DRAFT OF A SOCIAL STATEMENT ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

A document for public comment provided by the ELCA Task Force for Studies on Civic Life and Faith
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INTRODUCTION TO THE DRAFT AND COMMENT PROCESS

This Draft of a Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith is not an official or final word of our church. Rather, it is intended for comment, and you are invited to join in this exercise in discernment. There is an online survey and there will be hearings during 2024 within synods for those who are interested. (For more information about both means of participation, go to ELCA.org/civicsandfaith.)

This Draft is the result of three years of study by the ELCA Task Force for Studies on Civic Life and Faith. Members of the task force have worked diligently to provide this Draft as a test case for your response. Task force members might personally favor alternative wording at selected points, but they are in consensus that this document is ready for wider input from our church. That is, they support releasing this draft as a communal expression that faithfully represents their work. That work has included listening sessions, hours of reading and study, preparation of a study, and constant grappling with these critical, contemporary, and vexing matters in search of common convictions and expression. It is shared in this spirit of discernment.

To share your feedback with the task force, go to https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NCTT8ZV. For information on mailing in a paper survey, go to ELCA.org/civicsandfaith.

Your feedback is welcomed through September 30, 2024. The task force will then edit the draft in light of the public input. Then, the task force will submit a proposed version of the social statement to the ELCA Church Council, who will vote on sending it to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2025 for consideration. If adopted by a 2/3’s margin, the social statement will become official social teaching of this church. As such it will govern church teaching, policies, and ministries. It will also serve as a discernment tool for ELCA members as they think about civic life.

A word about this "two version" social statement. Civic life is a broad and complex dimension of society. In order to cover the many element needed, and to make it accessible to the various types of audiences who use social teaching, the draft uses a "small catechism" and "large catechism" approach. The entire statement is captured in summary by the "Short Version" that leads off the draft and is designed to be read from beginning to end. The "Full Version" provides detail for those who wish to go deeper into a particular article or group of articles in search of rationale, supporting documentation, and full explanation.

May God's Spirit that seeks the well-being of all in civic life guide you in your reading, reflection, and response.

Rev. Roger A. Willer, PhD
Director for Theological Ethics
A Draft ELCA Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith

Short Statement

Terms underlined in the text are defined in the concluding glossary.

Introduction

Article 1) Daily we are to pray as Jesus taught: “Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.” These words teach us that God’s will seeks the well-being of creation and all aspects of human life, including civil society. The Scriptures remind us that God’s Spirit empowers Jesus’ disciples through God’s will for human society (Micah 6:8) and the blessings of the gospel to join God’s work in society. Previous ELCA social teaching speaks to elements for faithful participation in civic life, whereas this social statement provides a comprehensive address. It gives special attention to matters related to faith and political authority.

I. Fundamental Teaching: God’s Activity Toward Well-being Through Civic Life

Article 2) In the biblical word shalom (Hebrew word) the Scriptures depict God’s goal for creation and point to the nature of God’s ongoing active engagement with it. God’s power and love seeks shalom, the fullness of peace, well-being, goodness, truth, beauty, justice, freedom, wholesomeness, and love woven together for all. This statement is undergirded by that biblical term but in the context of civic life employs other terms such as “the well-being of all” or “the common good” because they are earthly measures toward God’s intention. God’s sovereignty brings forth and sustains the universe and grants creatures their power, even though it often is hidden to human view. God intends that humans use and share the gift of power so that human structures and systems serve the intended well-being of all with good order and justice.

Article 3) Both the biblical witness and human history make clear that human beings are inherently social creatures and necessarily political beings. God’s intent is for human beings to use knowledge, wisdom, and power to foster the common good. When that is done by institutions through policies and regulations, or by individuals in acts of caring, then humans are fulfilling their God-given human vocation to join God’s activity in the world.

Article 4) Human sin is human brokenness and disorder and it distorts the calling to work for the well-being of all. It is sin when God’s gifts to humans are not used for the neighbor’s good and the self is turned in on itself (Matthew 22:36-40). Sin is expressed both personally and in human systems. It is expressed in actions we commit individually and is also embedded throughout larger institutions and systems. The examples of sin in civic life are many.

Article 5) God’s loving and just response to human sinfulness includes both law (God’s directives) and gospel (God’s mercy). While distinct in function and purpose, they are not independent and can be thought of as two strategies working together for the single goal of well-being for all. The Lutheran tradition teaches there are different uses for God’s law, such as the Ten Commandments. The law curbs evil through coercive power and offers directives for a good and just society. The law also reveals the deep, often unconscious, corruption of human motives and actions. In this way it drives people to contrition and prepares them for repentance. The gospel proclaims God’s unfathomable mercy and God’s loving desire of abundant life for all. Together law and gospel are the power of God bringing about God’s purpose for the well-being of humanity and all creation.
Article 6) God’s people approach civic life with abounding trust in God and, at the same time, with measured realism and humility about human efforts. God’s two-handed strategy is necessary because of sin, which means people of faith live in a continual tension. Some ways of civic life should be affirmed as better than others in serving the common good. Yet the presence and promise of God’s reign make the church inevitably restless with respect to life in society, and Christians thereby live simultaneously with hope and striving, realism and restlessness.

Article 7) God’s response to sin calls people to delight in the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:1-2) and provides tools for seeking civil well-being. The uniquely Christian proclamation, the gospel, does not introduce any new laws to govern the civil order but urges us to obey just laws and motivates us to seek greater well-being for all. While the Holy Scriptures provide the fundamental norm, our human faculties--such as reason, experience, knowledge, and imagination--have crucial roles in discerning better, and worse, ways of running a human society.

Article 8) The ELCA recognizes a history in which Lutheran churches, despite some important exceptions, have too often failed to make a priority of the civic common good. However, Lutherans affirm that civic institutions remain God’s gifts even as we admit our compromises and failures. This church’s work includes acknowledgment of past failures and a repentance that turns to holding accountable civic leaders and those in positions of political authority for the common good.

Article 9) To “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8) must include welcoming and acknowledging the ideas, values, and contributions of all people, regardless of their religious tradition or worldview. Christians, as individuals or as the church, have no guaranteed higher or better reasoning than other people in religious or nonreligious communities. This does not mean Christians do not have contributions to make, nor that they should avoid drawing from their faith, values, and insights in discussing public matters. The Christian vocation to serve God and the neighbor may be fulfilled in civic places of responsibility.

II. The Calling to Robust Civic Participation

Article 10) Civic life entails activities and institutions across all public life, from one’s local neighborhood to matters of national and international concern. Participation in civic organizations comes in many shapes and sizes, and the recent decline of civic participation in the United States is especially troubling. Our church affirms that anyone who seeks the community’s well-being through civic participation is, knowingly or not, using the gifts God provides. They are acting as channels of God’s concern for human life.

Article 11) Christian worshiping assemblies are grounded in the living Word of God’s law and gospel, which empowers them to be centers supporting civic participation. This is evident in how liturgy prepares us to join God’s work in civic life. As expressed in the ELCA constitution and social teaching, this church expects that each worshiping community will be engaged in forms of active civic participation as one element of life in Christ’s church.

Article 12) The ELCA reaffirms that civic service can represent a place to carry out one’s calling from God to civic participation. Public servants should be held to high expectations, and the larger community should give government officials the dignity and respect owed for good and just work. At the same time, citizens are expected to hold the government and its officials accountable.

Article 13) Religion can create divisions in civic life or can contribute to mending the torn social fabric and reconciling divided peoples. This church urges all people of faith to seek a constructive role that
counters growing polarization, distrust, and ill will. Religious traditions can offer particular gifts of moral
vision, inclusion, and compassion sorely needed in U.S. civic life.

Article 14) The ELCA and other religious bodies have a particular calling to encourage discernment and
provide spaces for difficult conversations. For Christians, discernment is enabled by the gift of unity that
Christ gives. Discussion about tough issues among God’s people is a witness that counters the forces of
social division and distrust. The ELCA’s identity as a community of moral deliberation is one into which
our church continues to grow, and which is increasingly crucial in a society so divided.

Article 15) The biblical witness teaches that, among other roles and aims, there is a prophetic task for
those who follow Jesus (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The church’s prophetic presence in civic life calls for
holding civic leaders accountable, taking constructive action, and lifting up a vision for improved social
well-being. It is part of this church’s work under the left hand of God as a contribution to society, and it
needs to be done with both vitality and great care.

Article 16) The ELCA encourages individuals and worshipping communities to work together toward a
civic life that better reflects God’s vision for a more just and reconciled world. The various forms of
advocacy offer ways to press civic leaders and public policy makers to respect the needs and dignity of all
persons and our common home, with special concern for the vulnerable. Such faith-rooted advocacy is
born from relationships of service and solidarity, is guided by ELCA social teaching, and requires
different practices in different contexts. Flowing from trust built through one-to-one relationships, faith-
based organizing seeks to spur action by building coalitions of like-minded people in mostly local
contexts. Faith-informed advocacy of various kinds can play a transformative role in a polarized political
world by bringing people together to work toward the common good in public life.

Article 17) Was Jesus “political”? The Scriptures are clear that he was not political in the sense of
affiliation with a political party, a partisan movement, or a designer of civic legislation. However, the
biblical claim that “Jesus is Lord” (Acts 10:36) is simultaneously a political and religious statement. In
addition, Jesus called government leadership to accountability to such an extent that he was executed as a
political criminal. Today, concern for the neighbor and the common good means the church is called to
follow Jesus’ example by engaging appropriate issues with care that are in the political arena. Political
partisanship is not proper for the church, even while we engage in issues that have political elements.

Article 18) The ELCA also has a standing commitment to civic life, exercised through synods and the
churchwide expressions of our church. The 1991 social statement The Church in Society: A Lutheran
Perspective details the nature of this institutional witness.

Article 19) Civic participation necessarily involves matters of government and political life. The word
“politics” often is used today to express disgust with dishonest practices, partisan shenanigans, power
grabs, ploys of deceit, and the sinful use of authority. “Politics” in this statement, however, is understood
as the negotiation of how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are
shared. Politics, rightly understood and practiced, then, is essential to civic well-being and of concern to
God’s people. It is important to distinguish between politics and ethics and to ensure that political
concerns are guided by ethical discernment. This church’s body of teaching addresses civic life ethically,
which includes the relation of communities of faith to political authority, to government. As an example,
ethics presents the principle of self-determination as a primary value of a healthy political community
because it encourages the idea of sharing power.
III. Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government

Article 20) Political authority is one way that God protects and promotes the well-being of human society. Political authority is also human and social, permeated by sin. Some governments and societies fulfill God’s intent for political authority better than others. In the Lutheran tradition the question to ask of government is “How faithful is it to God’s purposes of well-being, including caring for the most vulnerable members of the community?” Lutherans ought to live in troubled restlessness with all government, both supporting political authority and criticizing its misuse, as appropriate.

Article 21) To determine how the well-being of the neighbor is being served by political authority, criteria for assessment are necessary. God’s power sustains and gives power to creation. Therefore, the principal criterion used to assess governmental and political authority is whether it increases power and its beneficial use among the people governed. Power expressed as mutual self-determination enhances people’s lives and is a presumption that should be encouraged and respected by government and others. Both the model of divine power and the political presumption of self-determination include a criterion of fostering plurality.

Article 22) In the United States, the Constitution is the federal framework of political authority. When it was written, the Constitution was unique in some ways, including its neutrality in matters of religion and its making “we the people” politically sovereign. The Constitution’s separation of powers and their checks and balances were designed in part to prevent the monopolization of sovereignty by any branch or locale of government. The Constitution is both grounding and aspirational; that is, it did not fulfill its own objectives completely. The Constitution’s preamble (or preface) expresses this government’s purpose. The values expressed in the preamble can be used to assess whether the government is serving the purpose that its own Constitution has laid out.

Article 23) The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: “we the people.” Politically, the people are sovereign, not a monarch or other authority imposing a government on its people. The ratification of the Constitution itself enacts a preference for self-determination. Its enactment was deeply flawed, since the enfranchised “people” in the late 1700s were largely limited to white, property-owning males. The subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution have expanded “we the people” to include people of color, women, and younger adults.

Article 24) The Constitution explicitly supports religious neutrality and diversity by forbidding religious “tests” for U.S. officeholders. Had it not done so, the country would have been deprived of the service of many, including notable U.S. presidents. The Constitution’s choice was for religious self-determination. The later First Amendment to the Constitution expressed neutrality toward religion, thereby encouraging plurality of religion in society.

Article 25) Governmental action can be evaluated by how well it grants power to those subject to it, including the aim of mutual self-determination. Legitimate government action therefore includes both coercive action and the positive production of power for its citizens. There are many examples of this. This article identifies specific questions that we might ask when evaluating particular governmental policies at the local, state, or federal levels.

Article 26) The United States is not a “Christian nation.” It was not founded on specifically Christian principles, though Christians and Christianity did influence its ethos. The premise of the Constitution and its ratification is that the sovereign is “we the people,” not “we the Christians.”
IV. Religion and the First Amendment

Article 27) The First Amendment to the Constitution begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The first clause (“no law respecting an establishment of religion”) is known as the establishment clause. The second clause (“no law … prohibiting the free exercise thereof”) is known as the free exercise clause. Though these clauses are sometimes in tension, they both foster religious plurality, despite some exceptions in historical practice in the United States.

Article 28) The establishment clause mandates the institutional distinction between religious bodies and the state. The state may acknowledge the distinctiveness of religion but may not favor or disadvantage religion generally, or one religion in relation to another. There are two main traditions of interpreting “nonestablishment,” and the ELCA takes no position on either while affirming the institutional distinction between government and religion.

Article 29) The Constitution’s prohibition against establishment of religion clears the ground for the free exercise of religion secured by the free exercise clause (second clause). The two clauses together promote religious plurality in the United States. Free exercise means that religious people may enter public debate and decision-making with their religious convictions, as many abolitionists and civil rights leaders and advocates have done. Free exercise is different than Christian freedom, which, for Lutherans, arises solely from God’s promise of salvation and does not depend on any specific political arrangement. Christian freedom is a matter of the gospel; free exercise of religion is a matter of human law.

Article 30) The free exercise clause of the Constitution is a political good that, for the church, is consistent with our belief in the creation of humans in the image of God. The free exercise clause ensures the right to worship (or not) as each person desires. There are limits to free exercise, including that a person’s free exercise does not unduly damage important public interests. At the same time civic life is complex enough that sometimes it may require that civil laws and regulations “accommodate” a religious adherent’s practice that would otherwise violate civil law.

Article 31) The First Amendment does not prohibit or discourage the application of religious convictions to public life. The phrase “separation of church and state” is not found in the First Amendment and usually is shorthand for nonestablishment. Nonestablishment, however, was not meant to prevent the free exercise of religion. Instead nonestablishment allows each person, without fear of negative legal consequence, to determine for themselves their religious practice, including in civic life. The two clauses of the First Amendment do not contradict each other. If nonestablishment meant that religious commitments should not enter public life, religious people would be uniquely harmed. They would be the only people not allowed or encouraged to bring their highest commitments to bear on public questions.

V. Describing the Constructive Relationships of Religious Organizations and Political Authority

Article 32) The ELCA holds that the constructive relationship of religion and political authority is summarized by the phrase “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of religious organizations and institutions in a relation of functional interaction.” This summary description (codified in the ELCA constitution) provides guidance for the ELCA’s corporate life and for individuals.

Article 33) The directive to “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor” follows from both our faith’s commitment to join God’s work in civic life and the sovereignty of “we the people.” The
The purpose of citizenship is summed up in the preamble to the Constitution—to promote the general welfare. “Working with” seeks to address human needs, which can involve critical challenges such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people or God’s creation.

Article 34) The phrase “maintaining institutional separation of church and state” does not point to an absolute separation of public (government) versus private (religious) arenas. Rather it points to the importance of preserving the functional integrity of independent political authority and religious institutions. Christ’s church should not bless any particular political theory; no political system or theory is final or ultimate. To the extent that U.S. government is formed for the general welfare and guided by good principles, whether rooted in Christian ideas or not, it should be affirmed. It is for these reasons that our church objects to religious bodies endorsing or supporting candidates or parties, or exercising partisanship in any way. At the same time, religious bodies and individuals have a responsibility to call government to account, especially when it fails in its function to provide for all peoples such “goods” as human rights, economic justice, and the like.

Article 35) Rostered ministers face particular issues regarding the relationship of the church and political authority because of their divine office to preach and teach both law and gospel. Rostered ministers also are public figures because they lead public institutions and have a valuable role to play as leaders in civil society. The ELCA affirms these intersecting roles as right and salutary while also recognizing that any given scriptural text or any given social and political situation is complex and multilayered and requires discernment from multiple perspectives. Rostered leaders, then, should be attuned to their community or public setting in offering guidance and aiding discernment practices as assemblies determine how to participate in civic life. When they speak on public issues, their words should be rooted in the Scriptures and are to be governed by official ELCA teaching. Though there necessarily is a public face to the rostered role, this does not justify partisanship, such as telling members how to vote. Our church provides guidance for churches and congregations regarding participation in the electoral process.

Article 36) The directive to “work with civil authorities … in a relationship of institutional separation, with functional interaction” suggests a constructive relationship but must be guarded by neutrality among partners. It also is commended as a public proposal for a healthy approach between all religious bodies and political authority in the United States.

Article 37) The ELCA understanding of civic life and faith is at odds with Christian nationalism because the latter seeks to fuse the exercise of political authority with a selected set of supposed “Christian” ideals. It also asserts that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United States. Such core beliefs represent a political ideology of religious nationalism, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. In its hardline strains, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens. Christian nationalists pledge allegiance to their version of the United States, first making the U.S. into an idol and seeing God’s plan in U.S. society as including only those whose religious beliefs fuse with a certain view of that society.

VI. Addressing Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life

Article 38) The following articles address selected contemporary issues about civic life, grounded in the themes and insights above. These do not revisit questions the ELCA has already addressed in existing statements or messages and are not intended to be comprehensive. Some articles here offer definitive conclusions whereas others establish parameters that enable continued discernment on the part of our church.
Article 39) Hyper-partisan polarization is rampant in the United States, harming both individuals and the social fabric. The U.S. political system appropriately involves, of course, the presence and efforts of partisan activity. Unfortunately, today, social dynamics have taken partisanship to unhealthy levels that damage democratic interaction rather than foster respectful, responsible give and take. Many accept this winner-take-all approach as right or as, at least, unavoidable. Such approaches threaten the fabric of our nation and the lives of those in it. These threats are often felt most keenly by the marginalized. The ELCA calls for a different approach as both necessary and possible for a vital common life in which all can participate.

Article 40) Civic leaders bear a particular responsibility to seek constructive debate and solutions. Civic leaders include a wide array of individuals beyond just elected officials or heads of media. To bring people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that hinders careful listening among neighbors. They should offer models of vigorous and constructive civic leadership.

Article 41) Robust and constructive civic engagement in today’s society depends on clear distinction between fact and various forms of misinformation, from falsehoods to exaggeration. Avoiding forms of false statement is a civic responsibility for both providers and users of social media. Christians should be “innocent as doves” when it comes interpreting the intentions of the neighbor but “wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16) when it comes to discerning what information they encounter in any media. For the sake of U.S. civic life, the ELCA calls upon social media platforms to take responsibility to align policies and procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and rigorous online protocol available.

Article 42) Financial contributions to political campaigns are a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment and a significant part of campaigning that demonstrate a level of commitment consistent with the donor’s views. The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity to play a free and active part in the foundation of our communities. Therefore, we are concerned that being heard should not be effectively limited to those individuals and organizations who have overwhelming financial wealth and resources at their disposal. The ELCA urges legislation by state and federal lawmakers to set reasonable limits on campaign contributions and increase transparency in our elections and financial reporting by public officials.

Article 43) This statement recognizes that governmental policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial opinions sometimes do more harm to the well-being of all than to promote it. Harm results from poorly conceived and implemented policies and from intentional actions that discriminate against some in favor of others. All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of protecting and fostering the good of all. Citizens and residents also have an obligation to seek reform through the procedures of democratic self-rule.

Article 44) The ELCA has members in Washington, D.C., and in several of the U.S. territories. For this reason our church is attuned to the problematic relationship between the United States and its nonincorporated territories. We recognize complicating factors that include a legacy of racism because the vast majority of local residents in the territories belong to racially minoritized groups. We also recognize that the issues are complex. The principle of mutual self-determination dictates humble, intentional listening as the first step toward justice and healing.

Article 45) American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians have a unique, historical, and nation-to-nation trust relationship with the United States that should acknowledge the sovereignty of tribal nations and Indian self-determination and self-governance. There are many layers to the often horrid history of treatment of indigenous peoples, but it is imperative to acknowledge the relationship has been grounded in the Doctrine of Discovery that codified both colonialism and religious intolerance. The ELCA has repudiated explicitly this European-derived doctrine as a theological framework that supported
racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. Our church also has acknowledged and called for repentance for this church’s complicity in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal governments and tribal members. This statement reaffirms the ELCA’s need for continued attention to just policy via advocacy in the areas of treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, and other matters that affect the well-being of Native Americans. It also calls upon both U.S. residents and U.S. governments to honor the trust relationship and the sovereignty of tribal nations as well as to be guided by just principles supporting Indian self-determination and well-being.

Article 46) The ELCA calls for renewed emphasis on comprehensive civics education as an essential element for robust and revitalized civic life. Such education should teach the whole story of U.S. history in its aspirations, successes, and failures so that it might shape well-informed, thoughtful, and wise citizens.

Article 47) No single solution will reduce the increasing, fevered polarization or mend the damage that endangers the U.S. social fabric as a representative democracy. However, robust civic participation is critical for democratic self-governance, for support of public servants, and for well-crafted policies. The ELCA urges both its members and all U.S. residents to renew their efforts toward such a robust civic participation, guided by concern for the well-being of all.

Conclusion

Article 48) “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven” is both our prayer as a church and our calling into civic life for the well-being of all. May we, as forgiven people in Christ’s church, respond boldly and join all others of goodwill to work toward the aspiration and responsibility of “we the people” through wise civic participation.
A Draft ELCA Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith

Full Statement

Terms underlined in the text are defined in the concluding glossary.

Introduction

Article 1) Daily we are to pray as Jesus taught: “Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.” These words teach us that God’s will seeks the well-being of creation and all aspects of human life, including civil society. The Scriptures remind us that God’s Spirit empowers Jesus’ disciples through God’s will for human society (Micah 6:8) and the blessings of the gospel to join God’s work in society. Previous ELCA social teaching speaks to elements for faithful participation in civic life, whereas this social statement provides a comprehensive address. It gives special attention to matters related to faith and political authority.

We are to pray daily as Jesus taught, saying, “May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). What does this mean? The Lutheran catechisms say that daily bread means “everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our lives such as food, drink, … upright and faithful rulers, good government … good friends, faithful neighbors and the like.”¹ The catechisms, which explain biblical ideas, teach that the Triune God sustains creation and seeks human well-being through civic life. The Spirit empowers us as Jesus’ disciples through God’s will for human society (including the law²) and the blessings of the gospel. “He 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?” (Micah 6:8).

Previous ELCA social statements and messages express elements of a Lutheran understanding of civic life relevant to their themes. This social statement comprehensively addresses civic life, with particular attention to a Lutheran perspective on political authority. The six sections draw from the Scriptures, the wellspring of Lutheran theological themes, and contemporary social science to clarify theological themes and the calling to civic participation (sections I, II), consider the meaning and significance for people of faith of the founding documents of the United States (III, IV), sketch a constructive relationship of religious organizations and political authority (V), and address some pressing contemporary issues (VI).

I. Fundamental Teaching: God’s Activity Toward Well-being Through Civic Life

Article 2) In the biblical word shalom (Hebrew word) the Scriptures depict God’s goal for creation and point to the nature of God’s ongoing active engagement with it. God’s power and love seeks shalom, the fullness of peace, well-being, goodness, truth, beauty, justice, freedom, wholesomeness, and love woven together for all. This statement is undergirded by that biblical term but in the context of civic life employs other terms such as “the well-being of all” or “the common good” because they are earthly measures toward God’s intention. God’s sovereignty brings forth and sustains the universe and grants creatures their power, even though it often is hidden to human

² The law is a summary term for God’s directives for human living, such as the Ten Commandments, that describes “what is right and God-pleasing and rejects everything contrary to God’s will.” Charles P. Arand, James A. Nestingen, and Robert Kolb, The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 198.
view. God intends that humans use and share the gift of power so that human structures and systems serve the intended well-being of all with good order and justice.

The Scriptures tell us that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1) and reveal God’s tender care for all creation (Psalm 145:15). In what Christians call the Old Testament the single word shalom$^3$ epitomizes the rich fullness of that loving aim of the Creator for all creation. Shalom describes God’s intention in creation for the abundance of peace, well-being, goodness, truth, beauty, justice, freedom, joy, wholesomeness, and love woven together. This statement is undergirded by that biblical term but in the context of civic life employs other terms such as “the well-being of all” or “the common good” because they are earthly measures toward God’s intention.

The ELCA witnesses to the Holy Trinity in the unity of the three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) whose power is expressed in offering abundant life now and eternally. We teach that God is all-powerful in that only God is the source of all power. God’s power alone brings forth and sustains the universe, redeems the sinner, and promises creation’s ultimate fulfillment.

In God’s activity that seeks the well-being of all, we encounter a use of power that is unlike many human practices of power (Matthew 20:25-26). God is sovereign, but God’s sovereignty gives power to creatures rather than depriving them of it. In contrast to the usual political “zero-sum” understanding of power (if I gain power, you lose it), God gives freely, sharing abundantly without loss. God’s sovereign power produces human power; it does not diminish it. However, humans are given their power in order to serve God, creation, and their fellow humans.

God’s power is often hidden from human view. Sometimes God’s power is experienced as disruption and judgment, as the tearing down of human structures and misplaced values (Jeremiah 6:14). God’s power is experienced in varied and surprising ways that can be beautiful or painful. This is described by Martin Luther’s teaching about the struggles of faith and the “theology of the cross.” When human beings expect domination, God’s power appears in weakness (1 Corinthians 1:25). When we are overly confident, God unsettles our presumptions. In the fullness of time and the light of faith, we see that God’s purpose and power always move toward the divine promise of the full well-being of all people.

At the end of the Lord’s prayer, we affirm that “the power, the honor and the glory are yours.” Not ours! When Christians forget that all power belongs to God, they risk creating other “gods” (idols) such as wealth and power itself, but also country, race, party, or ideology. God’s power in Jesus Christ redirects forgiven ones from such idolatry and shapes the way we use the power entrusted to us.

This church bears witness to God’s purpose and power in the world. As human expressions of power, civic activity and political power are sustained by divine power. God intends that humans use and share such power so that human structures and systems serve the well-being of all with good order and justice.$^4$

Article 3) Both the biblical witness and human history make clear that human beings are inherently social creatures and necessarily political beings. God’s intent is for human beings to use knowledge,

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$^3$ The Scriptures use the Hebrew word shalom to refer to God’s goal of healthy, peaceful, just, joyful, wholesome relations for all creation. Christians should take seriously the comprehensive vision embedded in this fundamental biblical term and what it means for our calling. But the term itself also has a long, rich history as a central concept within Judaism, and it is best for Christians not to co-opt this rich post-biblical Jewish tradition. Instead, the two religious communities should explore together how best to understand the biblical concept and, on this basis, find ways to work together to advance the divine intention for humans and for the entire created world.

wisdom, and power to foster the common good. When that is done by institutions through policies and regulations, or by individuals in acts of caring, then humans are fulfilling their God-given human vocation to join God’s activity in the world.

The Scriptures (Genesis 1:27) teach that human beings are made in the image of God (imago dei). One way to understand this image is as the gift of human vocation to participate in God’s work of fostering the well-being of social and political communities, as well as in care of the earth. Genesis tells of God creating human beings from soil and tasking them with tilling and caring for the garden together (Genesis 2). From the beginning, there is shared activity, life together arranged in ways that require social cooperation, conversation, and coordination. Even in the narrative of the fall (Genesis 3-4) we see the value of social and political life, as human beings move from honesty and care into fear and disobedience, no longer trusting God or one another. This church celebrates that humans are relational beings and live in social and political communities.

The Christian faith sees God’s power and compassion revealed in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There is no neighbor, no enemy, no politician for whom Christ did not die. The Christian practice of baptism affirms this ongoing work of Christ and its connection to our vocation. This church teaches that “the gifts of the Spirit form and transform the people of God for discipleship in daily life.” The baptismal liturgy includes a vow to “care for others and the world God made, and to work for justice and peace.”

Correctly understood as a calling to serve, the human vocation does not invite arrogance and misplaced pride, nor does it tolerate the domination of others. Human beings respond to what God is doing through God’s orderings of creation. In Lutheran theology, these orderings are often referred to as the three estates of government, church, family, and economy. All people depend upon these social relationships, institutions, and structures of communal life that provide scaffolded sites of growth and responsibility. Because these are dynamic structures, their precise form, arrangement, and values vary across time and place, and they are open to ongoing revision and change.

In this sense the Lutheran tradition speaks of humans serving in civic life as “channels of God’s work.”

Humans should use their knowledge, wisdom, and power to foster the common good. When that is done by institutions through policies and regulations, or by individuals in acts of caring, humans are fulfilling their vocation to serve God’s activity in the world.

Article 4) Human sin is human brokenness and disorder and it distorts the calling to work for the well-being of all. It is sin when God’s gifts to humans are not used for the neighbor’s good and the self is turned in on itself (Matthew 22:36-40). Sin is expressed both personally and in human systems. It is expressed in actions we commit individually and is also embedded throughout larger institutions and systems. The examples of sin in civic life are many.

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5 God assigns human beings both the tasks of ruling, as with the sun and moon, and of being fruitful, as with other living creatures. Taken together, these tasks imitate what God does toward earth’s abundance. See further explanation in the ELCA social statement Genetics, Faith and Responsibility (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2011), 10, [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements).
9 This statement will employ the term “channel” rather than the traditional Lutheran term “mask” because the latter today suggests passivity and duplicity.
God’s intention for joyous well-being is too often not enacted or experienced in the world. Many religious traditions discuss human brokenness and disorder. The Lutheran tradition speaks of sin in various ways but fundamentally understands sin to be the condition of human existence in which we fail to love and trust God above all else. Martin Luther understood sin to be an excessive focus on the self at the expense of the neighbor. Human sin breaks a right relationship with God and others, damaging the well-being that God intends for all creation.

The pervasiveness and complexity of sin that damages human well-being must be understood. Sin is present in our continual unwillingness to accept our human vocation to serve as creatures created by God. Sin can also take the insidious form of self-denial and a lack of self-love when, for example, we diminish our contributions and deny our ability, dignity, and value as fellow human beings created in God’s image. Sin is expressed both personally and collectively, which means social and political institutions are bound in sin just as individuals are. There are manifold examples of this in civic life.

It is sin when the power of social structures, like government, are not used for the common good of neighbors and creation (Matthew 22:36-40). For instance, the individual domination of one person by another was multiplied in the social structure of slavery supported by laws, policies, religious beliefs, and cultural practices in the United States. Such systemic sins are particularly horrendous because the things done and left undone dramatically deepen the oppression of other people.

It is sin when we use civic or political power at the expense of others. One group’s self-interest cannot justify denying the humanity or dignity of others. The need for order cannot justify subjugation, marginalization, or tyranny. The need for a government cannot justify the idolatrous worship of a nation.

It also is sin when we completely avoid civic life and thereby do not work to serve neighbor justice through it. At the same time, it is sin when we support leaders who put their own power and self-interest above the needs of their constituents. It is sin when we uncritically support a member of a political party because of party affiliation or for our own personal gain. We see sin at work when we demonize others’ motives while glorifying and sanctifying our own.

Article 5) God’s loving and just response to human sinfulness includes both law (God’s directives) and gospel (God’s mercy). While distinct in function and purpose, they are not independent and can be thought of as two strategies working together for the single goal of well-being for all. The Lutheran tradition teaches there are different uses for God’s law, such as the Ten Commandments. The law curbs evil through coercive power and offers directives for a good and just society. The law also reveals the deep, often unconscious, corruption of human motives and actions. In this way it drives people to contrition and prepares them for repentance. The gospel proclaims God’s unfathomable mercy and God’s loving desire of abundant life for all. Together law and gospel are the power of God bringing about God’s purpose for the well-being of humanity and all creation.

Lutherans teach that we come to know both our sin and God’s grace as God comes to us. God reveals and gives the divine self to restore right relationships with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. The Scriptures teach about different strategies God uses to achieve this, and we call these “law” and “gospel.” This church understands the law (God’s directives) and gospel together as expressing the living Word of God for human life and well-being. The law addresses our relationships and actions before others in this

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10 Luther refers to sin in many ways but often as an excessive concern with the self at the expense of the neighbor. He describes the human condition as *homo in curvatus in se* (being turned in on oneself). See, for example, Martin Luther, “Lectures on Romans” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 25., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, et al (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 345.
mortal life. The gospel, by contrast, proclaims our relationship or standing before God from now into eternity.

God uses the law to sustain life and its needs for the good of all. The law has different functions, or uses. The civil use of the law governs our behavior toward one another in human communities. In contrast, the theological use of the law accuses and convicts humans of sinfulness, even if that wrong is allowed by a government’s law or not covered by human laws. God’s directives are realistic about human beings. They reveal the corruption of many human motives, drive people to contrition, and prepare them for repentance.

The gospel is the good news of God’s love in Christ, given by grace alone and received in and through faith alone. The gospel arrives as a blessed surprise, an unexpected gift that frees us from efforts to earn God’s love or forgiveness. The gospel has the liberating power to convert, transform, and re-create us in heart, mind, and spirit. Thus, Lutherans assert that the life of a Christian is described paradoxically as being simultaneously saint and sinner.

The Lutheran tradition commonly describes these two strategies of law and gospel by using the analogy of God’s two hands. Through God’s “left hand,” God’s power acts through the law to curb, restrain, and lead people toward goodness and justice. Through God’s “right hand,” God’s power acts through the gospel to draw, transform, and re-create people in heart, mind, and soul. Both hands serve God’s purposes of well-being through both spiritual and social means to bring a rightly ordered life of peace and flourishing.

While distinct in function and purpose, the law and the gospel are not independent, and both flow from God’s power and for God’s purposes. God’s left-hand work should not be identified solely with political authority or the state. It encompasses culture, family, economics, and all aspects of daily life.

There is a substantive discussion about the appropriate interaction in civic life of these two strategies in the ELCA social message “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in Democracy” (www.elca.org/socialmessages, p. 4). The dangers of misuse are also described there. These include teaching that God’s two strategies are unrelated, dismissing civic life and government as evil, or claiming an identification of God’s will with a particular nation, political strategy, or civil institution.

Article 6) God’s people approach civic life with abounding trust in God and, at the same time, with measured realism and humility about human efforts. God’s two-handed strategy is necessary because of sin, which means people of faith live in a continual tension. Some ways of civic life should be affirmed as better than others in serving the common good. Yet the presence and promise of God’s reign make the church inevitably restless with respect to life in society, and Christians thereby live simultaneously with hope and striving, realism and restlessness.

11 The Formula of Concord asserts a “third function [use] of the Law,” (FC Ep. VI and FC SD VI), but debate continues in Lutheran circles on whether a third use is redundant. Some hold to the formula’s position as important to assert that the externals of the law are performed by the godly not in hostile fearfulness but in loving faithfulness. Others think this unnecessary. Since the externals of the law remain the same regardless of the disposition of an individual’s faith and love, this statement notes the presence of the debate and will not otherwise engage in it.

12 Other analogies and phrases also are used in the Lutheran tradition. One common term has been “Two Kingdoms,” but in the New Testament, “kingdom” is reserved for the coming reign of God alone. The reformers’ insight that God works through two different strategies is vital, but the term “Two Kingdoms” is poor terminology for our times. The reformers grounded this insight not in actual kingdoms but in Paul’s eschatology of the two ages, in Adam and in Christ (Romans 5:12).

While we are called to do justice and love kindness (Micah 6:8), it is not always clear what that means in any particular situation. God’s people approach the present world with abounding trust in God’s coming reign and, at the same time, measured realism and humility about human efforts to create a just society.

Through faith, God’s church already takes part in the coming reign of God announced by and embodied in Jesus. As the social statement The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective explains, “The church still awaits the resurrection of the dead and the fulfillment of the whole creation in God’s promised future. In this time of ‘now … not yet,’ the church lives in two ages—the present age and the age to come. In this sense, the church is ‘in’ the world but not ‘from’ the world.” Christians have simultaneous memberships in God’s temporal and eternal work. It is unavoidable that Christians live in the temporal order, with all its questions, ambiguities, and tensions.

Neither the law nor the gospel allows the church to accommodate easily the way civic life often unfolds. Some of those ways should be affirmed as better expressions of good than others and as more productive means toward well-being. Yet the presence and promise of God’s reign makes the church inevitably restless and discontented with society’s continual brokenness and violence. We are called to work for a better world. We should support and commend civic and political efforts that bring better measures of order, justice, and harmony. However, even those best efforts require revision and, by God’s grace, improvement. Christians are simultaneously people of hope and courage, realism and restlessness.

Article 7) God’s response to sin calls people to delight in the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:1-2) and provides tools for seeking civil well-being. The uniquely Christian proclamation, the gospel, does not introduce any new laws to govern the civil order but urges us to obey just laws and motivates us to seek greater well-being for all. While the Holy Scriptures provide the fundamental norm, our human faculties—such as reason, experience, knowledge, and imagination—have crucial roles in discerning better, and worse, ways of running a human society.

God provides multiple tools for striving toward social well-being. Because the Scriptures are the norm for faith and life, all Christian efforts are judged according to its central proclamation. The Lutheran theological tradition also looks to the insights from the Book of Concord, grounded first in articles 6, 16, and 28 of the Augsburg Confession, as faithful, if historically conditioned, interpretations of the Scriptures.

Our church teaches that God also provides human reason as a gift for seeking justice and social harmony. Lutherans have sometimes used the language of “natural law” to describe shared values and ends that are given by God, individually and collectively, to direct human beings. At its most basic, this has referred to an inherent human principle that the good is to be done and the bad is to be avoided. It also is expressed by the exhortation of the Golden Rule or as the basic expectation to do no harm. This explains the sentiment in the Book of Concord that, to some extent, the Ten Commandments are something “written in the hearts of all [people].”

The character of natural law has been misunderstood and has too often been weaponized against people deemed different, especially already marginalized and oppressed groups. This has been done by picking particular laws from the Scriptures and imposing them on others, which is to misuse the function of law in the Scriptures. The natural law is not a set of specific rules or unchanging social mores. The rightful

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15 This is common phrasing found in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Philip Melanchthon.
16 Large Catechism, third article of the Creed, Article 3, para. 67, BC 2000, 492.
attention to shared human principles can be only one part of the ongoing work of communal deliberation and conversation.

Because law is God’s gift, the Scriptures exhort God’s people to “delight … in the law of the Lord” (Psalm 1:1-2). The Lutheran tradition also appreciates the gifts of human capacities that include many areas of expertise and inquiry. These include reason, emotion, experience, imagination, and the many areas of expertise and fields of study that society engages in, such as the political and social sciences. All human efforts are dimmed and distorted by sin. Nevertheless, these tools provide a common basis for Christians to work with others of good will toward the well-being of society.

The social teaching of this church is normed by the Scriptures and seeks to employ the many gifts of human capacity to address contemporary social life. Though these govern and guide as this church’s official teaching, Lutherans recognize the possibility for continuing rethinking and revision through discernment as a community together.

Article 8) The ELCA recognizes a history in which Lutheran churches, despite some important exceptions, have too often failed to make a priority of the civic common good. However, Lutherans affirm that civic institutions remain God’s gifts even as we admit our compromises and failures. This church’s work includes acknowledgment of past failures and a repentance that turns to holding accountable civic leaders and those in positions of political authority for the common good. Since the Reformation many of the historically dominant expressions of Lutheran theology and churches have, despite some important exceptions, too often failed to make a priority of the civic common good. We have not, as Lutheran Confessions teach, given “this righteousness of reason the praise it deserves, for our corrupt nature has no greater good than this … God even honors it with temporal rewards.”

An understandable desire to avoid “works righteousness” has led Lutherans too often to unjustifiable passivity and a failure to act in the public arena, thus not holding governments or each other accountable. An understandable desire for peace and for order has led Lutherans to remain complacent or even to support oppressive regimes and systems. At other times Lutherans have exhibited triumphalism or intolerance in taking political action.

This church acknowledges past failures and is committed to a repentance that turns toward holding civic leaders and those in positions of political authority accountable in appropriate ways. Under normal circumstances acting for accountability means making use of the tools of democratic process. That process implies an ongoing relationship between those in positions of authority and their constituents.

Those in authority owe an account of how they are using the power and resources that have been entrusted to them. On occasion, holding those in authority to account will mean engaging in nonviolent public protests or even, in rare instances, acts of civil disobedience. Even when use of these tools is necessary, such actions must always be guided by an ethic of love and a spirit of upbuilding the common good.

Article 9) To “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8) must include welcoming and acknowledging the ideas, values, and contributions of all people, regardless of their religious tradition or worldview. Christians, as individuals or as the church, have no guaranteed higher or better reasoning than other people in religious or nonreligious communities. This does not mean Christians do not have contributions to make, nor that they should avoid drawing from their faith, values, and insights in

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17 See www.elca.org/socialstatements.
18 Apology, Article IV, 24, BC 2000, 124.
discussing public matters. The Christian vocation to serve God and the neighbor may be fulfilled in
civic places of responsibility.

As Lutherans participate in civic life for the well-being of all, we recognize that this work is neither
unique to nor possessed by Christians alone. To “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8) must include
welcoming and acknowledging the ideas, values, and contributions of all people, regardless of their
religious tradition or worldview. Christians, as individuals or as the body of Christ in the world, have no
guaranteed higher or better reasoning than other religious or nonreligious communities. This means that
Lutherans reject the claim, explicit or assumed by some, that Christians have revelatory knowledge or
saving insight into civic and political matters.

This does not mean Christians do not have contributions to make, nor that they should not draw from their
faith, language, and traditions in discussing public matters. God’s grace received in faith empowers
people to action. Our calling comes with a sharpened commitment to the dignity of all because all are
God’s children and created in God’s image. Our actions come with an awakened sense of God’s biblical
call for justice and hearts changed for compassion and care. Love of God is embodied in neighbor justice
by providing for their daily bread and practicing the forgiveness Christians have received in Christ.

Liberated from the burden of seeking eternal salvation through our own efforts, we can join God’s efforts
to create and re-create the institutions and communities of human social life. The power of God moves us
to provide food, shelter, play, safety, education, and many other material and social benefits. Sin is
prevalent, but Lutherans call upon the Scriptures, find aid in their theological heritage, and use human
reason and practices of discernment to seek the means to participate wisely and critically in the civic life
God intends. Our baptismal vocation to serve God and neighbor can be lived out in civic places of
responsibility.

II. The Calling to Robust Civic Participation

Article 10) Civic life entails activities and institutions across all public life, from one’s local
neighborhood to matters of national and international concern. Participation in civic organizations
comes in many shapes and sizes, and the recent decline of civic participation in the United States is
especially troubling. Our church affirms that anyone who seeks the community’s well-being
through civic participation is, knowingly or not, using the gifts God provides. They are acting as
channels of God’s concern for human life.

Civic life involves activities and institutions across all public life, from one’s local neighborhood to issues
of national and international concern. Participation in civic organizations comes in many shapes and sizes,
such as coaching soccer for a community center, attending PTA meetings, providing meals for seniors,
participating in peaceful demonstration, volunteering one’s business acumen toward a community
development initiative, or participating in international “sister city” programs. The social fabric of a
democracy depends upon intelligent, prudent, vigorous, and broad participation. It is a medium through
which people deepen relationships, create opportunities, and hold one another accountable. This makes
the recent decline of civic participation in the United States19 especially troubling.

19 See, for instance, Peter Levine and William A. Galston, “America’s Civic Condition: A Glance at the Evidence,”
Brookings Institute, September 1, 1997, www.brookings.edu/articles/americas-civic-condition-a-glance-at-the-
evidence/, accessed October 13, 2023, and Union of International Associations, “Decline in Civic Participation.”
Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential, encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/decline-civic-participation,
Our church affirms that anyone who seeks the community’s well-being through civic participation is, knowingly or not, using the gifts God provides. There is no single or required way to live this out. The Christian faith celebrates the multitude of ways that God calls people into lives of service and community for the sake of the common good.

This statement relies on social teaching on civic life found in previous ELCA statements and messages with both domestic and international implications. The particular calling to be an active and informed citizen in relation to political life is most fully articulated in the social message “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States.” It affirms, for example, the need to pray for civic and political leaders (1 Timothy 2:12), the responsibility to vote and participate in political life, and the need for collective action toward fair and compassionate government.

**Article 11**) Christian worshiping assemblies are grounded in the living Word of God’s law and gospel, which empowers them to be centers supporting civic participation. This is evident in how liturgy prepares us to join God’s work in civic life. As expressed in the ELCA constitution and social teaching, this church expects that each worshiping community will be engaged in forms of active civic participation as one element of life in Christ’s church.

Congregations, synod-authorized ministries, campus ministries, and other recognized worshiping assemblies are to be grounded in the living Word of God’s law and gospel, which also means they are centers for civic participation. Rooted in Word and Sacrament, almost everything in worship, from the gathering to the sending, prepares us to join God’s activity in civic life. The dynamic movement of the liturgy allows Christians to rest in God’s mercy and be restored in hope but, at every turn, prepares them to be sent forth into the world to work for the community’s good, both local and beyond.

There are many examples. Besides preaching, the church’s prayers lift up social issues and ask guidance for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1f) The peace of Christ is a sign of our unity in God and a reminder that we are sent to share this experience of peace with the world. The offering is collected to support the assembly and to share with other people in need, locally and around the globe.

There are many types of worshiping communities. They may draw from the most local to broad regions. In all cases, as expressed in its constitution and social teaching, the ELCA expects that each worshiping community will be engaged in forms of active civic participation as one element of life in Christ’s church. This is one vital way that God’s people serve neighbors in human society.

**Article 12**) The ELCA reaffirms that civic service can represent a place to carry out one’s calling from God to civic participation. Public servants should be held to high expectations, and the larger community should give government officials the dignity and respect owed for good and just work. At the same time, citizens are expected to hold the government and its officials accountable.

Lutherans historically have encouraged individuals to use their gifts for civic and political service faithfully at the local, state, national, or international level. Examples include those who work in civil service, public safety, health care, or education. Other examples include military personnel, judges, legislators, and appointed officials. These and many others are essential in making possible the effective functioning of government services. Those called to such public service are urged to work toward justice and the common good, and never for dominating power or gain for themselves, or for particular groups with which they identify.

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20 The first ELCA social statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, sets the foundation for this. It is cited above.
Civil service includes more than work in a legislature or on the national stage, and this church encourages all people to explore service in state, county, and municipal branches including through various boards, agencies, and committees. It is critical to support and guide youth and young adults in this church to consider taking up such places of responsibility.

Christians are encouraged to take an initial stance of respect for neighbors who work in government at all levels—local, state, and national—and in each of the three branches of government. Unfortunately, in this society, there is a common caricature of government workers as lazy, incompetent, or troublesome bureaucrats. This image is grossly misleading. It misrepresents the complexities of civic life and government service, and from a Christian perspective, it violates the Eighth Commandment, against bearing false witness against another.

Government employees are not above reproach, and they may and do fail in their responsibilities. However, the default stance toward them should be dignity and respect, not slander and suspicion. In fact, this devaluation of government service, officials, and workers reveals deep problems with prejudices and distorted hierarchies of the value of each human being. When local trash collectors, postal workers, and county officials are not given honor for their work, this reveals one way in which we fail to see their labor and service as God does.

At the same time, citizens are expected to hold the government and its officials accountable. Government workers should do their jobs with integrity and fairness and in ways that serve the common good. Government institutions, programs, and policies must be held to high standards as a sign of their importance and impact. Courts must apply the law in accordance with precedent and with fairness, equity, and impartiality in order to preserve public trust. We should judge individual cases of government failure carefully, avoiding generalizations that are unfair and that fail to help identify areas where improvement is genuinely needed.

Article 13) Religion can create divisions in civic life or can contribute to mending the torn social fabric and reconciling divided peoples. This church urges all people of faith to seek a constructive role that counters growing polarization, distrust, and ill will. Religious traditions can offer particular gifts of moral vision, inclusion, and compassion sorely needed in U.S. civic life.

Religious organizations must discern when and how to constructively engage in civic life. We must be attentive to contexts and what specific roles and actions are called for. Religions can create divisions in civic life or can contribute to mending the social fabric and reconciling divided peoples. This church urges all people of faith to seek constructive roles to counter growing hyper-partisan polarization, distrust, and ill will.

The ELCA constitution and our church’s social teaching lift up a moral vision for civic life that reflects both the depth of sin in human fallenness and the heights of hope in God’s redemption. This church’s moral vision does not mean we expect to bring God’s kingdom on earth—only God can do that—but it does give witness to the biblical idea of God’s intention for shalom and thereby encourages us to stand for both justice and reconciliation in this time of divisiveness and acrimony.

This moral vision is held in tension with the realism of human nature’s fallenness but reminds us that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The moral vision also reminds us that, contrary to the common assumptions and painful actions in civic life, all stand equally before God. There is no neighbor or stranger, no political ally or opponent for whom Christ did not die. As a community of inclusion, a people of every race and tongue (Acts 2, Revelation 7:9), we are drawn by our civic engagement into wider inclusion and dignity for all.
The ELCA has committed itself to helping in the reconciliation and healing of communities and civic life. We are expected to respond with compassion and imagination, drawing from experience and innovating new ways to address civic challenges. For example, social ministries in the community are a means of civic participation and are widely affirmed by this church. Care facilities, food pantries, housing programs, and refugee resettlement efforts are but a few examples of types of responses found in individual congregations and among the members of Lutheran Services in America, one of the largest social service organizations in the United States. This church has a responsibility, working with all people of goodwill, to mediate conflict and to advocate just and peaceful resolutions while supporting institutions and policies that seek the well-being and power of all.

**Article 14** The ELCA and other religious bodies have a particular calling to encourage discernment and provide spaces for difficult conversations. For Christians, discernment is enabled by the gift of unity that Christ gives. Discussion about tough issues among God’s people is a witness that counters the forces of social division and distrust. The ELCA’s identity as a community of moral deliberation is one into which our church continues to grow, and which is increasingly crucial in a society so divided.

Discerning a best course of action requires considering many different sides of an issue. Because we recognize that every person is one for whom Christ died, we must seek to be a safe space for challenging conversations. A safe space does not mean a space where all agree; it means a space where all are honored and valued regardless of what they believe as worshiping communities struggle together to discern the common good.

In a polarized environment, the practice of communal moral discernment is an evangelical witness to God’s intention for humans to respect others and the good use of reason. Fulfilling a wide spectrum of callings and coming from a diversity of experiences, Christians will often disagree passionately on social questions. Because they share common convictions of faith, they are free, indeed obligated, to deliberate together on the challenges they face in the world even when consensus is not reached. United in baptism with Christ and all believers, Christians should welcome and celebrate their diversity and remain in conversation.

Since the 1991 adoption of the social statement *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, the idea of our church as a safe space for discernment has been formally part of the ELCA’s identity as a community of moral deliberation. It is an identity that our church continues to grow into. As a church, we recognize our many failures to live out this identity; at the same time, we give thanks that we may renew and build upon this heritage.

**Article 15** The biblical witness teaches that, among other roles and aims, there is a prophetic task for those who follow Jesus (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The church’s prophetic presence in civic life calls for holding civic leaders accountable, taking constructive action and lifting up a vision for improved social well-being. It is part of this church’s work under the left hand of God as a contribution to society, and it needs to be done with both vitality and great care.

Looking to the biblical witness, the church has long affirmed that one means of discipleship and ministry involves civic participation as a prophetic presence. With Mary, the mother of Jesus, the church sings of God’s action to bring down the proud and lift up the lowly (Luke 1:51-53). The church hopes to follow Christ, who boldly declared a calling to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the incarcerated, healing for the sick, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The prophetic role envisions and points us toward a better future of well-being.

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22 *The Church in Society*, 4.
This prophetic role includes “the obligation to name and denounce the idols before which people bow, to identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate in hope with poor and powerless people.” In its ordination rites, this church has consistently affirmed the expectation “to give faithful witness in the world through word and deed” and “to serve the needy, care for the sick, comfort the distressed.” Though these expectations are made explicit for rostered ministers, they are part of this church’s calling shared by all, irrespective of particular offices and roles within the church.

This role of holding civic leaders accountable applies to both religious and secular institutions when they abuse or overreach their authority. This church says, with Martin Luther, that “to rebuke” those in authority “through God’s Word spoken publicly, boldly and honestly” is “not seditious” but “a praiseworthy, noble, and ... particularly great service to God.”

Efforts toward justice-seeking, advocacy, social change, and addressing all forms of civic life require care, patience, and wise distinctions. Civic participation in these forms may be controversial, and worshiping communities need to take time to discern and identify common parameters for action. Each service ministry, advocacy effort, or social change ministry warrants careful selection.

Theologically it is important to recognize that the exertion of social power when addressing or challenging civic life is part of this church’s work under the left hand of God. Though the church’s message of the gospel is sure, we cannot know what the outcomes of exerting social power in public actions will be. We must consistently evaluate whether neighbor justice, especially for the marginalized, is being served by the prophetic presence of this church.

Article 16) The ELCA encourages individuals and worshipping communities to work together toward a civic life that better reflects God’s vision for a more just and reconciled world. The various forms of advocacy offer ways to press civic leaders and public policy makers to respect the needs and dignity of all persons and our common home, with special concern for the vulnerable. Such faith-rooted advocacy is born from relationships of service and solidarity, is guided by ELCA social teaching, and requires different practices in different contexts. Flowing from trust built through one-to-one relationships, faith-based organizing seeks to spur action by building coalitions of like-minded people in mostly local contexts. Faith-informed advocacy of various kinds can play a transformative role in a polarized political world by bringing people together to work toward the common good in public life.

The challenge to improve civic life, to provide a prophetic presence, or to address complex social issues is daunting. Our church encourages individuals and communities to find ways to work with others toward a civic life that better reflects God’s vision for a more just and reconciled world. Advocacy comes in many forms, from institution-based efforts to more local forms sometimes called “faith-based organizing.” The point is to press civic leaders and public-policy makers to respect the needs and dignity of all people and our common home, with special care for the vulnerable. Advocacy comes

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23 The Church in Society, 4.
24 See “Ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament,” adapted from Evangelical Lutheran Worship Occasional Services for the Assembly (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 3, tinyurl.com/bdeyuk3p, and “Ordination to the Ministry of Word and Service,” adapted from Evangelical Lutheran Worship Occasional Services for the Assembly (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 7, tinyurl.com/2p9w4sfw.
25 ELW, 236.
27 See articles 5-7 of this document, above.
from the Latin *vocare* (to call), the root word for voice and vocation, two important elements of our witness in society.

Institutional advocacy is a stewardship of the ELCA’s voice and is grounded in the ELCA’s constitution. That document calls the ELCA to:

- Empower members to engage with systems and processes to promote the well-being of the human community and creation in the public square, local and federal government, and the international community.
- Equip and encourage members to seek dignity and peace.
- Advance justice in response to human suffering, marginalization, and exclusion.
- Promote equality, justice, and respect for the value of every person to reduce the systemic injustices impacting communities and societies.
- Exercise *corporate social responsibility* through environmental, social, and justice principles to create a just and sustainable society.

Such faith-rooted advocacy is born from relationships of service and solidarity. It is an expression of both individual discipleship and our life as a church together. It grows most powerfully out of ministries among people and communities that have been denied their human dignity or are seeking greater justice. Advocacy supports and amplifies these voices. Though sometimes advocacy is described as providing “a voice for the voiceless,” we must be careful to identify and support opportunities for people to speak for themselves.

The ELCA’s corporate witness is governed by ELCA social teaching, and advocacy occurs in both domestic and global accompaniment with people and communities. Likewise, advocacy is enriched and strengthened through ecumenical and interreligious collaboration. The united witness of the faith community builds and depends upon relationships of trust and communal discernment.

Moving people of varying interests to act for the common good may require different practices in different contexts. Building relationships and sharing vision can involve letters, calls, and meetings with elected leaders and their staff. It can involve invitations for them to visit communities and ministries. It involves building public awareness from editorials to rallies and protests, earned and paid media, public testimony, community organizing, and more.

Using the trust of one-to-one relationships, faith-based organizers seek to spur action by building coalitions of like-minded people in mostly local contexts. Faith-based community organizing roots itself in shared values and commitments, in congregations and other institutions, often across denominations and religious boundaries.

Faith-informed advocacy can play a transformative role in a polarized political world by bringing people together to work toward the common good in the public square.

Article 17) Was Jesus “political”? The Scriptures are clear that he was not political in the sense of affiliation with a political party, a partisan movement, or a designer of civic legislation. However, the biblical claim that “Jesus is Lord” (Acts 10:36) is simultaneously a political and religious

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29 The ELCA’s corporate witness is expressed, for instance, in the work of the Witness in Society team or the occasional filing of amicus briefs. See elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church.
30 Such collaborations are specifically recognized in the ELCA’s ecumenical and interreligious policy documents. See, for example, Inter-Religious Policy Statement REVISED_0919_v2.indd (elca.org), 11 (especially commitments 7, 8, and 9), and Microsoft Word - EcumenicalVision.doc (elca.org), 6 (point number 4).
In addition, Jesus called government leadership to accountability to such an extent that he was executed as a political criminal. Today, concern for the neighbor and the common good means the church is called to follow Jesus’ example by engaging appropriate issues with care that are in the political arena. Political partisanship is not proper for the church, even while we engage in issues that have political elements.

There are debates about whether it is right to call Jesus “political.” The two millennia that separate us from Jesus’ social context make it difficult to appreciate the political dimensions of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus was not political in the sense of affiliation with a particular political party, movement, or leadership circle. He did not negotiate or legislate civic laws and regulations. Nevertheless, the Scriptures attest that “Jesus is Lord,” (Acts 10:36, Philippians 2:11), and that was and is both a theological and a political statement. Moreover, Jesus made political authorities uncomfortable enough to execute him because he called them to a higher accountability and claimed a power broader and greater than that of imperial Rome.

If Jesus’ ministry was political in this sense, then disciples today also have a related task. If Jesus is Ruler, then no nation, constitution, or government, even a democratic one, can have our ultimate loyalty. God’s demands have singular priority for Christians and, ultimately, are not to be equated with worldly structures such as a government or a nation. As with Jesus, however, these demands pull us not out of society but into it.

When God’s people join God’s efforts in society, they must sometimes address issues in the political arena if they are to hold government accountable, oppose social oppression, seek various kinds of liberation, and work toward the common good. Political engagement in this sense is a manifestation of serving God’s love through civic participation. In this sense, then, addressing issues that are in the political arena is an element of a Christian’s, and this church’s, calling. Political partisanship is not (Article 35). Any engagement of issues can be interpreted, criticized, or even rebuked as being partisan, but careful discernment and clear criteria (see articles 21 and 25, for example) provide the necessary guardrails for risking this participation in God’s work.

Article 18) The ELCA also has a standing commitment to civic life, exercised through synods and the churchwide expressions of our church. The 1991 social statement The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective details the nature of this institutional witness.

The ELCA also serves God and neighbor in civic life through its synods and the churchwide organization. These long-standing commitments are detailed in the 1991 social statement The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective (pp. 8-9). Some examples from that document, among others, illustrate our church’s civic contributions as part of our social witness:

- Supporting church-related economic, educational, and social ministry organizations in their service to human need.
- Speaking on timely, urgent issues on which the voice of this church should be heard and which have clear and specific grounding in ELCA social teaching.
- Working with and on behalf of the poor, the powerless, and those who suffer, using moral persuasion to advocate that political and economic decision-making bodies develop policies that advance justice, peace, and care of creation.
- Providing for federal chaplains in military and federal prisons.
- Supporting the Lutheran Office for World Community at the United Nations.

The reader can find the full list there, many of which relate to civic participation. See The Church in Society, 8-9.
Article 19) Civic participation necessarily involves matters of government and political life. The word “politics” often is used today to express disgust with dishonest practices, partisan shenanigans, power grabs, ploys of deceit, and the sinful use of authority. “Politics” in this statement, however, is understood as the negotiation of how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are shared. Politics, rightly understood and practiced, then, is essential to civic well-being and of concern to God’s people. It is important to distinguish between politics and ethics and to ensure that political concerns are guided by ethical discernment. This church’s body of teaching addresses civic life ethically, which includes the relation of communities of faith to political authority, to government. As an example, ethics presents the principle of self-determination as a primary value of a healthy political community because it encourages the idea of sharing power.

The Christian vocation to serve the neighbor through our common civic life has multiple facets, but inevitably it involves some participation in the essential civic dimension of government and politics. The word “politics” often is used today to express disgust with dishonest practices, partisan shenanigans, power grabs, ploys of deceit—with authority being used in a sinful way. These practices take place, but politics, rightly understood, is a necessary and beneficial gift. God creates humans as political beings. In the word’s original and fullest meaning, it describes action in the polis (Greek), a state or society especially when characterized by a sense of community.

“Politics” then, describes a necessary and positive aspect of human life. It describes negotiating how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are shared. Politics, in this sense, happens whenever two or more people are gathered to live in community together. (This includes life in the family and the church!) It describes the activity in which each person’s interests and the well-being of the community are navigated and negotiated. Politics is an essential and good thing because it is vital to self-governance.32

Politics is always complicated and messy because it involves diplomacy, compromise, persuasion, and sometimes coercion. The reality is that living in community requires scrappy negotiations about the ongoing (re)distribution of resources, rights, responsibilities, opportunity, access, and all other things that are needed to form a healthy community. It includes legislation (law-making), enforcement, judicial evaluation, community planning and organization, advocacy, and distribution of goods and services (such as postal delivery, overseas aid, etc.).

It is important to distinguish between politics and ethics. Ethics is careful discernment about what is right, good, or appropriate. It asks what ought to be done (or not), what we should value (or not), and who we should be (or not) as a community. In other words, ethics seeks to guide what we (as a community and members of it) will seek, be, and do to form a community of well-being. ELCA social statements are ethical documents that provide this church’s teaching for addressing civic life.

Politics and ethics are necessarily related. Ethics discerns; politics implements. As an example, ethics presents the principle of self-determination as a primary value of a healthy political community because it encourages the idea of sharing power. Government and political activity can be evaluated then by how well they foster mutual self-determination for each community in a society (Article 21). The following sections turn to the principles and assessments of our church on the essential element of civic life of political authority.

III. Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government

1. Political authority is one way that God protects and promotes the well-being of human society. Political authority is also human and social, permeated by sin. Some governments and societies fulfill God’s intent for political authority better than others. In the Lutheran tradition the question to ask of government is “How faithful is it to God’s purposes of well-being, including caring for the most vulnerable members of the community?” Lutherans ought to live in troubled restlessness with all government, both supporting political authority and criticizing its misuse, as appropriate.

The Lutheran Confessions affirm the principle of political authority and good government33 as one way the Triune God protects and coordinates the complex web of social and economic relationships for human well-being. Over time, Lutherans have come to understand that we ought to live with a troubled restlessness about all forms of government. Some provide better measures of well-being than others even though sin permeates every human intention and structure.

In the Lutheran theological tradition, the question is how faithful government is to God’s purposes of justice and good order, especially in caring for the most vulnerable members of the community. The reformers of the 16th century directed attention to those who held positions of responsibility in civic institutions, including government, the church, and the household.34 Such discernment about political authority reaches as far back as Luther’s catechisms. The Large Catechism says, “It would therefore be fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned with a loaf of bread instead of a lion or a wreath of rue [a medicinal herb], or if a loaf of bread were stamped on coins.”35 Rather than conquering more land or gaining more wealth, the role of government should be focused on ensuring that each person received all the necessities for daily well-being.

The Lutheran tradition supports an attitude of respect for and cooperation with political authority, but also maintains that there is a responsibility to assess and call individuals and institutions to account. Because government is an indispensable structure of society, Lutherans have historically called for great deference and obedience to civil authorities and institutions, in line with Romans 13. The Lutheran heritage contains examples of people denouncing the misuse of those institutions and also cooperating with them when appropriate.

2. To determine how the well-being of the neighbor is being served by political authority, criteria for assessment are necessary. God’s power sustains and gives power to creation. Therefore, the principal criterion used to assess governmental and political authority is whether it increases power and its beneficial use among the people governed. Power expressed as mutual self-determination enhances people’s lives and is a presumption that should be encouraged and respected by government and others. Both the model of divine power and the political presumption of self-determination include a criterion of fostering plurality.

33 Apology, Article 16, BC 2000, 231.
34 This tradition goes back to the work of the reformers, such as Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther’s pastor, who was deployed to various European government bodies to advocate for and help draft laws creating community chests, a welfare net, to assist the poor (see The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation, eds. Carter Lindberg and Paul Wee (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016). For other examples, see Walter Altmann, Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective, 2nd ed., trans. Thia Cooper (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 70-132.
35 Large Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, Article IV, para. 75, BC 2000, 231.
Human social life is an arena of multiple forms of power. This church teaches that an essential assessment for any use of power, whether in law, policy, or action, is whether it amplifies the power that God intends for people and groups. This assessment is especially important with those who have been denied power historically or marginalized by social systems.

As the source of all that is, God is sovereign. But God’s sovereignty brings forth creatures who are not God, and God gives power and sustenance to creatures. God's power creates their power rather than depriving them of it (Article 2). Divine, self-giving power is always and everywhere plural, producing not one center of power but multiple transmissions of power.

As such all power can be assessed by its adherence to the divine creative and self-giving purpose or by the extent to which it is distorted and misused for the sake of domination and exploitation. This is true whether in politics, civic life, religious organizations, business, law enforcement, society, or the family.

To the extent that human power is directed solely or primarily to the control or domination of others, it is a sinful distortion of the purpose of power. Dominating power, intentionally or unintentionally, ultimately destroys the independent power of others rather than increases or intensifies God’s gift of creative, sustaining power. Power exercised as domination hollows out those who are subject to it, whereas those in control lose the vitality that allows them to adapt.

Like all power, governmental power is subject to sinful impulses and systemic distortions. This is the case, in part, because those in government, like all other people, are sinners. Governmental actors, however well-meaning, are also subject to limitations of knowledge and the temptation to not acknowledge those limits. Government, too, may often seek its own advantage or that of its most influential constituencies at the expense of many of its people. This is especially likely if one thinks of politics and civic engagement as merely a collection of warring interest groups, battling in a zero-sum game of wins and losses.

There are circumstances that may require the use of dominating power to overcome others who are doing immense harm—such as another government. In certain circumstances, even war might be legitimate, for example, to defend one’s country against existential threats or to oppose totalitarian regimes. Under such circumstances, dominating power can be justified in good conscience to counter immense harm. This idea has been expressed in the Lutheran tradition as “the strange work of love to destroy what is against love.” Even there, however, Christians and others believe there are constraints. For example, noncombatants and former combatants should be treated with care, as God’s creatures, not mere objects of control or domination.

God’s self-giving creative and sustaining power gives human creatures agency, the ability to set their own course. In addition to creating plurality, the gift of power therefore includes a presumption for self-determination. An important criterion for assessing government action is whether it extends the self-determination of the people—and thus their power.

Practically, this means that the necessary starting point for considering what is good for others should be what those others believe is good for them. Consequently, whether government action extends the mutual self-determination of its people—and thus their power—is an important criterion to assess government action. A national government may be far removed from certain local realities. Local or state governments may be more removed from the effects of their actions on those outside their jurisdiction. That distance increases the possibility for error in determining what will lead to another’s well-being and

what will damage another’s self-determination and power. This is not a value judgement but a mere
description of the limits of government, even in a representative democracy.

These possibilities in turn mean government and the governed must ask what level of government is most
appropriate and how best to design policies that foster self-determination. That is also why it is important
to create opportunities for those who will be most directly affected by those decisions to participate and
be heard seriously in the process of making the decision.

A presumption is, however, not a rule, and self-determination is not an absolute value. It is a presumption,
a guardrail. Sometimes laws and regulations might oppose what people believe to be their own good.
Individuals and groups can also mistake what is good for them.

The presumption for self-determination is especially necessary when what seems good for my group
significantly harms others and their self-determination. This is because self-determination directly implies
a norm of reciprocity. As a universal presumption deriving from God's creative and sustaining power, it
gives priority to others' self-determination as well. Self-determination always includes mutual or plural
self-determination. It does not mean doing whatever one wants at the expense of others. Self-
determination is necessarily mutual self-determination. To rephrase this for ethics in the form of the
Golden Rule: I should extend to others their self-determination just as I wish to have it extended to me
(Matthew 7:12).

Both the model of divine power and the political presumption of self-determination include a criterion of
fostering plurality. These are indispensable elements for thinking through the nature and purpose of the
government of the United States as the country where most ELCA congregations operate.

Article 22) In the United States, the Constitution is the federal framework of political authority.
When it was written, the Constitution was unique in some ways, including its neutrality in matters
of religion and its making “we the people” politically sovereign. The Constitution’s separation of
powers and their checks and balances were designed in part to prevent the monopolization of
sovereignty by any branch or locale of government. The Constitution is both grounding and
aspirational; that is, it did not fulfill its own objectives completely. The Constitution’s preamble (or
preface) expresses this government’s purpose. The values expressed in the preamble can be used to
assess whether the government is serving the purpose that its own Constitution has laid out.

In the United States, the Constitution (ratified in 1788) provides the federal framework of what political
authority may and may not do with respect to its citizens and other governmental and nongovernmental
institutions. It provides for a national government consisting of three authorities with distinct roles and
power sharing—executive, legislative, and judicial. It reserves certain matters to the states and others to
citizens of the country regardless of the state in which they live. It also acknowledges Indigenous
sovereign governments.

The U.S. Constitution was not utterly unique. There are precedents in human history for what we
recognize as “democracy” or “a republic.” The Constitution was not even the first governing framework
of the fledgling United States. That distinction belonged to the Articles of Confederation, adopted by the
Continental Congress in 1777 (and ratified by the 13 states in 1781). But within a few years, it became

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37 For one comprehensive discussion of the Constitution’s history, including its uniqueness and history of
38 For an excellent discussion of the Articles of Confederation and their context, see George William Van Cleve, We
Have Not a Government: The Articles of Confederation and the Road to the Constitution (Chicago: University of
clear that the young country likely would not survive under the Articles of Confederation. There was no effective executive power to enforce the national Congress’ decisions, and the nation was in danger of defaulting on its debts. The states had separate, often conflicting, policies (sometimes aimed at other states) as well as separate currencies. These and other failures gave rise to the Constitution.

The Constitution was unique in crucial ways. The 1788 Constitution makes no mention of God or religion except to prohibit requiring religious tests for holding federal office. And for the first time in recorded history, the governing document of a people had to be adopted (ratified) by people it would govern rather than be imposed by a monarch, a sovereign state, or religious authority (Article 23).

The Constitution also strives against the monopolization of power and pure self-interest by instituting checks and balances across institutions and with the states. The structure of the new government was explicitly designed to combat extreme self-interest, which the drafters had experienced both under a parliamentary monarchy and among the states included in the Articles of Confederation.

It was controversial to provide for a strong executive, as the Constitution did. Because of that, the framers limited the executive branch,-reserving certain matters for the legislature or the judiciary. Similarly, the Constitution provides for an executive not elected by Congress, to limit Congress’s power and influence. In addition to reserving some areas of authority for states, the Constitution provided all states with equal representation in the U.S. Senate to combat the fear that the larger states would ignore or destroy the vitality of smaller states. The courts were established to settle disputes and interpret laws. The authority of the courts was also checked by certain legislative and executive means.

The Constitution is both grounding and aspirational. It serves as an example and points this society to values and practices that the nation has fulfilled incompletely. Its preamble (or preface) clearly expresses this government’s purpose and provides a reference for assessing national faithfulness to that purpose:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

These are secular standards for evaluating government that also give specificity to the Christian question “Is the neighbor’s well-being served?”

Article 23) The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: “we the people.” Politically, the people are sovereign, not a monarch or other authority imposing a government on its people. The ratification of the Constitution itself enacts a preference for self-determination. Its enactment was deeply flawed, since the enfranchised “people” in the late 1700s were largely limited to white, property-owning males. The subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution have expanded “we the people” to include people of color, women, and young adults.

The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: “we the people.” Never before had those who would be governed been required to vote their government into effect, to “ordain and establish” it. “The people” would determine how they would be governed (and that vote was close in some of the original 11 ratifying states). A clear preference for self-determination was inherent in the Constitutional process, as much as or more so than in the Constitution itself.

Much of the subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution made this preference for mutual self-determination more explicit. At the time of ratification, “the people” were largely limited to free white
men. Many states also imposed a property-owning qualification on the right to vote. Slavery was recognized and accepted by the Constitution. Indeed, slaveholding states received additional congressional representation through the constitutional clause counting slaves as three-fifths of a person, even though those states denied slaves’ personhood legally and gave them zero-fifths of a vote.

Most members of Indigenous nations, who were noncitizens of the United States until 1924, had no say in representation. Though American Indian sovereignty is recognized in the Constitution, that commitment was blatantly ignored as states and the federal governments violated treaty after treaty, and it remains a source of struggle today. Women had no universal right to vote in the United States until 1920.

The preference for self-determination was thus partly realized in the Constitution and partly unrealized. Amendments to the Constitution have tended to make that aspiration more effective by reducing the number of groups who were “governed” without their “consent” (for instance, expanding the right to vote).

Regarding citizens of African descent, the Reconstruction amendments essentially said that the 1787 Constitution’s “grand bargain” to preserve slavery got wrong who “we the people” should be. Later amendments guaranteed the vote to women (1920) and young adults ages 18-20 (1971). Levying any tax as a condition to vote was prohibited (1964). Except for the soon-repealed Prohibition amendment (1919, the Eighteenth Amendment), every amendment related to the ability of citizens to participate in civic life, or determine how they will live their own lives, has expanded, never limited, citizens’ capacity for mutual self-determination.

**Article 24** The Constitution explicitly supports religious neutrality and diversity by forbidding religious “tests” for U.S. officeholders. Had it not done so, the country would have been deprived of the service of many, including notable U.S. presidents. The Constitution’s choice was for religious self-determination. The later First Amendment to the Constitution expressed neutrality toward religion, thereby encouraging plurality of religion in society.

The 1788 Constitution made a firm decision for religious pluralism—the right of each person to practice the religion of their choice—in Article VI: “No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” That was a radical choice because 11 of the 13 states at that time had religious qualifications for public officials. The same attitude of neutrality and plurality regarding religion was expressed in the very first words of the First Amendment to the Constitution (discussed in Section IV), ratified as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

The Constitution’s choice to forbid religious tests was historically novel and has had momentous consequences. For example, neither Thomas Jefferson nor Abraham Lincoln had any institutional religious affiliation. A religious test would have left the country without their service and that of others from non-Christian faith traditions or no faith tradition. The United States opened public offices to people of all religions, as well to the nonreligious, and limited the ability of government to interfere with self-determined religious choice.

**Article 25** Governmental action can be evaluated by how well it grants power to those subject to it, including the aim of mutual self-determination. Legitimate government action therefore includes both coercive action and the positive production of power for its citizens. There are many examples of this. This article identifies specific questions that we might ask when evaluating particular governmental policies at the local, state, or federal levels.

The framers of the Constitution recognized that self-dealing by states under the Articles of Confederation was already destroying the country and the states themselves. Humans continue to demonstrate, in greater
or lesser measure, the tendency to want to dominate and control, to seek our advantage over our neighbor, not for their power but, in the end, for our own. Theologically, this is part of the meaning we Lutherans recognize in teaching that even the justified are also sinners.

Article 21 explains that government is subject to the same impulses. Accordingly, governmental action should be subject to the presumption that those governed have a right to identify what they see as their needs. Here, too, that presumption can be overcome, and government can act coercively upon those who are subject to it, particularly where those subjects are needlessly damaging others’ capacity for self-determination. That assessment is the source of much criminal law, for example.

As the government acts to prevent harmful behavior, the government should also seek to share power in ways to promote the common good. Examples of this communication of power and well-being include compulsory school attendance, Social Security, regulations to incentivize accomplishing social goals, and many more.

A few of the questions to assess a government at federal, state, and local levels include: Has this act opened room for the self-determination of those in its jurisdiction? Has this coercive authority adequately protected valuable mutual self-determination to a reasonable extent? Has this regulatory authority made the operation of the economy smoother than it otherwise would have been, so that those affected can live their lives more fully? Has this action assisted or encouraged those who want to participate in civic life to do so? Will the act do these things in the future? Does it effectively rectify failures of the past, especially failures to include the marginalized?

All of these are examples of asking whether, on balance, an action has increased or will increase the power, mutual self-determination, and well-being of those affected by a government. The answers to these questions provide the means for people of faith, and others, to enter into important civic conversations about what is taking place in U.S. civic and political life.

Article 26) The United States is not a “Christian nation.” It was not founded on specifically Christian principles, though Christians and Christianity did influence its ethos. The premise of the Constitution and its ratification is that the sovereign is “we the people,” not “we the Christians.”

The religious diversity and neutrality of both the original Constitution and its First Amendment (see Section IV) clearly reject past or present claims that the U.S. was founded as a “Christian nation.” During George Washington’s first term this claim was explicitly addressed in a treaty, an act of state. It reads, “The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion.”

Many people involved in the movement for U.S. independence and the ratification of the Constitution had devout Christian faith, though others did not. The dominant religious practice of the times were certainly Protestant, and this helped weave the founding social fabric with a Christian ethos. However, it must be recognized that many who lived in and contributed to the establishment of the United States were not Christian. They included people of various religions and worldviews.

The ELCA gives thanks for many of the ways in which God worked through Christian individuals and in that ethos. In this sense it is possible to speak of Christianity as contributing to the founding of this country and to claim that the original U.S. ethos was influenced by Christianity. However, this church

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39 Article 11 of the Barbary Treaties, signed at Tripoli on November 4, 1796. Accessed September 1, 2023, avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp. Though not a constitution or amendment, such treaties are official declarations that help articulate a country’s self-understanding.
rejects the baseless claims that the U.S. was founded on specifically Christian beliefs or that the U.S. Constitution is a result of special revelation, thus establishing a Christian nation. The Constitution established that the nation’s sovereign is “we the people,” not just “we the faithful” or “we the Christians.”

IV. Religion and the First Amendment

Article 27) The First Amendment to the Constitution begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The first clause (“no law respecting an establishment of religion”) is known as the establishment clause. The second clause (“no law … prohibiting the free exercise thereof”) is known as the free exercise clause. Though these clauses are sometimes in tension, they both foster religious plurality, despite some exceptions in historical practice in the United States.

The U.S. should never be claimed as a Christian nation. Yet the ELCA gives thanks that the founding documents of our country do not exclude religious commitments from public life. The First Amendment to the Constitution (ratified in 1791) begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The amendment’s first clause (“shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”) or “establishment clause” was cut from the same cloth as the Constitution’s prohibition against religious tests for public office. Government is not the church, and the church is not the government. Government must not select one faith as “official” nor promote religion in general. Support for religion arises from the people, not the government. Nonestablishment undergirds a vibrant religious plurality in the U.S., despite historical examples of religious discrimination.

The establishment clause also bars excessive government entanglement in religious institutions. For example, the government has no authority to decide who is a fit minister or teacher of a faith or to micromanage the governance of religious institutions. It does not say that a person’s religious commitments cannot or should not be shared or visible in that individual’s civic life.

The amendment’s second clause (“no law … prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]”) or “free exercise clause” means that government cannot prohibit individuals from worshiping, or not, in the manner each sees fit.

The establishment and free exercise clauses are sometimes in tension, and there are complex and sometimes contradictory assertions about the nuances of their meaning. Nevertheless, their general intent is clear. Government by the people means there is no favored religion. At the same time, government cannot prohibit people from practicing their religions. The two clauses establish self-determination in religious matters.

As with all expressions of self-determination, there are limits to free exercise of religion. Free exercise is not an absolute right. Otherwise, individuals and groups could claim anything they do as religious. There are no general religious exemptions from laws designed for public safety or against harm to others, for example. Religious liberty does not include the ability to injure the neighbor or violate the neighbor’s civil rights.

Article 28) The establishment clause mandates the institutional distinction between religious bodies and the state. The state may acknowledge the distinctiveness of religion but may not favor or
disadvantage religion generally, or one religion in relation to another. There are two main
traditions of interpreting “nonestablishment,” and the ELCA takes no position on either while
affirming the institutional distinction between government and religion.

The ELCA is aware of a society wide concern about a shift in the interpretation regarding the
establishment clause. It is a contemporary struggle of traditions about the distinction between religion and
the state.

Historically, the tradition of robust “separationism” prevailed during the life of ELCA predecessor bodies,
1960-1987, and is evident in their social teaching.40 This separationist perspective emphasized the need
for government to act with secular purpose only.41 A second historical interpretation focused on a
different U.S. tradition in which civil government promoted “non-sectarian Protestantism.” This view
contributed to the practice of establishing school prayer in “common” (public) schools. It is sometimes
called a “religionist” tradition and contends that the religion clauses should take into account a
community’s deeply held and widely shared religious convictions.

The church’s fundamental concern in this social statement is not whether it should support either tradition
but that the critical distinctions between religion and civil society are always maintained. The state is not
an instrument of a common religion or tradition. The state may acknowledge the wide variety of religious
expression but is not responsible for, or a participant in, preserving and transmitting a particular religious
tradition.

Article 29) The Constitution’s prohibition against establishment of religion clears the ground for
the free exercise of religion secured by the free exercise clause (second clause). The two clauses
together promote religious plurality in the United States. Free exercise means that religious people
may enter public debate and decision-making with their religious convictions, as many abolitionists
and civil rights leaders and advocates have done. Free exercise is different than Christian freedom,
which, for Lutherans, arises solely from God’s promise of salvation and does not depend on any
specific political arrangement. Christian freedom is a matter of the gospel; free exercise of religion
is a matter of human law.

The relationship between faith and public life is more the focus of the free exercise clause. That
relationship is less constrained than the one between the state and established religions. In fact,
prohibiting the establishment of a religion clears the ground for plurality. Nonestablishment allows people
of various faiths to determine their own best way of connecting faith with their own public lives. It opens
space for self-determination. Prohibiting the practice of sharing religious values publicly would also have
deprived the U.S. public of much of the basis for the abolition of slavery and for the civil rights
movement, to name just two examples.

It is critical to distinguish Christian freedom from the religious liberty guaranteed in the U.S.
Constitution. For Lutherans, the distinction is one between gospel and law. Christian freedom, given
through Christ, is a gift of God received by faith and does not depend on any particular political
arrangement. Arising from God’s promise of salvation, this is an eternal freedom from condemnation by

40 See www.elca.org/Resources/Predecessor-Social-Teachings. Until the ELCA adopts teaching of its own on a
topic, it accepts predecessor documents as the basis of social teaching, insofar as they are in agreement.
41 Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602 (1971) was widely regarded as establishing a standard for analysis of
establishment clause cases. It identified a three-pronged test: whether the law or government action has a legitimate
secular purpose, does not have the primary effect of either advancing or inhibiting religion, and does not result in an
excessive entanglement of government and religion. Lemon was overruled by Kennedy v. Bremerton School
District, 597 U.S. ___ (2022),
... the demands of God that we do not fulfill. It also gives us the positive freedom to love God and neighbor. Christian freedom has only indirect significance for organizations and individuals in the civil realm.\(^{42}\)

The Lutheran tradition teaches that Christian freedom includes the presumptive duty to obey civil law. There are exceptions, such as circumstances when the law has become tyrannical and abusive, especially to the most vulnerable. Then love may require something other than obedience to civil law.\(^{43}\) But in normal situations, Christians obey for the sake of the neighbor—for the sake of good civil order.

**Article 30)** The free exercise clause of the Constitution is a political good that, for the church, is consistent with our belief in the creation of humans in the image of God. The free exercise clause ensures the right to worship (or not) as each person desires. There are limits to free exercise, including that a person’s free exercise does not unduly damage important public interests. At the same time civic life is complex enough that sometimes it may require that civil laws and regulations “accommodate” a religious adherent’s practice that would otherwise violate civil law.

Religious liberty (or religious freedom) as asserted in the First Amendment is a political term describing a civil liberty. Historically, the ELCA considers it a gift from God developed through common human faculties but with grounding in our creation in the image of God. Christians and other traditions together assert the value of religious liberty in society as a political good. The idea of religious liberty thus connects both of the religion clauses in the First Amendment.

The free exercise clause assures individuals and religious communities the right to believe and worship, or not, as they choose (provided that the form of worship does not unduly burden important public interests). In addition, it assures the right to be free from compulsory statements of faith as a condition of holding civil positions (public office tests were already forbidden in the 1788 Constitution). It also grants freedom from religion-based discrimination that would bar people from receiving general public benefits like public education or participating in general public programs operated on behalf of the state for a wide range of human care programs, including adoption and foster care.

In the complexity of civil life, the concept of religious liberty may sometimes require that civil laws and regulations “accommodate” a religious adherent’s practice that would otherwise violate civil law. An accommodation may be affirmative—one that permits the adherent to do something otherwise prohibited.\(^{44}\) Or the accommodation may be negative—one that allows the adherent to avoid performance of some required act. Not all requested accommodations are justifiable, nor must all laws contain a religious accommodation. Nonetheless, the idea of accommodations, when justifiable, plays a role in religious liberty.

**Article 31)** The First Amendment does not prohibit or discourage the application of religious convictions to public life. The phrase “separation of church and state” is not found in the First Amendment and usually is shorthand for nonestablishment. Nonestablishment, however, was not meant to prevent the free exercise of religion. Instead nonestablishment allows each person, without fear of negative legal consequence, to determine for themselves their religious practice, including in civic life. The two clauses of the First Amendment do not contradict each other. If nonestablishment meant that religious commitments should not enter public life, religious people would be uniquely

\(^{42}\) Other faiths or others who depend on natural moral knowledge express a different understanding of spiritual freedom.

\(^{43}\) Apology, Article 16, BC 2000, 231.

\(^{44}\) For example, churches were exempted from the Eighteenth Amendment during Prohibition so they could use wine for communion.
harmed. They would be the only people not allowed or encouraged to bring their highest commitments to bear on public questions.

On the basis of the First Amendment, some, including religious people, believe that religious commitments and claims stemming from religious values are out of bounds in public life. This can include claims that there should be no interaction with or funding of religious organizations by the government, or that discussion of government policies or political matters should never happen within assemblies of believers.

For support, some invoke the phrase “wall of separation” of church and state. This phrase, however, is not in the Constitution and should not be substituted for what the Constitution actually says.

Though “separation” is an accurate description of the proper distinction between the roles of state and church (see Section V), the Constitution does not suggest that religious individuals or communities should keep their deepest beliefs out of public life. Not only would that suggestion conflict with the free exercise clause, but it would also uniquely disadvantage religious people in that they—and they alone—would be unable to bring their deeply held convictions to bear on public issues. Public life would be impoverished.

We need only recall the specifically religious invocations of many slavery abolitionists and participants in the civil rights movement for example.

We should not, then, reduce the proper relationship of personal religious commitment to political and civic life merely to the proper relationship of “church” (or other religious institutions) and state. At the same time, personal religious commitment may be guided in civic life by the constructive relationships that religious organizations hold with political bodies. The next section addresses the character and boundaries of such constructive relationships.

V. Describing the Constructive Relationships of Religious Organizations and Political Authority

Article 32) The ELCA holds that the constructive relationship of religion and political authority is summarized by the phrase “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of religious organizations and institutions in a relation of functional interaction.” This summary description (codified in the ELCA constitution) provides guidance for the ELCA’s corporate life and for individuals.

As God’s people pray for God’s will to be done on earth, it is necessary to set forth ELCA teaching about the constructive relationship of religious organizations to political authority and as a guide for individuals in their civic life. The U.S. Constitution, including the First Amendment, neither prohibits nor requires that religious institutions actively engage in civic and political life. The Constitution leaves those decisions mostly to religious institutions themselves.

What is the ELCA’s view of its relationship with government? This church holds that the holistic Christian message, comprising law and gospel, includes a message to be spoken to public matters as well as private life. The social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* expressed this living

45 This famous metaphor seems to have originated with Roger Williams and was then used, more famously, by Thomas Jefferson in his personal writings.

46 *The Church in Society*, 1.
tension: As a church (and as Christian citizens) who are dwelling in, but are not of, this society, we also take to heart God’s gift that earthly sovereignty resides in “we, the people.”

These beliefs intersect to undergird the ELCA’s contemporary understanding that God calls us to “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction.”

That summary phrase reinforces the idea that the functions of religious organizations and of political authority are distinct: the state does not run religious institutions and religious institutions do not control the state. At the same time, religious organizations and institutions share spaces of mutual concern and action with government. The ELCA holds that the functional interactions should be governed by institutional boundaries created on the one side by the particular purpose and competence of government and on the other side by the particular purpose and competence of religious faith and institutions.

Article 33) The directive to “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor” follows from both our faith’s commitment to join God’s work in civic life and the sovereignty of “we the people.” The purpose of citizenship is summed up in the preamble to the Constitution—to promote the general welfare. “Working with” seeks to address human needs, which can involve critical challenges such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people or God’s creation.

The phrase “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor” makes clear that the church should deal with political authority actively and flexibly. Theologically, “work with…” points to the Lutheran understanding of God’s two hands in which God calls religious organizations to join divine activity in society. The Triune God, our all-encompassing source and commitment, works in society and calls us to public action.

The relationship with political authority is not cozy. Sometimes, to be sure, “working with” affirms the mutual endeavor of addressing human needs. Sometimes, however, “working with” entails critical challenges such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people and the earth.

This church also understands “work with” as grounded in the foundational commitment that sovereignty in the United States rests in “we the people.” It is fair to say that the purpose of citizenship is summed up in the preamble to the Constitution—to promote the general welfare. These constitutional underpinnings allow the people and their social institutions to work with governing authorities to that end. Citizenship implies a promise and opportunity to seek both the welfare of all residents at every level of civic life.

Article 34) The phrase “maintaining institutional separation of church and state” does not point to an absolute separation of public (government) versus private (religious) arenas. Rather it points to the importance of preserving the functional integrity of independent political authority and religious institutions. Christ’s church should not bless any particular political theory; no political system or theory is final or ultimate. To the extent that U.S. government is formed for the general welfare and guided by good principles, whether rooted in Christian ideas or not, it should be affirmed. It is for these reasons that our church objects to religious bodies endorsing or supporting candidates or parties, or exercising partisanship in any way. At the same time, religious bodies and individuals have a responsibility to call government to account, especially when it fails in its function to provide for all peoples such “goods” as human rights, economic justice, and the like.

47 “Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (2022), 4.03.n., www.elca.org/constitution.
48 Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble.
The phrase “maintaining institutional separation of church and state” does not point to the separation of public (government) versus private (religious) arenas. Rather it points to preserving the functional integrity of both independent political authority and religious institutions, based on their distinctive purposes and organization principles and their powers and competences.

The integrity of the phrase “in a relation of functional interaction” depends on this understanding of proper function and jurisdiction. Civic institutions have no competence to teach religion, no authority to coerce faith in God. Conversely, religious faith does not provide revelatory or other special knowledge beyond common human faculties regarding the practical policies or means for government’s work. To the extent that the U.S. government is formed for the general welfare and guided by good principles, whether rooted in Christian ideas or not, it should be affirmed.

Religious organizations, then, cross the boundaries of their role when they campaign for parties or candidates or assert specific legislation or policies as if these were God’s plan. Religious communities are mistaken when they identify a particular political movement as God’s or claim divine revelation for the Constitution, or identify the U.S. experience with salvation history. No political system or theory is divine or ultimate. This teaching applies to Christianity, the dominant religious expression in the United States, and also to other religious traditions.

For these reasons, this church, unlike some Christian churches, teaches that it is not the church’s role to endorse candidates or parties. The ELCA also recognizes the legal soundness of the Johnson Amendment in prohibiting religious bodies or their representatives from verbally or financially supporting candidates or parties. Individual parishioners may, of course, advocate for specific candidates and parties on the basis of religious values and common criteria but should not claim to do so as spokespeople for a church.

At the same time, this dynamic, function-driven approach encourages the public contribution of religious values for the sake of society’s good. The ELCA teaches that religious communities may speak publicly about their values to express support for policies and legislation that seem to support the well-being of all better than alternative legislation or policy. This church, for example, assesses and speaks to how policies will affect those who are hungry (Matthew 25:35).

Article 35) Rostered ministers face particular issues regarding the relationship of the church and political authority because of their divine office to preach and teach both law and gospel. Rostered ministers also are public figures because they lead public institutions and have a valuable role to play as leaders in civil society. The ELCA affirms these intersecting roles as right and salutary while also recognizing that any given scriptural text or any given social and political situation is complex and multilayered and requires discernment from multiple perspectives. Rostered leaders, then, should be attuned to their community or public setting in offering guidance and aiding discernment practices as assemblies determine how to participate in civic life. When they speak on public issues, their words should be rooted in the Scriptures and are to be governed by official ELCA teaching. Though there necessarily is a public face to the rostered role, this does not justify partisanship, such as telling members how to vote. Our church provides guidance for churches and congregations regarding participation in the electoral process.

The tasks of maintaining institutional separation in a relation of functional interaction create particular issues for rostered ministers entrusted with the ministries of Word and Sacrament or Word and Service because of their calling to preach and teach both law and gospel. This living word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can transform lives as Christ begins to take shape in us. The theological (second use) of

49 The Johnson Amendment is a provision in the U.S. tax code, since 1954, that prohibits all 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates.
the law convicts us of our individual and collective sins, and that includes naming social and structural evils. Preaching and teaching the civil (first) use of the law necessarily raises questions about whether a society—individually and corporately—is failing to fulfill the common good. The gospel frees us to serve the neighbor through civic participation.

In this sense it is the calling of rostered leaders (deacons, pastors, and bishops) to connect the meaning of the faith and contemporary issues. There are necessarily, then, appropriate kinds of civic and political implications to their calling, as was true of Jesus (Article 17). The ELCA affirms this as right and salutary while also recognizing that any given scriptural text and any given social and political situation is complex, multilayered and requires discernment from multiple perspectives. The rostered minister’s calling is not limited to preaching alone. Adult forums and the like provide valuable occasions for injecting biblical and church social teaching into discussion and discernment.

The ELCA’s role in civic and political involvement depends significantly on laypeople in their lives as citizens and the ways they bring their discipleship into civic life. At the same time, rostered ministers are public figures because they lead public institutions and have a valuable role to play as leaders in civic life. They often serve as the public face of their worshiping assembly and have the responsibility to represent the assemblies’ life experiences and perspectives, woven together with their pastoral experiences and theological training.

Rostered leaders, then, should be attuned to their community or public setting in offering guidance and discernment practices as assemblies determine how to participate in civic life. They also are charged to speak on public issues as rooted in Scripture and governed by official social teaching. Though there necessarily is a public face to the rostered role, this does not justify the practice of partisanship, such as telling members how to vote regarding candidates or parties. Our church provides guidance for churches and congregations regarding participation in the electoral process.

**Article 36** The directive to “work with civil authorities … in a relationship of institutional separation, with functional interaction” suggests a constructive relationship but must be guarded by neutrality among partners. It also is commended as a public proposal for a healthy approach between all religious bodies and political authority in the United States.

The consistent principle of the ELCA has been to “work with civil authorities … in a relationship of institutional separation, with functional interaction.” Our church is grateful for the interaction with government that is possible because of religious liberty. It should be noted that the church and other nonprofits in the U.S. have become increasingly dependent on aid from public entities. The crucial criterion for maintaining the appropriate relationship is that selected government support for faith-based social services is possible when religious organizations serve people without regard to their faith. ELCA ministries meeting this criterion include chaplaincy in armed services, correctional institutions, hospitals, and other care facilities.

“Institutional separation” maintains a complicated protection that enables support while insisting on the distinction between religion and civil authority. This is not a “wall of separation,” but to maintain the distinction, the ELCA holds that:

- Government must not fund programs that discriminate between religions in providing their services and benefits.

50 See Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) as one example that takes into account the complexity of this task for preaching.
51 See download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Being_A_Public_Church.pdf.
• Government must not fund programs that require recipients to participate in religious activities as a condition of receiving a public service.
• Government must treat program service providers equally—on religious and other grounds—and selection of funded service providers must be based solely on nonreligious outcomes identified in publicly available criteria.

This dynamic, function-driven interactionist relationship\(^{52}\) has guided constructive, valuable interactions between the ELCA and political authority. Our church will continue to be so guided. As a church we also commend this approach as salutary for consideration by other religious bodies in interaction with political authority in the U.S.

Article 37) The ELCA understanding of civic life and faith is at odds with Christian nationalism because the latter seeks to fuse the exercise of political authority with a selected set of supposed “Christian” ideals. It also asserts that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United States. Such core beliefs represent a political ideology of religious nationalism, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. In its hardline strains, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens. Christian nationalists pledge allegiance to their version of the United States, first making the U.S. into an idol and seeing God’s plan in U.S. society as including only those whose religious beliefs fuse with a certain view of that society.

In contrast to the constructive approach used by the ELCA, which balances institutional separation with functional interaction, there is a distorted approach gaining traction at the time of this writing: Christian nationalism. In public forums this term is used to mean various things, but among its core beliefs are that:\(^{53}\)

- The government should advocate or legislate certain Christian values, often selectively interpreted from parts of the Scriptures.
- Christianity should be a privileged religion in the U.S.
- The U.S. has privileged status in God’s eyes, and its success is part of God’s plan.
- True patriots are those who hold certain Christian beliefs and adhere to certain Christian practices.

The constellation of such beliefs represents a political ideology of religious nationalism, whether explicitly stated or not. Christian nationalist belief seeks to fuse selected Christian ideas about what should be the national way of life with a comprehensive cultural framework. That framework incorporates selective narratives, practices, symbols, and value systems. “In a Christian nation, social power is placed in the service of the Christian religion,”\(^{54}\) and Christian nationalism seeks to legislatively implement its framework.

The supporters of Christian nationalism may not identify with every belief or perspective in this holistic ideology, but they are adamant about many of these values and beliefs. Conversely, acceptance of an idea also held by Christian nationalists does not make one a Christian nationalist. For example, one might believe that God’s providence includes a role for one’s country without being a Christian nationalist. That can be true if one also believes (against Christian nationalism) that other nations have equally valuable roles and that, therefore, God’s will cannot be reduced to special privilege for one’s own nation.


\(^{53}\) These illustrations are adapted from the research reported in Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 7.

Proponents or benign supporters of Christian nationalism range from those who believe Congress should declare the U.S. a Christian nation (approximately 29% of the U.S. population\(^{55}\)) to those people involved in more virulent strains that are overtly racist, patriarchal, and authoritarian.\(^{56}\) In hardline strains only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens. Christian nationalism, thus, denies the U.S. motto, \textit{e pluribus unum} (out of many, one.) Hardline Christian nationalism effectively substitutes “we the (self-declared) true Christians” for “we the people.”

Christian nationalism does not reflect Christlike values or other values found throughout the Scriptures. It fuses a particular form of human government and a nation (and sometimes a race) with a vision of God’s ultimate will, something Jesus explicitly rejects (John 18:36). It perverts the Christian message in cherry-picking texts that interpret the Scriptures in ways that connect it to domination, even coercion.

\section*{VI. Addressing Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life}

\textbf{Article 38)} The following articles address selected contemporary issues about civic life, grounded in the themes and insights above. These do not revisit questions the ELCA has already addressed in existing statements or messages and are not intended to be comprehensive. Some articles here offer definitive conclusions whereas others establish parameters that enable continued discernment on the part of our church.

As we pray to discern God’s will for today, our church addresses particular issues in contemporary civic life through its social teaching. For example, the 2020 social message “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy,” requested as a resource for use during election cycles, dealt with contemporary problems such as the widespread breakdown of trust in government and provided criteria for assessing the work of government, among other concerns.

Since 1988 social statements have addressed nearly every facet of contemporary life: economics, criminal justice, science and human power, war and the military-industrial complex, sexuality and family, health care, and others (visit \url{www.elca.org/socialstatements}). ELCA social messages have spoken to civic and political concerns such as human rights, terrorism, community violence, and others (\url{www.elca.org/socialmessages}). ELCA social policy resolutions, adopted by ELCA assemblies, have addressed narrow policy questions. Some, for instance, speak to voter apathy, racially motivated restrictions to voting, and gerrymandering (\url{www.elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society}).

The issues addressed in this section do not revisit questions the ELCA has already addressed and therefore are not intended to be comprehensive. Rather they supplement the existing teaching of this church, grounded in the themes, insights, and criteria developed earlier in this statement.

\textbf{Article 39)} Hyper-partisan polarization is rampant in the United States, harming both individuals and the social fabric. The U.S. political system appropriately involves, of course, the presence and efforts of partisan activity. Unfortunately, today, social dynamics have taken partisanship to unhealthy levels that damage democratic interaction rather than foster respectful, responsible give and take. Many accept this winner-take-all approach as right or as, at least, unavoidable. Such approaches threaten the fabric of our nation and the lives of those in it. These threats are often felt

\(^{55}\) Whitehead, 6, cited from the 2017 Baylor Religion Report.

\(^{56}\) For a psychologist’s discussion of how and why people are drawn in by extremist belief, see Pamela Cooper-White, \textit{The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).
most keenly by the marginalized. The ELCA calls for a different approach as both necessary and possible for a vital common life in which all can participate.

One widespread and troubling reality in the United States at this time is hyper-partisan polarization, which continues to increase and does significant damage to individuals and the social fabric. The U.S. has seen times of acute polarization in its past and experienced immense harm. The Civil War is an example.

What seems on the rise when compared to our recent past is a type of separation and opposition for which this statement uses the term “hyper-partisan polarization,” which is different from the simply partisan. The U.S. political system has almost always included the active presence and work of partisan activity. Though parties are fallible, the system itself provides an avenue for organizing, educating, and advocating for issues of political concern. In much of U.S. history and the recent past, this partisanship did not bar cross-party work or even friendships. Parties commonly formed coalitions, made compromises, and could work together toward their overlapping views of the common good. Working together often forged more effective ideas than working alone.

At the time of writing, a quite different hyper-partisan polarization is widespread and at work even in normal government efforts. Political identity now is often closely linked with other identifications such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, race, urban or rural residence, cable news preference, and even restaurants and stores frequented. Overlapping interests are increasingly overwhelmed by rigid us-versus-them identities. It is harder to create collegial—and even familial—relationships despite political difference, or to recognize commonalities despite differences in political affinity. Our social linkages become constellations of identifications and may be designated “mega-identities.”

These mega-identities take partisanship to new levels—to hyper-partisanship—reinforced by cable news preference, social media echo-chambers, the assertions of elected officials (especially at the federal level), and other factors. Those reinforcements are also accompanied by a “nationalization” of issues and an oversize focus on those issues. Local campaigns are becoming overwhelmed by outside money and, though there is a lot of vibrant discussion of, say, zoning policy at the local level, those vibrant democratic discussions get little play in the media.

The result is that loyalty to hyper-partisan identities becomes absolute. These identities are considered necessary to one’s family safety, to protection from “them,” to the survival of core values or “our way of life.” Not incidental is the frequent assumption of my or my group’s innocence and the guilt, even evil, of those not part of that identity. Sin is no longer widespread; it is almost exclusively “over there.”

The problem is that loyalty to a mega-identity has become oversize and has taken on huge emotional stakes. Crucially, hyper-partisan polarization is practiced as “zero-sum power,” as a winner-take-all struggle for domination. Those with alternative perspectives are designated as enemies rather than fellow citizens with a different view.

Many today are cynical, as if polarization is unavoidable. It is certainly a reality, and many accept such outsized loyalty and harsh practices as necessary, or even right and good. Such hyper-partisan animosity threatens the fabric of our nation and the lives of those in it, especially the marginalized.

The ELCA teaches that a different approach is both possible and necessary for a productive common life in which all can participate. There is a better path forward than one motivated primarily by fear of others.

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57 The term “mega-identities” is used by a number of writers, but for more see Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).
(and belief in the greater purity of one’s own group) or one practiced in rancorous attack and hyper-
partisan animosity. These are vices to be confronted, both within the church and within the wider society.

This alternative approach is not primarily about tolerance but about respectful engagement. Article 14
describes how practicing discernment together is a gift for civic life and a witness to God’s love because
it models how people with opposing views can give priority to the practice of careful listening and
respect.

For Christians, our identity in Christ as forgiven sinners undercuts any polarization and urges love for
every person as a creature of God who is not to be dominated and whose well-being we should try to
improve. Our Christian identity encourages us to take seriously both our well-considered perspectives and
the limitations of our knowledge, thoughtfulness, empathy, and goodwill.

Therefore, our identity in Christ encourages careful listening to others who also have well-considered
perspectives, which may be quite different from our own. The presumption of self-determination and the
criterion of mutual self-determination similarly require the starting point of listening (Article 21). These
are comparable to values aspired to in the U.S. Constitution—truly democratic values, commitment to
diversity, and the public good of all. The objective is to search for and find constructive ways to enhance
the well-being of human society and the wider creation.

On that basis, the ELCA calls for an end to the practices that contribute to hyper-partisan polarization.
We, both as a society and as a church, must end any winner-take-all mindset, which approaches our
common life together as if it were a football game. We must not accept hyper-partisan polarization and its
practices to be inevitable. Political opponents are not enemies simply because they have a different
opinion of what is the best course forward for a specific issue or because they travel in different social
circles.

It is possible to face difference without aggression and with an eye to the common good. It is even
possible to close gaps between us by an exchange of values and ideas that changes all participants for the
better. The solutions we come up with together are often better because of collaboration. Most of us know
that from personal and social experience—there is no reason our political experience should be different.

Article 40) Civic leaders bear a particular responsibility to seek constructive debate and solutions.
Civic leaders include a wide array of individuals beyond just elected officials or heads of media. To
bring people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that
hinders careful listening among neighbors. They should offer models of vigorous and constructive
civic leadership.

In our current polarized context, civic thought and opinion leaders and information sources bear a
particular responsibility to work toward constructive debate and solutions. While this is the responsibility
of each of us, individuals and groups look to thought and opinion leaders and information sources to
negotiate life in a fast-paced, information-saturated society. U.S. residents look to both certified and
unconventional experts, and both are influential in shaping the values and behaviors of the public.

Civic thought leaders do not always see themselves as such, but leadership comes in many forms and
exists in many forums. Elected and publicly appointed leaders are obvious. However, civic thought
leaders include community league coaches, social media influencers, news reporters, religious ministers,
activists, think tank staff, the heads of nonprofit and volunteer organizations, and many others.

A healthy society requires such leaders to be models of vigorous and constructive participation. To bring
people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that hinders
conscientious listening among neighbors. Civil disagreement about issues and the interpretation and relative importance of facts is important, but inflammatory rhetoric and personal attacks have no place in the public arena. Our society needs to be a place of informed public dialogue enabling people to hear one another and find solutions.

The ELCA commends leaders that model such practices, which are essential to honest analysis and creative solutions to social problems. Our church also encourages associations, think tanks, and other sources of analysis and information to seek to understand cultural and political differences as a crucial step toward building political accommodation and fact-based negotiation.

Article 41) Robust and constructive civic engagement in today’s society depends on clear distinction between fact and various forms of misinformation, from falsehoods to exaggeration. Avoiding forms of false statement is a civic responsibility for both providers and users of social media. Christians should be “innocent as doves” when it comes interpreting the intentions of the neighbor but “wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16) when it comes to discerning what information they encounter in any media. For the sake of U.S. civic life, the ELCA calls upon social media platforms to take responsibility to align policies and procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and rigorous online protocol available.

The saying is hundreds of years old that “falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it,” but it is widely acknowledged that the spread of lies, rumor, and ignorance in civic life has reached new levels today, particularly through social media. In one study, researchers found that falsehoods were 70% more likely to be re-shared on a social media platform (X, formerly Twitter) than true statements. Moreover, people were more likely to repeat or amplify a false statement than automated bots were.

Robust and constructive civic engagement in today’s society depends on clear distinction between fact and various forms of misinformation, from falsehoods to exaggeration. The reach of social media, the lack of clarity about the origins of many of its posts, and the ability of AI to conjure utterly false images and video all necessitate strong self-regulation by social and other media platforms. If self-regulation is not sufficiently robust, government intervention may be appropriate.

The Eighth Commandment directs people of faith to exert efforts against bearing false witness. The Catechism teaches that “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.” Our church, then, encourages us all to ask, in every personal interaction and on social media, whether our words or those we repeat represent the best possible understanding of our neighbor.

We should be “innocent as doves” when it comes interpreting the intentions of our neighbor but “wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16) when it comes to discerning what information we encounter in any media. We should not share:

- Sensationalist headlines.
- Insulting memes.
- Information whose source we cannot verify.
- Information from sources whose purpose or chief likely effect is to stir up anger or hate and to undermine, rather than foster, our civic unity.

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58 This saying is attributed to satirist Jonathan Swift, Anglican cleric (1667-1745).
59 See “Study: False News Spreads Faster Than the Truth,” MIT Sloan School of Management, March 8, 2018, mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/study-false-news-spreads-faster-truth. Other studies have broadened and generally supported this study, which was limited to the platform X, formerly Twitter.
For the sake of U.S. civic life, the ELCA also calls upon social media platforms to:

- Align policies and procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and rigorous online safety regulations available,
- Regularly assess and publicly disclose the extent to which their platforms may be involved in violations of civil and human rights,
- Allow oversight of operations in human rights hotspots,
- Allow transparency in their algorithms and advertisements,
- Regularly assess, report on, and address hate speech and misinformation on their platforms, removing such hate speech and misinformation as quickly as possible.

**Article 42)** Financial contributions to political campaigns are a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment and a significant part of campaigning that demonstrate a level of commitment consistent with the donor’s views. The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity to play a free and active part in the foundation of our communities. Therefore, we are concerned that being heard should not be effectively limited to those individuals and organizations who have overwhelming financial wealth and resources at their disposal. The ELCA urges legislation by state and federal lawmakers to set reasonable limits on campaign contributions and increase transparency in our elections and financial reporting by public officials.

In the political sphere, money plays an indispensable role. Individuals, corporations, lobbyists, PACs, super PACs, nonprofits, and interest groups spend money to influence political campaigns. Contributions may be disbursed in a variety of ways including political advertising to influence public opinion on candidates and ballot measures. Public officials are generally required by law to report on their personal finances to ensure that ethical guidelines are followed. So-called “dark money,” or funds raised by nonprofit organizations that are not required to disclose the identities of their donors, is known to be spent to influence elections, public policy, and political discourse.

The ELCA recognizes that financial contributions to political campaigns are a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment. Publicly accountable contributions are both legal and a significant part of campaigning that demonstrate a level of commitment consistent with the donor’s views. Historically, laws have included reporting requirements that may require disclosure of a contributor’s name, address, and occupation. Individuals who choose to engage in contributing are expected to adhere to the appropriate laws and consider the implications such disclosures could have with their employer(s) or other entities. While some federal, state, and local laws continue to limit the sources and contribution limits for elections at their respective levels, it is widely recognized that recent Supreme Court rulings have altered the system of campaign finance.

The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity to play a free and active part in the foundation of our communities. This ability should not be effectively limited to those individuals and organizations who have overwhelming financial wealth and resources at their disposal. Democracy is threatened if only those with the most means (disposable income and time) have the dominant voice with politicians while others, especially those who are less well off, are effectively silenced. Free speech does not include the right to drown out the speech of one’s neighbors. To do so is to violate God’s intention for abundant life for all.

This church urges legislation by state and federal lawmakers to set reasonable limits on campaign contributions and increase transparency in our elections and financial reporting by public officials. It is up

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60 For example, in *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2009), the U.S. Supreme Court held that corporations are protected by the First Amendment’s right to free speech and that statutes restricting corporations’ campaign contributions are unconstitutional.
to legislators to take steps that limit the hidden and overpowering corporate and super PAC money given
to political action committees that distort the political debate and influence our representatives. Our
church urges policies and reforms that help:

- Enhance transparency and increase public awareness of campaign contributions and financial
  reporting by public officials.
- Expand access for citizens across the economic spectrum to run for political office.
- Reduce the influence of money in shaping political debates and media, including political
  advertising.

Article 43) This statement recognizes that governmental policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial
opinions sometimes do more harm to the well-being of all than to promote it. Harm results from
poorly conceived and implemented policies and from intentional actions that discriminate against
some in favor of others. All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to
its purpose of protecting and fostering the good of all. Citizens and residents also have an obligation
to seek reform through the procedures of democratic self-rule.

ELCA teaching has long held that it is the proper concern of government to regulate aspects of social life
in order to provide for the safety and well-being of its people. For example, government must serve as a
referee in economic life to protect consumers and check harmful inequalities of wealth and power.

This statement recognizes that sometimes government policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial opinions
harm well-being more than they promote it. Harm results from poorly conceived and implemented
policies and from intentional actions that discriminate against some in favor of others.

There is a critical distinction between fallible structure and structured oppression. Government is fallible
because it is made up of humans. It has not served its purpose when its goals, policies, and programs are
poorly designed or implemented, or cause undue waste or hardship. In contrast, government becomes
oppressive when its goals, policies, and programs are designed or transformed into vehicles for
oppressing the neighbor—such as voter suppression laws and gerrymandering.

All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of protecting and
fostering the well-being of all. Public partnerships between nonprofits (including faith-based
organizations) and the private sector can be means to enhance the work of both partners when dedicated
to the common good. Finally, citizens and residents have an obligation to seek reform when government
goes astray through the procedures of democratic self-rule.

It is not possible for this church, or any civic actor, to identify a complete set of ethical norms that apply
in all cases for discerning failures in civic and political life. Some criteria for discernment are elaborated
in Articles 25 of this statement and in previous ELCA social messages and social statements. However,
at a minimum, discernment regarding these everyday but weighty questions should strive to include the
perspectives of those affected as well as fair representation of those served, because that is the starting
point for mutual self-determination and deciding whether the neighbor is being well-served.

61 For more see the ELCA document at
download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCAvotesMoneyReissue.pdf?_ga=2.187824555.20578980
85.1695207063-2124814884.1671473207.
62 See, for example, the ELCA social statement Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All, cited above, 7-10.
63 See, for example, the discussion of criteria in the social message “Government and Civic Engagement:
Discipleship in a Democracy,” 13, or various social statements as they address economic life, health care, and
others, at www.elca.org/socialstatements.
Article 44) The ELCA has members in Washington, D.C., and in several of the U.S. territories. For this reason our church is attuned to the problematic relationship between the United States and its nonincorporated territories. We recognize complicating factors that include a legacy of racism because the vast majority of local residents in the territories belong to racially minoritized groups. We also recognize that the issues are complex. The principle of mutual self-determination dictates humble, intentional listening as the first step toward justice and healing.

The ELCA has significant membership in Washington, D.C., and several of the U.S. territories, e.g., Guam, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The ELCA’s Caribbean Synod, in fact, consists largely of these territories. This fact and the lives of millions of people in these areas urge our church to discern the responsibility of the United States for these areas under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Congress as possessions or unincorporated territories. The ELCA recognizes that issues pertaining to the relationship between these territories and the wider U.S. society are manifold and complex, but they must not be ignored.

Many view the political relationship between the U.S. government and its nonincorporated territories as problematic because of the inherent inequality between the territories and the states. There is also the specter of continued colonial-style relationships in which territories lack any real power for self-determination. Territories get a representative in Congress with voice but no vote, despite residents being required to sign up for military selective service and having a long and distinguished record of service to the U.S. in general. Territorial residents pay taxes but do not have equitable representation. Many believe that the U.S. Congress has actually undermined the democratic processes in the territories.

This church recognizes complicating factors. One of those is the legacy of racism involved since the vast majority of local residents in all the territories belong to racially minoritized groups—historically Black, Indigenous, Latiné, and Pacific Islander people. The relationship between U.S.-based churches and the territories is also complicated because the churches sometimes were complicit in the colonizing of territories, including stripping ancestral inhabitants of their traditional religions. The goal was to replace those religions with Christian faith, but that faith was deeply entangled with U.S. expansionist ideology. Though we should acknowledge that good was done, the ELCA also bears some responsibility to help repair the harm also done. We believe, as Lutherans, that the Holy Spirit brings faith to people—it should not be forced or coerced by human action.

An intentional, humble listening is the starting point of the principle of mutual self-determination and is the first step on the path toward justice and healing. This process of careful listening can be difficult and challenging, yet when rooted in sincerity and a genuine willingness to understand each other, it can lead

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64 According to the Department of the Interior, an unincorporated territory is “a United States insular area in which the United States Congress has determined that only selected parts of the United States Constitution apply” (Department of the Interior, “Definitions of Insular Areas of Political Organization. www.doi.gov


66 A case in point is the Promesa law (see oversightboard.pr.gov/debt/) imposed on Puerto Rico as a condition to adjust the commonwealth’s debt. Its Board of Fiscal Control, appointed by the U.S. Congress, has power to veto laws passed by the duly elected members of Puerto Rico’s local legislature as well as the power to block initiatives from the duly elected governor.

to new possibilities of reparation, healing, and wholeness. In collaboration with ecumenical partners and others of good will, we believe it is possible to foster and facilitate processes of listening and accountability between the territories and those in positions of power over them in the U.S. government.

Consistent with the principle of mutual self-determination (article 21), the ELCA is committed to advocating for equality in government representation for the District of Columbia and U.S. territories for economic and social equity, and for their right of self-determination.

Article 45) American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians have a unique, historical, and nation-to-nation trust relationship with the United States that should acknowledge the sovereignty of tribal nations and Indian self-determination and self-governance. There are many layers to the often horrid history of treatment of indigenous peoples, but it is imperative to acknowledge the relationship has been grounded in the Doctrine of Discovery that codified both colonialism and religious intolerance. The ELCA has repudiated explicitly this European-derived doctrine as a “theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people.”7 Our church also has acknowledged and called for repentance for this church’s complicity in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal governments and tribal members. This statement reaffirms the ELCA’s need for continued attention to just policy via advocacy in the areas of treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, and other matters that affect the well-being of Native Americans. It also calls upon both U.S. residents and U.S. governments to honor the trust relationship and the sovereignty of tribal nations as well as to be guided by just principles supporting Indian self-determination and well-being.

American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians have a unique, historical, and nation-to-nation relationship with the United States. In terms of the official relationship, it is a trust relationship acknowledging the sovereignty of tribal nations and Indian self-determination and self-governance. This relationship is based on Indian treaties, the U.S. Constitution, and Supreme Court decisions.

It is a relationship in which treaties and other legal guarantees have repeatedly not been honored by those who began settling in the 1600s and swept across the continent. It is also a relationship in which Native people endured racial, social, and economic oppression during some of the darkest chapters of American history. The ELCA, with many others in this country, recognizes that this history must be acknowledged, the status of Native Americans in the United States protected, and efforts at reconciliation and justice increased.

There are many layers to this history, but it is imperative to acknowledge that it is grounded in the Doctrine of Discovery that codified both colonialism and religious intolerance through the pronouncement of several papal bulls in the 15th century. It specifically was introduced into United States municipal law by U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall in Johnson v. McIntosh (1823). In Marshall’s formulation of the doctrine, discovery of territory previously unknown to Europeans gave the discovering nation title to that territory against all other European nations, and this title could be perfected by possession.70

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68 This is illustrated by the Truth and Healing Movement, launched by the ELCA with the American Indian and Alaska Native people. For more information see www.elca.org/truthandhealing.
69 “A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to American Indian Alaska Native People” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2016), 2.
70 One easily accessible discussion of the complex meaning and history may be found in en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine (accessed November 19, 2023).
The doctrine was, and is, not only political but also explicitly theological, Christian legal discourse. Though global in scope, this principle undergirded the actions of religious and nonreligious bodies that made claims to Native land in North America. Supported by this doctrine, those who moved across North America, including predecessors of this church, claimed Indian land as their own property.

The ELCA has acknowledged that the Doctrine of Discovery “created a theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. Today it continues to support those evils and injustices found in our church, U.S. law, and legal interpretation.” The ELCA has joined other religious bodies in explicitly repudiating this European-derived doctrine, calling it an “improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword.” It has acknowledged and called for repentance in this church’s complicity in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal governments and tribal members.

Early in its life this church named and acknowledged the sovereignty of Native American tribes and committed to speaking out for their just treatment. This social statement reaffirms that acknowledgment and the need for the practices of accompaniment in so doing. It calls for continued attention to supporting just policy via advocacy in the areas of treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, religious freedom, and other matters that affect the well-being of Native Americans. It calls upon both residents and all governments in the United States to:

- Honor the trust relationship acknowledging the sovereignty of tribal nations and Indian self-determination and self-governance.
- Be guided by concerns for justice, reconciliation, visibility, equity, and healing as central to these sovereign relationships.
- Prioritize consultation with tribal nations that ensures equity and honors parity with tribal nations.
- Give particular attention to policies and legislation that increase Native American self-determination.
- Support efforts to increase voter registration and access to polling places and early voting while opposing state efforts to raise barriers to the ballot box.
- Engage in careful listening and consultation with Native Americans on matters with environmental impact affecting their sovereign lands.

**Article 46** The ELCA calls for renewed emphasis on comprehensive civics education as an essential element for robust and revitalized civic life. Such education should teach the whole story of U.S. history in its aspirations, successes, and failures so that it might shape well-informed, thoughtful, and wise citizens.

Comprehensive, honest civics education is an essential element for robust and revitalized civic life. It provides the building blocks of a society. The ELCA has addressed the social institution of education in the United States and is on record that “schools, therefore, ought to teach the principles and virtues of living together in responsible freedom in a democratic society, which includes respect for the diverse cultures and beliefs of their students.”

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71 “Declaration,” 2.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid, Augsburg Confession Article XXVIII, Latin text.
76 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Our Calling in Education* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007), 26ff.
A comprehensive, honest civics curriculum must teach the whole story of U.S. history in its aspirations, successes, and failures. It should emphasize the values inherent in the U.S. Constitution. It should draw upon what the community holds in common and explore in a fair and impartial way those issues on which the community is divided. To have a strong democracy, its citizens must know how it is supposed to function and how they are called to participate.

Article 47) No single solution will reduce the increasing, fevered polarization or mend the damage that endangers the U.S. social fabric as a representative democracy. However, robust civic participation is critical for democratic self-governance, for support of public servants, and for well-crafted policies. The ELCA urges both its members and all U.S. residents to renew their efforts toward such a robust civic participation, guided by concern for the well-being of all.

No single solution will reduce the increasingly fevered polarization or repair the damage that endangers our social fabric and democratic republic. One fundamental element is a renewed, constructively grounded, and thoughtful commitment to civic life across this nation. Hyper-partisan polarization is, in part, the result of individuals withdrawing from robust participation in civic life. This church holds that a return to robust civic engagement that seeks the public good is the responsibility of all residents of this country and is our calling as Christians.

The social message “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy” addresses at greater length the nature and purpose of a robust civic engagement, especially in relation to citizenship. Among other elements, that message teaches that civic engagement takes numerous forms—informed voting, attending public meetings, holding public office, political party involvement, policy advocacy, community organizing, and nonviolent protest.

The message points out that civic engagement arises both from concern about disorder and injustice and from hope for the well-being of all. It affirms elements of a robust civic engagement such as democratic self-governance, support for public servants, and well-crafted policies that foster justice, racial and social equity, and reconciliation. The ELCA urges its members and all residents of this society to contribute to and urge robust civic participation.

Conclusion

Article 48) “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven” is both our prayer as a church and our calling into civic life for the well-being of all. May we, as forgiven people in Christ’s church, respond boldly and join all others of goodwill to work toward the aspiration and responsibility of “we the people” through wise civic participation.

“Your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.” As Jesus taught the disciples, so we pray in this church. We do so in concert with Christians down through the ages and into the future, who, in the Spirit, offer witness to God’s will for just peace and well-being. We do so in faith, understanding that God’s creative power is shared throughout all creation and is given to human beings to use in civic life for the good of all.

May we as your church live wisely by your law as a guide for joining your work in human society. May we walk humbly with you as we strive for justice, kindness, and peace. May we as your people join all others of goodwill in the work of government as gift, aspiration, and responsibility to serve the common good of “we the people.” May we, as your forgiven ones, be empowered by your gracious word and sacraments and boldly seek the good of the neighbor through our participation in civic life.

Glossary

All terms are underlined when introduced in the text.

**Book of Concord:** A collection of writings from 1580 that were subscribed to by some 80 princely and municipal governments. They were published on the 50th anniversary of the 1530 Augsburg Confession and are generally understood as authoritative documents of the Evangelical/Lutheran movement. Across the globe the most widely affirmed writings include the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, and Luther’s two catechisms. The ELCA accepts the entire book as authoritative.

**Christian nationalism:** A cultural framework that idealizes and advocates fusion of certain Christian views with American civic life. This nationalistic ideology believes, among other things, that the U.S. Constitution was divinely inspired, that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United States, and that this nation holds a uniquely privileged status in God’s eyes. Proponents range from those who believe the U.S. legally should be declared a Christian nation (approximately 21% of the U.S. population) to those involved in more virulent strains that are openly racist, patriarchal, or anti-democratic.

**Church:** Has multiple meanings, largely dependent on context. Fundamentally “church” is the event of God’s saving 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 church is universal (catholic), describing all believers in their individual capacity as followers of Christ. The also is used to designate large Christian bodies or institutions but also local congregations, as in “going to my church.” In this statement regarding civic life, “this or our church” refers to the ELCA as one body that is part of the Church Catholic.

**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 the purpose of government is to seek the general welfare of all members of the public. While imperfectly achieved, the common good can be sought through collective action, citizenship, and other forms of active participation in the realms of politics and civic life.

**Community of moral deliberation/discernment:** A concept established in the first ELCA social statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, as an element of the ELCA’s identity to which our church is called to grow. The concept envisions the whole community praying for one another, studying Scripture, and wrestling together toward moral understanding and action. This approach to doing ethics is bottom-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.”)

**Corporate social responsibility:** The means by which a corporation, nonprofit, or other organization intentionally specifies it contributions or responsibilities toward the well-being of society, especially in economic decisions. The Corporate Social Responsibility program of the ELCA, for instance, decides ELCA investment policy in socially responsible ways, as guided by ELCA social teaching. This program also enables dialogue between this church and representatives of the businesses with which it deals, regarding the social implications of company practices.
**Discernment:** As used here, the practice of evaluating multiple factors in an issue so as to find an appropriate response that seems God-pleasing. It generally implies active theological or ethical reflection involving study, prayer, and dialogue. It seeks wisdom through God’s Spirit and reaches decisions not according to individual desires but, as much as possible, according to God’s will as understood through a community process (Romans 12:1-2). (See also “Community of moral deliberation/discernment.”)

**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 into or influence their public life 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 “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 done as individuals and as a community. It often involves analyzing a current, accepted moral idea to determine its rationale or ways it should be altered. The terms “ethics” and “morals” are somewhat different but are often used interchangeably. (See “Morality.”)

**Ethos:** The distinguishing web of largely implicit cultural practices, social assumptions, values, and guiding beliefs of an organization or a society.

**Faith:** Has many meanings and uses, but the fundamental Lutheran emphasis is a trusting response to and trusting relationship with God. This relationship of trust 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 (“Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]”) 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.”)

**God’s sovereignty:** Has had multiple meanings in Christian thinking but fundamentally describes God’s supreme power or God’s rule and reign over and in the universe. This statement speaks theologically of God’s sovereignty as the source of all power and thus of political sovereignty. Both power and sovereignty are fundamental to civic life. (See “Power.”)

**Justice:** Generally, an underlying sense of fairness, right treatment, and reciprocity. This statement emphasizes the aspects of justice that include fair and equal treatment under the law, ending oppression based on power differences, and, as emphasized in the Scriptures, a right and wholesome relationship with God and within community.

**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 law is a summary term for God’s directives for human living, such as the Ten Commandments. “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. Luther was a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation and is the namesake of Lutheranism.

Mega-identity: An interlocking set of social identifications: ethnic, religious, urban/rural, conservative/liberal. When these identifications cohere in a set that is semifixed and loaded with huge emotional stakes, they become a mega-identity that walls off people from others, especially those who don’t share the same 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 an 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: A member of one’s community. This could be someone in a person’s local neighborhood or town but can also refer to members of the global community.

Neighbor justice: Meeting neighbors’ needs in public life. Though rooted in the biblical directive to “love your neighbor as yourself,” the term expresses how faith active in love requires seeking justice in relationships and in the structures of society.

Partisanship: Strong loyalty and, often, blind adherence to a specific party, group, faction, set of beliefs, or person.

Polarization: As used in this study, a partisanship so strong that partisans are rigidly set apart from other groups, whose beliefs and views are considered utterly opposite and most often inferior, dangerous to society, and unworthy of consideration. There is no value of or respect for “those people.” In everyday speech such polarization 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. As used here, 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 to seek the common good. (See “Common Good.”)

Power: Most fundamentally, the ability to make something happen or the capacity to affect, even if minimally, an outcome. In civic life the idea of power carries the implication of authority, control, or influence upon social activity, whether that indicates power over others or the ability to control the outcome of actions. Theologically, all power is based in divine power, which creates, sustains, and redeems creatures who are not God. Power that is only dominating distorts the fulfilled divine power on which it is based.

Religious pluralism: The state of affairs in which more than one religion operates openly in the same community. In the United States the term generally indicates a situation in which the society sees the value of each person having their own religious beliefs and practicing them openly and safely. This includes the freedom to practice no religion.

Self-determination: Most basically, the ability of people or communities to determine their own objectives and actions with minimal external compulsion. In terms of political authority, it means that people have the right to freely choose their government.
**Self-governance:** The ability of people to play a fundamental role in the functioning of their government.

**Separation of church and state:** Often used as shorthand for the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution, which forbids state-sponsored religion. The applied meaning of the phrase is contested. For example, many people believe it means that religious convictions or religious institutions should have no real role in political life. 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.

**Shalom:** The Scriptures use the Hebrew word *shalom* to refer to God’s goal of whole, healthy, peaceful, joyous, just relations among all elements in God’s creation. It is often translated as “peace,” but it means far more than mere peace of mind or absence of violence. In the Scriptures shalom indicates universal well-being and wholeness—a state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed. Though the term appears in what Christians call the Old Testament, it also has a long, rich history as a central and complex concept within Judaism that Christians should acknowledge and respect.

**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” or “systemic” sin.

**Solidarity:** A kinship within all of nature that issues from God’s creative activity. The term expresses the contention that the interests of the entire community of life should be legitimate concerns when decisions are made and actions evaluated.

**Systemic sin:** Argues that social and political systems are developed by humans and that, because of this, the sin embedded in them is greater than the sin of any individual action. For instance, consider a society where a racial minority has dramatically less access to political power because of laws or widespread discrimination and that, therefore, has less chance of living and thriving. All political systems are flawed but can be assessed by the extent of inequality or inequity that perpetuates harm.

**Theology:** Can indicate academic or abstract reflection, but in this study the term generally 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.

**Theology of the cross:** Coined by Martin Luther to refer to theology that sees “the cross” (that is, divine self-revelation) as the only source of ultimate knowledge concerning who God is and how God saves. It is contrasted with the “theology of glory,” which places great emphasis on human capacity and human reason to know who God is and how God saves.

**Three estates:** Used to designate the broadest divisions of social structures in Christendom (Christian Europe) from the Middle Ages to early modern Europe. While there is some variation in meaning, the three overarching divisions (estates) in the Reformation period 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 distinction between God’s activity in the world through secular means, such as government, and 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 that
they are interrelated.

**Vocation:** In this statement, a calling from God that comes both as gift and responsibility. 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 in the writers as they describe and
announce God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain
Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

**Works righteousness:** As conceived during the Reformation period, describes the practice or belief
that some level of right activity, belief, or character is required to achieve righteousness in God’s
eyes. The Lutheran tradition encourages people to seek righteousness (right action, character, and
relationship) in civic life but emphasizes the biblical idea that works righteousness cannot achieve
God’s salvation (Romans 3:21). Rather, righteousness is given by God’s mercy as a gift on account of
Christ, and is received by faith.