of the larger churches in town. The public was invited (donations welcome!), and many church choirs would present Christmas songs. The entire event was broadcast live on a local radio station, and local businesses would staff the donation lines. This year, to protect older choir members during the pandemic, choirs have been invited to record a few songs. A volunteer will compile the videos into one show, and the entire thing will play on the municipality’s public access station. A phone number to donate to the food pantry will be embedded onscreen.

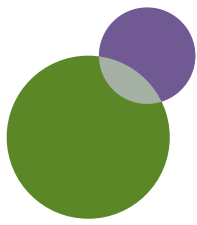
After seeing the plan for the fundraiser on the minutes of the municipality’s council meeting, a local activist from the Freedom From Religion Foundation complains to the mayor and town council that featuring Christian music on the taxpayer-funded public access television station amounts to endorsing a religion.

On advice from the municipal lawyer, the council advises the volunteer leaders for the pantry fundraiser that they can keep the church choirs if they also include secular groups and other faiths. Among the other groups now scheduled to perform are children from a nearby synagogue, a sorority from a historically Black college celebrating Kwanzaa, an atheist barbershop quartet, and members of a regional chapter of a neopagan group celebrating the winter solstice through dance. There’s also a subtle hint that more Santa and less Baby Jesus might be appropriate for song selections this year.

The choir director is extremely upset that the Christian character of this feed-the-hungry event is being changed, and wants to pull out in protest. The pastor believes that the choir should participate, seeing the program as an opportunity to promote mission and ministry among the broader community.

DISCUSSION

Based on your knowledge of biblical, theological, and constitutional principles, what would you do?



ON THE GROUND: TRIBAL NATIONS AND U.S. TERRITORIES

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

In addition to the 50 states constituting the United States of America, there are also territories and American Indian tribes and nations. The ELCA membership includes American Indians and Alaska Natives as well as people from the territories, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

These diverse peoples all lack full inclusion and participation in the government whose decisions affect their well-being. None has full representation in Congress, with a vote on the floor; like the District of Columbia, they have a representative with voice but no vote. People living in the territories are U.S. citizens, subject to the Selective Service Act, and have a long tradition of distinguished service in the U.S. military—to the point of making the ultimate sacrifice—yet they lack the right to elect their own commander-in-chief.

We should note that none of these U.S. territories chose their jurisdiction; they joined the nation either as purchases (in the case of the U.S. Virgin Islands, acquired from Denmark) or as a bounty of the Spanish-American War (in the case of Guam and Puerto Rico). The territories’ sovereignty issues are many and varied, but in the case of Puerto Rico, The Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico created under the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act of 2016 by the U.S. Congress holds much power. It’s seven members are appointed by the U.S. president and given oversight and veto power over economic decisions made by the Puerto Rico’s democratically elected governor and House of Representatives. This is seen by many as further contradicting the fundamental principle of consent of the governed.

The history of the relationship between the U.S. government and American Indian tribes is perhaps more well-known by the American public than that of the territories. Theirs is a complicated history of genocidal violence, of white settlers taking possession of Indian land, of tribes being forcibly displaced or relocated from their lands, of treaties made and broken, of famine as a result of broken treaties, and of continual intrusions into sovereign tribal territories by private interests that pollute water, desecrate holy places, and do violence to people—often with impunity. This has included violence against women and girls, who are murdered or go missing, and the systemic, institutional violence of separating children from their parents and sending them to boarding schools, where they were punished for speaking their native languages, taught to look down on their own ancestral heritages, and forced to embrace the ways of the white Euro-American colonizers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What responsibility does the ELCA have to advocate for the democratic inclusion of U.S. territories, American Indians, and Alaska Natives?
2. On whose ancestral lands was this congregation built? What is known about the history of the land acquisition?
3. Why does or doesn’t it surprise you that the “one person–one vote” issues from the earliest days of our republic still haven’t been resolved in regard to U.S. territories? How might the theology of our churches have contributed to those injustices? What can our churches do to address them?

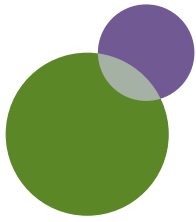
4. How can we learn more about each other and about the issues important to underrepresented groups, without blame or defensiveness? How can we show solidarity toward each other, especially in the public sphere of civic engagement?
5. When considering the plight of U.S. territories and tribal nations, what might Christian love of neighbor look like to you?

For resources on ELCA–American Indian relations see the ELCA's Indigenous Ministries and Tribal Relations page at [ELCA.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native](https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native).

For resources from the Library of Congress on the history of U.S. and Native American relations see www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/native-american/.

For a helpful chart identifying the U.S. territories see “The Territories: They Are Us,” available at www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/magazine/articles/2018/SL_0118-Stats.pdf.

For an article on the economic crisis in Puerto Rico see cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2022/08/puerto-rico-at-a-crossroads-as-economic-crisis-takes-toll.



ON THE GROUND: ZONING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

YOUR COUNTY

You live in a county that is mixed urban, suburban, and rural. By population, your county is about 70% urban/suburban and about 30% rural. In recent years your county’s population has grown more slowly than the state’s overall. The county is racially and ethnically diverse, including in rural areas, though rural diversity is somewhat less than urban and suburban. There are no significant employment or income differences among ethnic and racial groups. County unemployment is below the national and state averages. Wages are at about the state average and below the national average.

About 65% of the county’s land is rural. Much of it is used for farming and ranching, with some private nonagricultural residences, public and private woods, and open areas. There are also several wildlife migration routes, some across public lands, and others where private landowners have accommodated wildlife routes. About half the agricultural land is worked by family farmers and ranchers whose families have been in your county for multiple generations.

The surrounding counties are more urban and suburban than yours; one has a large metropolitan area. Throughout the region, including in your county, housing demand is up and vacancy rates are down. There is demand by developers, backed by some state and county officials, to open up more of your county for housing and economic development.

THE PARCEL SIZE PROPOSAL

The county zoning board is considering reducing the minimum-size lot requirement throughout the county and especially in rural areas. Federal and state regulation is minimal, so the county has wide discretion.

Currently, minimum lot sizes for homes, apartment/condo complexes and businesses are quite small in urban parts of the county, somewhat larger in suburban areas, and quite large in rural areas. There are no industrial uses permitted in rural areas.

Advocates of the proposed change argue that a reduction in minimum parcel size would:

- Open rural areas to economic development.
- Increase land values in rural areas.
- Significantly increase housing supply, which would either decrease the pressure on housing (if population remained about the same) or attract new businesses and their employees from the county’s urban and suburban areas and surrounding counties.
- Improve the county’s tax revenue base, allowing the county to provide significantly more funding for education, infrastructure, and other social services.

Opponents of the proposal claim that increased economic development would:

- Increase population in the county more than is desirable.
- Increase property taxes (if land values rise significantly) to a level that would price out many county natives and longtime residents in the long term, with the strongest impact on younger residents and lower-wage earners.

- Change the character of the county at the expense of longtime residents, including farmers and ranchers and their workers, whose history, culture, and traditions in the county are important and should be preserved as much as possible.

Opponents also note that:

- Housing development possibilities still exist in urban and suburban areas through additional vertical development, though they are likely less profitable for developers than rural properties marketed as “serene nature” outside the county’s major population centers.
- While the county has been able to preserve wildlife migration routes with many rural private landowners now, the change in lot size and exponential increase in the number of landowners will make preservation of migration routes much more difficult.
- Eliminating agricultural and rural land tends to be irreversible—you rarely get it back once it’s gone—so the county should prioritize protecting it for as long as possible.

A third group opposes the zoning board’s proposal on the grounds that it doesn’t go far enough. In this group’s view, the county should have no role in zoning and should eliminate all zoning restrictions. It believes that a property owner should not be restricted in use of their land; if an owner wants to put a business or an industrial facility on their own property, or sell land in smaller parcels than currently permitted, they should be allowed to do so.

The zoning board is holding public meetings on the proposal. Board members believe that if the proposal were put to a countywide popular vote, it would win, if only because most urban and suburban residents would support it. However, there is little current interest in holding such a vote, so the zoning board’s decision will be the county’s decision.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you attend and participate in the public meetings the county holds, or is this an issue you don’t much care about? If you are apathetic, what makes you so?
2. Where do you come out on the theological, biblical, and democratic principles you’ve been discussing in regard to the proposal?
3. Take a perspective counter to your own and construct the strongest argument you can for its theological, biblical, and democratic merits. Does this change your view at all?
4. Would your stance on this issue depend on whether you are native to the county or recently arrived? Whether you are younger, middle-aged, or older? Which racial or ethnic group(s) you identify with? Whether your economic position is above or below average? Whether you’re retired or still working? Whether you live in a rural, urban, or suburban community? In each case, think about why your view changes or doesn’t, and how you might adjust public policy to help those disadvantaged by your position.
5. Why do you think the proposal should be put to a public vote or, conversely, decided by the zoning board?

Whether you support or oppose the proposal, you can also propose your own changes. For example, you might explicitly protect wildlife migration routes, set aside a certain number of housing units for lower-income families, or mandate some sort of agricultural preservation.

SELECTED ONLINE RESOURCES ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

(see also the resources for each session)

ELCA SOCIAL TEACHING

- Visit the ELCA website for the civic life and faith social statement process at [ELCA.org/civicsandfaith](https://www.elca.org/civicsandfaith).
- ELCA social teaching provides insight and guidance for discerning about life in society. There are statements, messages, and policy resolutions available. Visit [ELCA.org/socialstatements](https://www.elca.org/socialstatements) and see especially Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective (1991) and “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy” (2020).

CHURCHWIDE-BASED RESOURCES

- [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America — Advocacy](https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/advocacy). “ELCA advocacy works for change in public policy based on the experience of Lutheran ministries, programs, and projects around the world and in communities across the United States. We work through political channels on behalf of the following biblical values: peacemaking, hospitality to strangers, care for creation, and concern for people living in poverty and struggling with hunger and disease.” [ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Advocacy](https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/advocacy)
- [ELCA Advocacy Action Center](https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/advocacy/action-center). Links for taking action, as individuals or in groups, on vital issues affecting our communities right now. tinyurl.com/ycxukre2
- [ELCA Advocacy Resources](https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/advocacy/resources). This link is the source for information to educate and equip more effective advocates on a variety of issues. [ELCA.org/resources/advocacy](https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/advocacy/resources)
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America — Lutheran Office for World Community. Members of the ELCA participate in the work of this office by monitoring and deepening their understanding of international issues, supporting legislative work in the United States, and participating in UN meetings and conferences as outlined above in consultation with the Lutheran Office for World Community. [ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Lutheran-Office-for-World-Community](https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/lutheran-office-for-world-community)
- [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America — Corporate Social Responsibility](https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/corporate-social-responsibility). The Corporate Social Responsibility program engages businesses guided by ELCA social teaching on a range of social, environmental, and financial issues. This includes values-based stockholder voting and formal dialogues with executives and boards. In collaboration with others, businesses are asked to commit to hire without discrimination and to bear more fully the wider social and environmental costs of what they produce. Financial institutions are encouraged to find new ways of providing assistance to low-income people and ensuring that services do not sacrifice the most vulnerable for the sake of economic efficiency and profit. tinyurl.com/wnezx5km

RESOURCES ON DEMOCRACY

- Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, “Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century,” amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report
- Congregational Resource Guide, “Agents of Unity: Center the People,” thecrg.org/collections/Agents_of_Unity_Center_the_People

RESOURCES ON FAITH AND POLITICS

- “Faith & Fire Conversations,” National Council of Churches, nationalcouncilofchurches.us/faith-fire-conversations
- “Voter Empowerment,” National Council of Churches, nationalcouncilofchurches.us/voter-empowerment
- “Podcast: Civility Won’t Save Our Souls,” Religica, religica.org/podcast-civility-wont-save-our-souls