



# 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



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- The Task Force and advisors, p. 2
- An Introduction to the purpose of this Draft, p. 3
- Short Statement, p. 4
- Full Statement, p. 12
- Glossary, p. 52

## 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](https://www.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](https://www.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*



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

55  
56 Article 7) God’s response to sin calls people to delight in the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:1-2) and provides  
57 tools for seeking civil well-being. The uniquely Christian proclamation, the gospel, does not introduce  
58 any new laws to govern the civil order but urges us to obey just laws and motivates us to seek greater  
59 well-being for all. While the Holy Scriptures provide the fundamental norm, our human faculties--such as  
60 reason, experience, knowledge, and imagination--have crucial roles in discerning better, and worse, ways  
61 of running a human society.

62  
63 Article 8) The ELCA recognizes a history in which Lutheran churches, despite some important  
64 exceptions, have too often failed to make a priority of the civic common good. However, Lutherans  
65 affirm that civic institutions remain God’s gifts even as we admit our compromises and failures. This  
66 church’s work includes acknowledgment of past failures and a repentance that turns to holding  
67 accountable civic leaders and those in positions of political authority for the common good.

68  
69 Article 9) To “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8) must include welcoming and acknowledging the  
70 ideas, values, and contributions of all people, regardless of their religious tradition or worldview.  
71 Christians, as individuals or as the church, have no guaranteed higher or better reasoning than other  
72 people in religious or nonreligious communities. This does not mean Christians do not have contributions  
73 to make, nor that they should avoid drawing from their faith, values, and insights in discussing public  
74 matters. The Christian vocation to serve God and the neighbor may be fulfilled in civic places of  
75 responsibility.

## 76 77 II. The Calling to Robust Civic Participation

78  
79 Article 10) Civic life entails activities and institutions across all public life, from one’s local  
80 neighborhood to matters of national and international concern. Participation in civic organizations comes  
81 in many shapes and sizes, and the recent decline of civic participation in the United States is especially  
82 troubling. Our church affirms that anyone who seeks the community’s well-being through civic  
83 participation is, knowingly or not, using the gifts God provides. They are acting as channels of God’s  
84 concern for human life.

85  
86 Article 11) Christian worshiping assemblies are grounded in the living Word of God’s law and gospel,  
87 which empowers them to be centers supporting civic participation. This is evident in how liturgy prepares  
88 us to join God’s work in civic life. As expressed in the ELCA constitution and social teaching, this church  
89 expects that each worshiping community will be engaged in forms of active civic participation as one  
90 element of life in Christ’s church.

91  
92 Article 12) The ELCA reaffirms that civic service can represent a place to carry out one’s calling from  
93 God to civic participation. Public servants should be held to high expectations, and the larger community  
94 should give government officials the dignity and respect owed for good and just work. At the same time,  
95 citizens are expected to hold the government and its officials accountable.

96  
97 Article 13) Religion can create divisions in civic life or can contribute to mending the torn social fabric  
98 and reconciling divided peoples. This church urges all people of faith to seek a constructive role that

99 counters growing polarization, distrust, and ill will. Religious traditions can offer particular gifts of moral  
100 vision, inclusion, and compassion sorely needed in U.S. civic life.

101  
102 Article 14) The ELCA and other religious bodies have a particular calling to encourage discernment and  
103 provide spaces for difficult conversations. For Christians, discernment is enabled by the gift of unity that  
104 Christ gives. Discussion about tough issues among God’s people is a witness that counters the forces of  
105 social division and distrust. The ELCA’s identity as a community of moral deliberation is one into which  
106 our church continues to grow, and which is increasingly crucial in a society so divided.

107  
108 Article 15) The biblical witness teaches that, among other roles and aims, there is a prophetic task for  
109 those who follow Jesus (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The church’s prophetic presence in civic life calls for  
110 holding civic leaders accountable, taking constructive action, and lifting up a vision for improved social  
111 well-being. It is part of this church’s work under the left hand of God as a contribution to society, and it  
112 needs to be done with both vitality and great care.

113  
114 Article 16) The ELCA encourages individuals and worshipping communities to work together toward a  
115 civic life that better reflects God’s vision for a more just and reconciled world. The various forms of  
116 advocacy offer ways to press civic leaders and public policy makers to respect the needs and dignity of all  
117 persons and our common home, with special concern for the vulnerable. Such faith-rooted advocacy is  
118 born from relationships of service and solidarity, is guided by ELCA social teaching, and requires  
119 different practices in different contexts. Flowing from trust built through one-to-one relationships, faith-  
120 based organizing seeks to spur action by building coalitions of like-minded people in mostly local  
121 contexts. Faith-informed advocacy of various kinds can play a transformative role in a polarized political  
122 world by bringing people together to work toward the common good in public life.

123  
124 Article 17) Was Jesus “political”? The Scriptures are clear that he was not political in the sense of  
125 affiliation with a political party, a partisan movement, or a designer of civic legislation. However, the  
126 biblical claim that “Jesus is Lord” (Acts 10:36) is simultaneously a political and religious statement. In  
127 addition, Jesus called government leadership to accountability to such an extent that he was executed as a  
128 political criminal. Today, concern for the neighbor and the common good means the church is called to  
129 follow Jesus’ example by engaging appropriate issues with care that are in the political arena. Political  
130 partisanship is not proper for the church, even while we engage in issues that have political elements.

131  
132 Article 18) The ELCA also has a standing commitment to civic life, exercised through synods and the  
133 churchwide expressions of our church. The 1991 social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran  
134 Perspective* details the nature of this institutional witness.

135  
136 Article 19) Civic participation necessarily involves matters of government and political life. The word  
137 “politics” often is used today to express disgust with dishonest practices, partisan shenanigans, power  
138 grabs, ploys of deceit, and the sinful use of authority. “Politics” in this statement, however, is understood  
139 as the negotiation of how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are  
140 shared. Politics, rightly understood and practiced, then, is essential to civic well-being and of concern to  
141 God’s people. It is important to distinguish between politics and ethics and to ensure that political  
142 concerns are guided by ethical discernment. This church’s body of teaching addresses civic life ethically,  
143 which includes the relation of communities of faith to political authority, to government. As an example,  
144 ethics presents the principle of self-determination as a primary value of a healthy political community  
145 because it encourages the idea of sharing power.

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

149  
150  
151 Article 20) Political authority is one way that God protects and promotes the well-being of human society.  
152 Political authority is also human and social, permeated by sin. Some governments and societies fulfill  
153 God's intent for political authority better than others. In the Lutheran tradition the question to ask of  
154 government is "How faithful is it to God's purposes of well-being, including caring for the most  
155 vulnerable members of the community?" Lutherans ought to live in troubled restlessness with all  
156 government, both supporting political authority and criticizing its misuse, as appropriate.  
157

158 Article 21) To determine how the well-being of the neighbor is being served by political authority, criteria  
159 for assessment are necessary. God's power sustains and gives power to creation. Therefore, the principal  
160 criterion used to assess governmental and political authority is whether it increases power and its  
161 beneficial use among the people governed. Power expressed as mutual self-determination enhances  
162 people's lives and is a presumption that should be encouraged and respected by government and others.  
163 Both the model of divine power and the political presumption of self-determination include a criterion of  
164 fostering plurality.  
165

166 Article 22) In the United States, the Constitution is the federal framework of political authority. When it  
167 was written, the Constitution was unique in some ways, including its neutrality in matters of religion and  
168 its making "we the people" politically sovereign. The Constitution's separation of powers and their  
169 checks and balances were designed in part to prevent the monopolization of sovereignty by any branch or  
170 locale of government. The Constitution is both grounding and aspirational; that is, it did not fulfill its own  
171 objectives completely. The Constitution's preamble (or preface) expresses this government's purpose.  
172 The values expressed in the preamble can be used to assess whether the government is serving the  
173 purpose that its own Constitution has laid out.  
174

175 Article 23) The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: "we the people."  
176 Politically, the people are sovereign, not a monarch or other authority imposing a government on its  
177 people. The ratification of the Constitution itself enacts a preference for self-determination. Its enactment  
178 was deeply flawed, since the enfranchised "people" in the late 1700s were largely limited to white,  
179 property-owning males. The subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution have expanded "we  
180 the people" to include people of color, women, and younger adults.  
181

182 Article 24) The Constitution explicitly supports religious neutrality and diversity by forbidding religious  
183 "tests" for U.S. officeholders. Had it not done so, the country would have been deprived of the service of  
184 many, including notable U.S. presidents. The Constitution's choice was for religious self-determination.  
185 The later First Amendment to the Constitution expressed neutrality toward religion, thereby encouraging  
186 plurality of religion in society.  
187

188 Article 25) Governmental action can be evaluated by how well it grants power to those subject to it,  
189 including the aim of mutual self-determination. Legitimate government action therefore includes both  
190 coercive action and the positive production of power for its citizens. There are many examples of this.  
191 This article identifies specific questions that we might ask when evaluating particular governmental  
192 policies at the local, state, or federal levels.  
193

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

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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



249 purpose of citizenship is summed up in the preamble to the Constitution—to promote the general welfare.  
250 “Working with” seeks to address human needs, which can involve critical challenges such as advocating  
251 for change in policies and programs that harm people or God’s creation.  
252

253 Article 34) The phrase “maintaining institutional separation of church and state” does not point to an  
254 absolute separation of public (government) versus private (religious) arenas. Rather it points to the  
255 importance of preserving the functional integrity of independent political authority and religious  
256 institutions. Christ’s church should not bless any particular political theory; no political system or theory  
257 is final or ultimate. To the extent that U.S. government is formed for the general welfare and guided by  
258 good principles, whether rooted in Christian ideas or not, it should be affirmed. It is for these reasons that  
259 our church objects to religious bodies endorsing or supporting candidates or parties, or exercising  
260 partisanship in any way. At the same time, religious bodies and individuals have a responsibility to call  
261 government to account, especially when it fails in its function to provide for all peoples such “goods” as  
262 human rights, economic justice, and the like.  
263

264 Article 35) Rostered ministers face particular issues regarding the relationship of the church and political  
265 authority because of their divine office to preach and teach both law and gospel. Rostered ministers also  
266 are public figures because they lead public institutions and have a valuable role to play as leaders in civil  
267 society. The ELCA affirms these intersecting roles as right and salutary while also recognizing that any  
268 given scriptural text or any given social and political situation is complex and multilayered and requires  
269 discernment from multiple perspectives. Rostered leaders, then, should be attuned to their community or  
270 public setting in offering guidance and aiding discernment practices as assemblies determine how to  
271 participate in civic life. When they speak on public issues, their words should be rooted in the Scriptures  
272 and are to be governed by official ELCA teaching. Though there necessarily is a public face to the  
273 rostered role, this does not justify partisanship, such as telling members how to vote. Our church provides  
274 guidance for churches and congregations regarding participation in the electoral process.  
275

276 Article 36) The directive to “work with civil authorities ... in a relationship of institutional separation,  
277 with functional interaction” suggests a constructive relationship but must be guarded by neutrality among  
278 partners. It also is commended as a public proposal for a healthy approach between all religious bodies  
279 and political authority in the United States.  
280

281 Article 37) The ELCA understanding of civic life and faith is at odds with Christian nationalism because  
282 the latter seeks to fuse the exercise of political authority with a selected set of supposed “Christian”  
283 ideals. It also asserts that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United States. Such core  
284 beliefs represent a political ideology of religious nationalism, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. In  
285 its hardline strains, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens.  
286 Christian nationalists pledge allegiance to their version of the United States, first making the U.S. into an  
287 idol and seeing God’s plan in U.S. society as including only those whose religious beliefs fuse with a  
288 certain view of that society.  
289

## 290 VI. Addressing Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life

291  
292 Article 38) The following articles address selected contemporary issues about civic life, grounded in the  
293 themes and insights above. These do not revisit questions the ELCA has already addressed in existing  
294 statements or messages and are not intended to be comprehensive. Some articles here offer definitive  
295 conclusions whereas others establish parameters that enable continued discernment on the part of our  
296 church.  
297

298 Article 39) Hyper-partisan polarization is rampant in the United States, harming both individuals and the  
299 social fabric. The U.S. political system appropriately involves, of course, the presence and efforts of  
300 partisan activity. Unfortunately, today, social dynamics have taken partisanship to unhealthy levels that  
301 damage democratic interaction rather than foster respectful, responsible give and take. Many accept this  
302 winner-take-all approach as right or as, at least, unavoidable. Such approaches threaten the fabric of our  
303 nation and the lives of those in it. These threats are often felt most keenly by the marginalized. The ELCA  
304 calls for a different approach as both necessary and possible for a vital common life in which all can  
305 participate.

306  
307 Article 40) Civic leaders bear a particular responsibility to seek constructive debate and solutions. Civic  
308 leaders include a wide array of individuals beyond just elected officials or heads of media. To bring  
309 people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that hinders careful  
310 listening among neighbors. They should offer models of vigorous and constructive civic leadership.

311  
312 Article 41) Robust and constructive civic engagement in today's society depends on clear distinction  
313 between fact and various forms of misinformation, from falsehoods to exaggeration. Avoiding forms of  
314 false statement is a civic responsibility for both providers and users of social media. Christians should be  
315 "innocent as doves" when it comes interpreting the intentions of the neighbor but "wise as serpents"  
316 (Matthew 10:16) when it comes to discerning what information they encounter in any media. For the sake  
317 of U.S. civic life, the ELCA calls upon social media platforms to take responsibility to align policies and  
318 procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and rigorous online protocol available.

319  
320 Article 42) Financial contributions to political campaigns are a form of free speech protected by the First  
321 Amendment and a significant part of campaigning that demonstrate a level of commitment consistent with  
322 the donor's views. The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity to play a free and  
323 active part in the foundation of our communities. Therefore, we are concerned that being heard should not  
324 be effectively limited to those individuals and organizations who have overwhelming financial wealth and  
325 resources at their disposal. The ELCA urges legislation by state and federal lawmakers to set reasonable  
326 limits on campaign contributions and increase transparency in our elections and financial reporting by  
327 public officials.

328  
329 Article 43) This statement recognizes that governmental policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial  
330 opinions sometimes do more harm to the well-being of all than to promote it. Harm results from poorly  
331 conceived and implemented policies and from intentional actions that discriminate against some in favor  
332 of others. All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of  
333 protecting and fostering the good of all. Citizens and residents also have an obligation to seek reform  
334 through the procedures of democratic self-rule.

335  
336 Article 44) The ELCA has members in Washington, D.C., and in several of the U.S. territories. For this  
337 reason our church is attuned to the problematic relationship between the United States and its  
338 nonincorporated territories. We recognize complicating factors that include a legacy of racism because the  
339 vast majority of local residents in the territories belong to racially minoritized groups. We also recognize  
340 that the issues are complex. The principle of mutual self-determination dictates humble, intentional  
341 listening as the first step toward justice and healing.

342  
343 Article 45) American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians have a unique, historical, and  
344 nation-to-nation trust relationship with the United States that should acknowledge the sovereignty of  
345 tribal nations and Indian self-determination and self-governance. There are many layers to the often  
346 horrid history of treatment of indigenous peoples, but it is imperative to acknowledge the relationship has  
347 been grounded in the Doctrine of Discovery that codified both colonialism and religious intolerance. The  
348 ELCA has repudiated explicitly this European-derived doctrine as a theological framework that supported

349 racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. Our church also has acknowledged and  
350 called for repentance for this church’s complicity in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal  
351 governments and tribal members. This statement reaffirms the ELCA’s need for continued attention to  
352 just policy via advocacy in the areas of treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, and other matters that affect the  
353 well-being of Native Americans. It also calls upon both U.S. residents and U.S. governments to honor the  
354 trust relationship and the sovereignty of tribal nations as well as to be guided by just principles supporting  
355 Indian self-determination and well-being.

356  
357 Article 46) The ELCA calls for renewed emphasis on comprehensive civics education as an essential  
358 element for robust and revitalized civic life. Such education should teach the whole story of U.S. history  
359 in its aspirations, successes, and failures so that it might shape well-informed, thoughtful, and wise  
360 citizens.

361  
362 Article 47) No single solution will reduce the increasing, fevered polarization or mend the damage that  
363 endangers the U.S. social fabric as a representative democracy. However, robust civic participation is  
364 critical for democratic self-governance, for support of public servants, and for well-crafted policies. The  
365 ELCA urges both its members and all U.S. residents to renew their efforts toward such a robust civic  
366 participation, guided by concern for the well-being of all.

#### 367 368 Conclusion

369  
370 Article 48) “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven” is both our prayer as a church and our calling into  
371 civic life for the well-being of all. May we, as forgiven people in Christ’s church, respond boldly and join  
372 all others of goodwill to work toward the aspiration and responsibility of “we the people” through wise  
373 civic participation.

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375

376 **A Draft ELCA Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith**  
377 **Full Statement**

378 Terms underlined in the text are defined in the concluding glossary.  
379

380 **Introduction**  
381

382 **Article 1) Daily we are to pray as Jesus taught: “Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us**  
383 **today our daily bread.” These words teach us that God’s will seeks the well-being of creation and**  
384 **all aspects of human life, including civil society. The Scriptures remind us that God’s Spirit**  
385 **empowers Jesus’ disciples through God’s will for human society (Micah 6:8) and the blessings of**  
386 **the gospel to join God’s work in society. Previous ELCA social teaching speaks to elements for**  
387 **faithful participation in civic life, whereas this social statement provides a comprehensive address.**  
388 **It gives special attention to matters related to faith and political authority.**  
389

390 We are to pray daily as Jesus taught, saying, “May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth  
391 as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). What does this mean? The Lutheran  
392 catechisms say that daily bread means “everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our  
393 lives such as food, drink, ... upright and faithful rulers, good government ... good friends, faithful  
394 neighbors and the like.”<sup>1</sup> The catechisms, which explain biblical ideas, teach that the Triune God sustains  
395 creation and seeks human well-being through civic life. The Spirit empowers us as Jesus’ disciples  
396 through God’s will for human society (including the law<sup>2</sup>) and the blessings of the gospel. “He has told  
397 you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness  
398 and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).  
399

400 Previous ELCA social statements and messages express elements of a Lutheran understanding of civic  
401 life relevant to their themes. This social statement comprehensively addresses civic life, with particular  
402 attention to a Lutheran perspective on political authority. The six sections draw from the Scriptures, the  
403 wellspring of Lutheran theological themes, and contemporary social science to clarify theological themes  
404 and the calling to civic participation (sections I, II), consider the meaning and significance for people of  
405 faith of the founding documents of the United States (III, IV), sketch a constructive relationship of  
406 religious organizations and political authority (V), and address some pressing contemporary issues (VI).  
407  
408

409 **I. Fundamental Teaching: God’s Activity Toward Well-being Through Civic**  
410 **Life**  
411

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

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<sup>1</sup> The Small Catechism, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 357; hereafter referred to as “BC 2000.”

<sup>2</sup> 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.

419 **view. God intends that humans use and share the gift of power so that human structures and**  
420 **systems serve the intended well-being of all with good order and justice.**  
421

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

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

433  
434 In God’s activity that seeks the well-being of all, we encounter a use of power that is unlike many human  
435 practices of power (Matthew 20:25-26). God is sovereign, but God’s sovereignty *gives* power to creatures  
436 rather than depriving them of it. In contrast to the usual political “zero-sum” understanding of power (if I  
437 gain power, you lose it), God gives freely, sharing abundantly without loss. God’s sovereign power  
438 produces human power; it does not diminish it. However, humans are given their power in order to serve  
439 God, creation, and their fellow humans.

440  
441 God’s power is often hidden from human view. Sometimes God’s power is experienced as disruption and  
442 judgment, as the tearing down of human structures and misplaced values (Jeremiah 6:14). God’s power is  
443 experienced in varied and surprising ways that can be beautiful or painful. This is described by Martin  
444 Luther’s teaching about the struggles of faith and the “theology of the cross.” When human beings expect  
445 domination, God’s power appears in weakness (1 Corinthians 1:25). When we are overly confident, God  
446 unsettles our presumptions. In the fullness of time and the light of faith, we see that God’s purpose and  
447 power always move toward the divine promise of the full well-being of all people.

448  
449 At the end of the Lord’s prayer, we affirm that “the power, the honor and the glory are yours.” Not ours!  
450 When Christians forget that all power belongs to God, they risk creating other “gods” (idols) such as  
451 wealth and power itself, but also country, race, party, or ideology. God’s power in Jesus Christ redirects  
452 forgiven ones from such idolatry and shapes the way we use the power entrusted to us.

453  
454 This church bears witness to God’s purpose and power in the world. As human expressions of power,  
455 civic activity and political power are sustained by divine power. God intends that humans use and share  
456 such power so that human structures and systems serve the well-being of all with good order and justice.<sup>4</sup>

457  
458 **Article 3) Both the biblical witness and human history make clear that human beings are inherently**  
459 **social creatures and necessarily political beings. God’s intent is for human beings to use knowledge,**

---

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> The Augsburg Confession, XVI, BC 2000, 48.

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

463  
464 The Scriptures (Genesis 1:27) teach that human beings are made in the image of God (*imago dei*). One  
465 way to understand this image is as the gift of human vocation to participate in God’s work of fostering the  
466 well-being of social and political communities, as well as in care of the earth.<sup>5</sup> Genesis tells of God  
467 creating human beings from soil and tasking them with tilling and caring for the garden together (Genesis  
468 2). From the beginning, there is shared activity, life together arranged in ways that require social  
469 cooperation, conversation, and coordination. Even in the narrative of the fall (Genesis 3-4) we see the  
470 value of social and political life, as human beings move from honesty and care into fear and disobedience,  
471 no longer trusting God or one another. This church celebrates that humans are relational beings and live in  
472 social and political communities.<sup>6</sup>

473  
474 The Christian faith sees God’s power and compassion revealed in the ministry, death, and resurrection of  
475 Jesus. There is no neighbor, no enemy, no politician for whom Christ did not die. The Christian practice  
476 of baptism affirms this ongoing work of Christ and its connection to our vocation. This church teaches  
477 that “the gifts of the Spirit form and transform the people of God for discipleship in daily life.”<sup>7</sup> The  
478 baptismal liturgy includes a vow to “care for others and the world God made, and to work for justice and  
479 peace.”<sup>8</sup>

480  
481 Correctly understood as a calling to serve, the human vocation does not invite arrogance and misplaced  
482 pride, nor does it tolerate the domination of others. Human beings respond to what God is doing through  
483 God’s orderings of creation. In Lutheran theology, these orderings are often referred to as the three estates  
484 of government, church, family, and economy. All people depend upon these social relationships,  
485 institutions, and structures of communal life that provide scaffolded sites of growth and responsibility.  
486 Because these are dynamic structures, their precise form, arrangement, and values vary across time and  
487 place, and they are open to ongoing revision and change.

488  
489 In this sense the Lutheran tradition speaks of humans serving in civic life as “channels of God’s work.”<sup>9</sup>  
490 Humans should use their knowledge, wisdom, and power to foster the common good. When that is done  
491 by institutions through policies and regulations, or by individuals in acts of caring, humans are fulfilling  
492 their vocation to serve God’s activity in the world.

493  
494 **Article 4) Human sin is human brokenness and disorder and it distorts the calling to work for the**  
495 **well-being of all. It is sin when God’s gifts to humans are not used for the neighbor’s good and the**  
496 **self is turned in on itself (Matthew 22:36-40). Sin is expressed both personally and in human**  
497 **systems. It is expressed in actions we commit individually and is also embedded throughout larger**  
498 **institutions and systems. The examples of sin in civic life are many.**

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<sup>5</sup> 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).

<sup>6</sup> *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019), II.14, 5, [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements).

<sup>7</sup> *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991), 4, [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements).

<sup>8</sup> “Affirmation of Baptism” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236.

<sup>9</sup> This statement will employ the term “channel” rather than the traditional Lutheran term “mask” because the latter today suggests passivity and duplicity.

499 God's intention for joyous well-being is too often not enacted or experienced in the world. Many religious  
500 traditions discuss human brokenness and disorder. The Lutheran tradition speaks of sin in various ways  
501 but fundamentally understands sin to be the condition of human existence in which we fail to love and  
502 trust God above all else. Martin Luther understood sin to be an excessive focus on the self at the expense  
503 of the neighbor.<sup>10</sup> Human sin breaks a right relationship with God and others, damaging the well-being  
504 that God intends for all creation.

505  
506 The pervasiveness and complexity of sin that damages human well-being must be understood. Sin is  
507 present in our continual unwillingness to accept our human vocation to serve as creatures created by God.  
508 Sin can also take the insidious form of self-denial and a lack of self-love when, for example, we diminish  
509 our contributions and deny our ability, dignity, and value as fellow human beings created in God's image.  
510 Sin is expressed both personally and collectively, which means social and political institutions are bound  
511 in sin just as individuals are. There are manifold examples of this in civic life.

512  
513 It is sin when the power of social structures, like government, are not used for the common good of  
514 neighbors and creation (Matthew 22:36-40). For instance, the individual domination of one person by  
515 another was multiplied in the social structure of slavery supported by laws, policies, religious beliefs, and  
516 cultural practices in the United States. Such systemic sins are particularly horrendous because the things  
517 done and left undone dramatically deepen the oppression of other people.

518  
519 It is sin when we use civic or political power at the expense of others. One group's self-interest cannot  
520 justify denying the humanity or dignity of others. The need for order cannot justify subjugation,  
521 marginalization, or tyranny. The need for a government cannot justify the idolatrous worship of a nation.

522  
523 It also is sin when we completely avoid civic life and thereby do not work to serve neighbor justice  
524 through it. At the same time, it is sin when we support leaders who put their own power and self-interest  
525 above the needs of their constituents. It is sin when we uncritically support a member of a political party  
526 because of party affiliation or for our own personal gain. We see sin at work when we demonize others'  
527 motives while glorifying and sanctifying our own.

528  
529 **Article 5) God's loving and just response to human sinfulness includes both law (God's directives)**  
530 **and gospel (God's mercy). While distinct in function and purpose, they are not independent and**  
531 **can be thought of as two strategies working together for the single goal of well-being for all. The**  
532 **Lutheran tradition teaches there are different uses for God's law, such as the Ten Commandments.**  
533 **The law curbs evil through coercive power and offers directives for a good and just society. The law**  
534 **also reveals the deep, often unconscious, corruption of human motives and actions. In this way it**  
535 **drives people to contrition and prepares them for repentance. The gospel proclaims God's**  
536 **unfathomable mercy and God's loving desire of abundant life for all. Together law and gospel are**  
537 **the power of God bringing about God's purpose for the well-being of humanity and all creation.**

538  
539 Lutherans teach that we come to know both our sin and God's grace as God comes to us. God reveals and  
540 gives the divine self to restore right relationships with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. The Scriptures  
541 teach about different strategies God uses to achieve this, and we call these "law" and "gospel." This  
542 church understands the law (God's directives) and gospel together as expressing the living Word of God  
543 for human life and well-being. The law addresses our relationships and actions before others in this

---

<sup>10</sup> 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.

544 mortal life. The gospel, by contrast, proclaims our relationship or standing before God from now into  
545 eternity.

546  
547 God uses the law to sustain life and its needs for the good of all. The law has different functions, or  
548 uses.<sup>11</sup> The civil use of the law governs our behavior toward one another in human communities. In  
549 contrast, the theological use of the law accuses and convicts humans of sinfulness, even if that wrong is  
550 allowed by a government's law or not covered by human laws. God's directives are realistic about human  
551 beings. They reveal the corruption of many human motives, drive people to contrition, and prepare them  
552 for repentance.

553  
554 The gospel is the good news of God's love in Christ, given by grace alone and received in and through  
555 faith alone. The gospel arrives as a blessed surprise, an unexpected gift that frees us from efforts to earn  
556 God's love or forgiveness. The gospel has the liberating power to convert, transform, and re-create us in  
557 heart, mind, and spirit. Thus, Lutherans assert that the life of a Christian is described paradoxically as  
558 being simultaneously saint and sinner.

559  
560 The Lutheran tradition commonly describes these two strategies of law and gospel by using the analogy  
561 of God's two hands.<sup>12</sup> Through God's "left hand," God's power acts through the law to curb, restrain, and  
562 lead people toward goodness and justice. Through God's "right hand," God's power acts through the  
563 gospel to draw, transform, and re-create people in heart, mind, and soul. Both hands serve God's purposes  
564 of well-being through both spiritual and social means to bring a rightly ordered life of peace and  
565 flourishing.

566  
567 While distinct in function and purpose, the law and the gospel are not independent, and both flow from  
568 God's power and for God's purposes. God's left-hand work should not be identified solely with political  
569 authority or the state. It encompasses culture, family, economics, and all aspects of daily life.

570  
571 There is a substantive discussion about the appropriate interaction in civic life of these two strategies in  
572 the ELCA social message "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in Democracy"  
573 ([www.elca.org/socialmessages](http://www.elca.org/socialmessages), p. 4). The dangers of misuse are also described there. These include  
574 teaching that God's two strategies are unrelated, dismissing civic life and government as evil, or claiming  
575 an identification of God's will with a particular nation, political strategy, or civil institution.<sup>13</sup>

576  
577 **Article 6) God's people approach civic life with abounding trust in God and, at the same time, with**  
578 **measured realism and humility about human efforts. God's two-handed strategy is necessary**  
579 **because of sin, which means people of faith live in a continual tension. Some ways of civic life**  
580 **should be affirmed as better than others in serving the common good. Yet the presence and promise**  
581 **of God's reign make the church inevitably restless with respect to life in society, and Christians**  
582 **thereby live simultaneously with hope and striving, realism and restlessness.**

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<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020), 6ff, [www.elca.org/socialmessages](http://www.elca.org/socialmessages).



583 While we are called to do justice and love kindness (Micah 6:8), it is not always clear what that means in  
584 any particular situation. God’s people approach the present world with abounding trust in God’s coming  
585 reign and, at the same time, measured realism and humility about human efforts to create a just society.  
586

587 Through faith, God’s church already takes part in the coming reign of God announced by and embodied  
588 in Jesus. As the social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* explains, “The church  
589 still awaits the resurrection of the dead and the fulfillment of the whole creation in God’s promised future.  
590 In this time of ‘now ... not yet,’ the church lives in two ages—the present age and the age to come. In this  
591 sense, the church is ‘in’ the world but not ‘from’ the world.”<sup>14</sup> Christians have simultaneous memberships  
592 in God’s temporal and eternal work. It is unavoidable that Christians live in the temporal order, with all  
593 its questions, ambiguities, and tensions.  
594

595 Neither the law nor the gospel allows the church to accommodate easily the way civic life often unfolds.  
596 Some of those ways should be affirmed as better expressions of good than others and as more productive  
597 means toward well-being. Yet the presence and promise of God’s reign makes the church inevitably  
598 restless and discontented with society’s continual brokenness and violence. We are called to work for a  
599 better world. We should support and commend civic and political efforts that bring better measures of  
600 order, justice, and harmony. However, even those best efforts require revision and, by God’s grace,  
601 improvement. Christians are simultaneously people of hope and courage, realism and restlessness.  
602

603 **Article 7) God’s response to sin calls people to delight in the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:1-2) and**  
604 **provides tools for seeking civil well-being. The uniquely Christian proclamation, the gospel, does**  
605 **not introduce any new laws to govern the civil order but urges us to obey just laws and motivates us**  
606 **to seek greater well-being for all. While the Holy Scriptures provide the fundamental norm, our**  
607 **human faculties--such as reason, experience, knowledge, and imagination--have crucial roles in**  
608 **discerning better, and worse, ways of running a human society.**  
609

610 God provides multiple tools for striving toward social well-being. Because the Scriptures are the norm for  
611 faith and life, all Christian efforts are judged according to its central proclamation. The Lutheran  
612 theological tradition also looks to the insights from the Book of Concord, grounded first in articles 6, 16,  
613 and 28 of the Augsburg Confession, as faithful, if historically conditioned, interpretations of the  
614 Scriptures.  
615

616 Our church teaches that God also provides human reason as a gift for seeking justice and social harmony.  
617 Lutherans have sometimes used the language of “natural law” to describe shared values and ends that are  
618 given by God, individually and collectively, to direct human beings. At its most basic, this has referred to  
619 an inherent human principle that the good is to be done and the bad is to be avoided. It also is expressed  
620 by the exhortation of the Golden Rule or as the basic expectation to do no harm.<sup>15</sup> This explains the  
621 sentiment in the Book of Concord that, to some extent, the Ten Commandments are something “written in  
622 the hearts of all [people].”<sup>16</sup>  
623

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

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<sup>14</sup> A fuller description of this tension appears in the ELCA social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, 3, [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements).

<sup>15</sup> This is common phrasing found in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Philip Melancthon.

<sup>16</sup> Large Catechism, third article of the Creed, Article 3, para. 67, BC 2000, 492.

628 attention to shared human principles can be only one part of the ongoing work of communal deliberation  
629 and conversation.

630

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

637

638 The social teaching of this church is normed by the Scriptures and seeks to employ the many gifts of  
639 human capacity to address contemporary social life.<sup>17</sup> Though these govern and guide as this church’s  
640 official teaching, Lutherans recognize the possibility for continuing rethinking and revision through  
641 discernment as a community together.

642

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

648

649 Since the Reformation many of the historically dominant expressions of Lutheran theology and churches  
650 have, despite some important exceptions, too often failed to make a priority of the civic common good.  
651 We have not, as Lutheran Confessions teach, given “this righteousness of reason the praise it deserves, for  
652 our corrupt nature has no greater good than this ... God even honors it with temporal rewards.”<sup>18</sup>

653

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

659

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

664

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

670

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

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<sup>17</sup> See [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements).

<sup>18</sup> Apology, Article IV, 24, BC 2000, 124.

676 **discussing public matters. The Christian vocation to serve God and the neighbor may be fulfilled in**  
677 **civic places of responsibility.**

678  
679 As Lutherans participate in civic life for the well-being of all, we recognize that this work is neither  
680 unique to nor possessed by Christians alone. To “walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8) must include  
681 welcoming and acknowledging the ideas, values, and contributions of all people, regardless of their  
682 religious tradition or worldview. Christians, as individuals or as the body of Christ in the world, have no  
683 guaranteed higher or better reasoning than other religious or nonreligious communities. This means that  
684 Lutherans reject the claim, explicit or assumed by some, that Christians have revelatory knowledge or  
685 saving insight into civic and political matters.

686  
687 This does not mean Christians do not have contributions to make, nor that they should not draw from their  
688 faith, language, and traditions in discussing public matters. God’s grace received in faith empowers  
689 people to action. Our calling comes with a sharpened commitment to the dignity of all because all are  
690 God’s children and created in God’s image. Our actions come with an awakened sense of God’s biblical  
691 call for justice and hearts changed for compassion and care. Love of God is embodied in neighbor justice  
692 by providing for their daily bread and practicing the forgiveness Christians have received in Christ.

693  
694 Liberated from the burden of seeking eternal salvation through our own efforts, we can join God’s efforts  
695 to create and re-create the institutions and communities of human social life. The power of God moves us  
696 to provide food, shelter, play, safety, education, and many other material and social benefits. Sin is  
697 prevalent, but Lutherans call upon the Scriptures, find aid in their theological heritage, and use human  
698 reason and practices of discernment to seek the means to participate wisely and critically in the civic life  
699 God intends. Our baptismal vocation to serve God and neighbor can be lived out in civic places of  
700 responsibility.

701  
702

## 703 **II. The Calling to Robust Civic Participation**

704  
705 **Article 10) Civic life entails activities and institutions across all public life, from one’s local**  
706 **neighborhood to matters of national and international concern. Participation in civic organizations**  
707 **comes in many shapes and sizes, and the recent decline of civic participation in the United States is**  
708 **especially troubling. Our church affirms that anyone who seeks the community’s well-being**  
709 **through civic participation is, knowingly or not, using the gifts God provides. They are acting as**  
710 **channels of God’s concern for human life.**

711  
712 Civic life involves activities and institutions across all public life, from one’s local neighborhood to issues  
713 of national and international concern. Participation in civic organizations comes in many shapes and sizes,  
714 such as coaching soccer for a community center, attending PTA meetings, providing meals for seniors,  
715 participating in peaceful demonstration, volunteering one’s business acumen toward a community  
716 development initiative, or participating in international “sister city” programs. The social fabric of a  
717 democracy depends upon intelligent, prudent, vigorous, and broad participation. It is a medium through  
718 which people deepen relationships, create opportunities, and hold one another accountable. This makes  
719 the recent decline of civic participation in the United States<sup>19</sup> especially troubling.

720

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<sup>19</sup> 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/](http://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](http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/decline-civic-participation), accessed October 24, 2023.

721 Our church affirms that anyone who seeks the community’s well-being through civic participation is,  
722 knowingly or not, using the gifts God provides. There is no single or required way to live this out. The  
723 Christian faith celebrates the multitude of ways that God calls people into lives of service and community  
724 for the sake of the common good.

725

726 This statement relies on social teaching on civic life found in previous ELCA statements and messages  
727 with both domestic and international implications.<sup>20</sup> The particular calling to be an active and informed  
728 citizen in relation to political life is most fully articulated in the social message “Government and Civic  
729 Engagement in the United States.”<sup>21</sup> It affirms, for example, the need to pray for civic and political  
730 leaders (1 Timothy 2:12), the responsibility to vote and participate in political life, and the need for  
731 collective action toward fair and compassionate government.

732

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

738

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

745

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

750

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

755

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

760

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

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<sup>20</sup> The first ELCA social statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, sets the foundation for this. It is cited above.

<sup>21</sup> “Government and Civic Engagement,” cited above.

768 Civil service includes more than work in a legislature or on the national stage, and this church encourages  
769 all people to explore service in state, county, and municipal branches including through various boards,  
770 agencies, and committees. It is critical to support and guide youth and young adults in this church to  
771 consider taking up such places of responsibility.

772  
773 Christians are encouraged to take an initial stance of respect for neighbors who work in government at all  
774 levels—local, state, and national—and in each of the three branches of government. Unfortunately, in this  
775 society, there is a common caricature of government workers as lazy, incompetent, or troublesome  
776 bureaucrats. This image is grossly misleading. It misrepresents the complexities of civic life and  
777 government service, and from a Christian perspective, it violates the Eighth Commandment, against  
778 bearing false witness against another.

779  
780 Government employees are not above reproach, and they may and do fail in their responsibilities.  
781 However, the default stance toward them should be dignity and respect, not slander and suspicion. In fact,  
782 this devaluation of government service, officials, and workers reveals deep problems with prejudices and  
783 distorted hierarchies of the value of each human being. When local trash collectors, postal workers, and  
784 county officials are not given honor for their work, this reveals one way in which we fail to see their labor  
785 and service as God does.

786  
787 At the same time, citizens are expected to hold the government and its officials accountable. Government  
788 workers should do their jobs with integrity and fairness and in ways that serve the common good.  
789 Government institutions, programs, and policies must be held to high standards as a sign of their  
790 importance and impact. Courts must apply the law in accordance with precedent and with fairness, equity,  
791 and impartiality in order to preserve public trust. We should judge individual cases of government failure  
792 carefully, avoiding generalizations that are unfair and that fail to help identify areas where improvement  
793 is genuinely needed.

794  
795 **Article 13) Religion can create divisions in civic life or can contribute to mending the torn social**  
796 **fabric and reconciling divided peoples. This church urges all people of faith to seek a constructive**  
797 **role that counters growing polarization, distrust, and ill will. Religious traditions can offer**  
798 **particular gifts of moral vision, inclusion, and compassion sorely needed in U.S. civic life.**

799  
800 Religious organizations must discern when and how to constructively engage in civic life. We must be  
801 attentive to contexts and what specific roles and actions are called for. Religions can create divisions in  
802 civic life or can contribute to mending the social fabric and reconciling divided peoples. This church  
803 urges all people of faith to seek constructive roles to counter growing hyper-partisan polarization, distrust,  
804 and ill will.

805  
806 The ELCA constitution and our church’s social teaching lift up a moral vision for civic life that reflects  
807 both the depth of sin in human fallenness and the heights of hope in God’s redemption. This church’s  
808 moral vision does not mean we expect to bring God’s kingdom on earth—only God can do that—but it  
809 does give witness to the biblical idea of God’s intention for shalom and thereby encourages us to stand for  
810 both justice and reconciliation in this time of divisiveness and acrimony.

811  
812 This moral vision is held in tension with the realism of human nature’s fallenness but reminds us that all  
813 human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The moral vision also reminds us that,  
814 contrary to the common assumptions and painful actions in civic life, all stand equally before God. There  
815 is no neighbor or stranger, no political ally or opponent for whom Christ did not die. As a community of  
816 inclusion, a people of every race and tongue (Acts 2, Revelation 7:9), we are drawn by our civic  
817 engagement into wider inclusion and dignity for all.

818

819 The ELCA has committed itself to helping in the reconciliation and healing of communities and civic  
820 life.<sup>22</sup> We are expected to respond with compassion and imagination, drawing from experience and  
821 innovating new ways to address civic challenges. For example, social ministries in the community are a  
822 means of civic participation and are widely affirmed by this church. Care facilities, food pantries, housing  
823 programs, and refugee resettlement efforts are but a few examples of types of responses found in  
824 individual congregations and among the members of Lutheran Services in America, one of the largest  
825 social service organizations in the United States. This church has a responsibility, working with all people  
826 of goodwill, to mediate conflict and to advocate just and peaceful resolutions while supporting institutions  
827 and policies that seek the well-being and power of all.

828  
829 **Article 14) The ELCA and other religious bodies have a particular calling to encourage**  
830 **discernment and provide spaces for difficult conversations. For Christians, discernment is enabled**  
831 **by the gift of unity that Christ gives. Discussion about tough issues among God’s people is a witness**  
832 **that counters the forces of social division and distrust. The ELCA’s identity as a community of moral**  
833 **deliberation is one into which our church continues to grow, and which is increasingly crucial in a**  
834 **society so divided.**

835  
836 Discerning a best course of action requires considering many different sides of an issue. Because we  
837 recognize that every person is one for whom Christ died, we must seek to be a safe space for challenging  
838 conversations. A safe space does not mean a space where all agree; it means a space where all are  
839 honored and valued regardless of what they believe as worshiping communities struggle together to  
840 discern the common good.

841  
842 In a polarized environment, the practice of communal moral discernment is an evangelical witness to  
843 God’s intention for humans to respect others and the good use of reason. Fulfilling a wide spectrum of  
844 callings and coming from a diversity of experiences, Christians will often disagree passionately on social  
845 questions. Because they share common convictions of faith, they are free, indeed obligated, to deliberate  
846 together on the challenges they face in the world even when consensus is not reached. United in baptism  
847 with Christ and all believers, Christians should welcome and celebrate their diversity and remain in  
848 conversation.

849  
850 Since the 1991 adoption of the social statement *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, the idea of  
851 our church as a safe space for discernment has been formally part of the ELCA’s identity as a community  
852 of moral deliberation. It is an identity that our church continues to grow into. As a church, we recognize  
853 our many failures to live out this identity; at the same time, we give thanks that we may renew and build  
854 upon this heritage.

855  
856 **Article 15) The biblical witness teaches that, among other roles and aims, there is a prophetic task**  
857 **for those who follow Jesus (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The church’s prophetic presence in civic life**  
858 **calls for holding civic leaders accountable, taking constructive action and lifting up a vision for**  
859 **improved social well-being. It is part of this church’s work under the left hand of God as a**  
860 **contribution to society, and it needs to be done with both vitality and great care.**

861  
862 Looking to the biblical witness, the church has long affirmed that one means of discipleship and ministry  
863 involves civic participation as a prophetic presence. With Mary, the mother of Jesus, the church sings of  
864 God’s action to bring down the proud and lift up the lowly (Luke 1:51-53). The church hopes to follow  
865 Christ, who boldly declared a calling to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the incarcerated,  
866 healing for the sick, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The prophetic role envisions  
867 and points us toward a better future of well-being.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Church in Society*, 4.

868 This prophetic role includes “the obligation to name and denounce the idols before which people bow, to  
869 identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate in hope with poor and powerless  
870 people.”<sup>23</sup> In its ordination rites, this church has consistently affirmed the expectation “to give faithful  
871 witness in the world through word and deed” and “to serve the needy, care for the sick, comfort the  
872 distressed.”<sup>24</sup> Though these expectations are made explicit for rostered ministers, they are part of this  
873 church’s calling shared by all, irrespective of particular offices and roles within the church.<sup>25</sup>  
874

875 This role of holding civic leaders accountable applies to both religious and secular institutions when they  
876 abuse or overreach their authority. This church says, with Martin Luther, that “to rebuke” those in  
877 authority “through God’s Word spoken publicly, boldly and honestly” is “not seditious” but “a  
878 praiseworthy, noble, and ... particularly great service to God.”<sup>26</sup>  
879

880 Efforts toward justice-seeking, advocacy, social change, and addressing all forms of civic life require  
881 care, patience, and wise distinctions. Civic participation in these forms may be controversial, and  
882 worshiping communities need to take time to discern and identify common parameters for action. Each  
883 service ministry, advocacy effort, or social change ministry warrants careful selection.  
884

885 Theologically it is important to recognize that the exertion of social power when addressing or  
886 challenging civic life is part of this church’s work under the left hand of God.<sup>27</sup> Though the church’s  
887 message of the gospel is sure, we cannot know what the outcomes of exerting social power in public  
888 actions will be. We must consistently evaluate whether neighbor justice, especially for the marginalized,  
889 is being served by the prophetic presence of this church.  
890

891 **Article 16) The ELCA encourages individuals and worshipping communities to work together**  
892 **toward a civic life that better reflects God’s vision for a more just and reconciled world. The**  
893 **various forms of advocacy offer ways to press civic leaders and public policy makers to respect the**  
894 **needs and dignity of all persons and our common home, with special concern for the vulnerable.**  
895 **Such faith-rooted advocacy is born from relationships of service and solidarity, is guided by ELCA**  
896 **social teaching, and requires different practices in different contexts. Flowing from trust built**  
897 **through one-to-one relationships, faith-based organizing seeks to spur action by building coalitions**  
898 **of like-minded people in mostly local contexts. Faith-informed advocacy of various kinds can play a**  
899 **transformative role in a polarized political world by bringing people together to work toward the**  
900 **common good in public life.**  
901

902 The challenge to improve civic life, to provide a prophetic presence, or to address complex social issues is  
903 daunting. Our church encourages individuals and communities to find ways to work with others toward a  
904 civic life that better reflects God’s vision for a more just and reconciled world.  
905

906 Advocacy comes in many forms, from institution-based efforts to more local forms sometimes called  
907 “faith-based organizing.” The point is to press civic leaders and public-policy makers to respect the needs  
908 and dignity of all people and our common home, with special care for the vulnerable. Advocacy comes

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<sup>23</sup> *The Church in Society*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> 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](http://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](http://tinyurl.com/2p9w4sfw).

<sup>25</sup> *ELW*, 236.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in *The Church in Society*, 4. The source is Martin Luther, “Commentary on Psalm 82” (1530) in *Selected Psalms II, Works*, vol. 13., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956).

<sup>27</sup> See articles 5-7 of this document, above.



909 from the Latin *vocare* (to call), the root word for voice and vocation, two important elements of our  
910 witness in society.

911  
912 Institutional advocacy is a stewardship of the ELCA’s voice and is grounded in the ELCA’s constitution.  
913 That document calls the ELCA to:

- 914 • Empower members to engage with systems and processes to promote the well-being of the human  
915 community and creation in the public square, local and federal government, and the international  
916 community.
- 917 • Equip and encourage members to seek dignity and peace.
- 918 • Advance justice in response to human suffering, marginalization, and exclusion.
- 919 • Promote equality, justice, and respect for the value of every person to reduce the systemic  
920 injustices impacting communities and societies.
- 921 • Exercise corporate social responsibility through environmental, social, and justice principles to  
922 create a just and sustainable society.<sup>28</sup>

923  
924 Such faith-rooted advocacy is born from relationships of service and solidarity. It is an expression of both  
925 individual discipleship and our life as a church together. It grows most powerfully out of ministries  
926 among people and communities that have been denied their human dignity or are seeking greater justice.  
927 Advocacy supports and amplifies these voices. Though sometimes advocacy is described as providing “a  
928 voice for the voiceless,” we must be careful to identify and support opportunities for people to speak for  
929 themselves.

930  
931 The ELCA’s corporate witness is governed by ELCA social teaching,<sup>29</sup> and advocacy occurs in both  
932 domestic and global accompaniment with people and communities. Likewise, advocacy is enriched and  
933 strengthened through ecumenical and interreligious collaboration.<sup>30</sup> The united witness of the faith  
934 community builds and depends upon relationships of trust and communal discernment.

935  
936 Moving people of varying interests to act for the common good may require different practices in  
937 different contexts. Building relationships and sharing vision can involve letters, calls, and meetings with  
938 elected leaders and their staff. It can involve invitations for them to visit communities and ministries. It  
939 involves building public awareness from editorials to rallies and protests, earned and paid media, public  
940 testimony, community organizing, and more.

941  
942 Using the trust of one-to-one relationships, faith-based organizers seek to spur action by building  
943 coalitions of like-minded people in mostly local contexts. Faith-based community organizing roots itself  
944 in shared values and commitments, in congregations and other institutions, often across denominations  
945 and religious boundaries.

946  
947 Faith-informed advocacy can play a transformative role in a polarized political world by bringing people  
948 together to work toward the common good in the public square.

949  
950 **Article 17) Was Jesus “political”? The Scriptures are clear that he was not political in the sense of**  
951 **affiliation with a political party, a partisan movement, or a designer of civic legislation. However,**  
952 **the biblical claim that “Jesus is Lord” (Acts 10:36) is simultaneously a political and religious**

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<sup>28</sup> ELCA Constitution 16.12.D21, p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> 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](http://elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church).

<sup>30</sup> 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).



953 **statement. In addition, Jesus called government leadership to accountability to such an extent that**  
954 **he was executed as a political criminal. Today, concern for the neighbor and the common good**  
955 **means the church is called to follow Jesus' example by engaging appropriate issues with care that**  
956 **are in the political arena. Political partisanship is not proper for the church, even while we engage in**  
957 **issues that have political elements.**  
958

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

967  
968 If Jesus’ ministry was political in this sense, then disciples today also have a related task. If Jesus is  
969 Ruler, then no nation, constitution, or government, even a democratic one, can have our ultimate loyalty.  
970 God’s demands have singular priority for Christians and, ultimately, are not to be equated with worldly  
971 structures such as a government or a nation. As with Jesus, however, these demands pull us not out of  
972 society but into it.

973  
974 When God’s people join God’s efforts in society, they must sometimes address issues in the political  
975 arena if they are to hold government accountable, oppose social oppression, seek various kinds of  
976 liberation, and work toward the common good. Political engagement in this sense is a manifestation of  
977 serving God’s love through civic participation. In this sense, then, addressing issues that are in the  
978 political arena is an element of a Christian’s, and this church’s, calling. Political partisanship is not  
979 (Article 35). Any engagement of issues can be interpreted, criticized, or even rebuked as being partisan,  
980 but careful discernment and clear criteria (see articles 21 and 25, for example) provide the necessary  
981 guardrails for risking this participation in God’s work.

982  
983 **Article 18) The ELCA also has a standing commitment to civic life, exercised through synods and**  
984 **the churchwide expressions of our church. The 1991 social statement *The Church in Society: A***  
985 ***Lutheran Perspective* details the nature of this institutional witness.**  
986

987 The ELCA also serves God and neighbor in civic life through its synods and the churchwide organization.  
988 These long-standing commitments are detailed in the 1991 social statement *The Church in Society: A*  
989 *Lutheran Perspective* (pp. 8-9).<sup>31</sup> Some examples from that document, among others, illustrate our  
990 church’s civic contributions as part of our social witness:

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

1000

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<sup>31</sup> The reader can find the full list there, many of which relate to civic participation. See *The Church in Society*, 8-9.

1001 **Article 19) Civic participation necessarily involves matters of government and political life. The**  
1002 **word “politics” often is used today to express disgust with dishonest practices, partisan**  
1003 **shenanigans, power grabs, ploys of deceit, and the sinful use of authority. “Politics” in this**  
1004 **statement, however, is understood as the negotiation of how the benefits, burdens, rights, and**  
1005 **responsibilities of living in a society are shared. Politics, rightly understood and practiced, then, is**  
1006 **essential to civic well-being and of concern to God’s people. It is important to distinguish between**  
1007 **politics and ethics and to ensure that political concerns are guided by ethical discernment. This**  
1008 **church’s body of teaching addresses civic life ethically, which includes the relation of communities**  
1009 **of faith to political authority, to government. As an example, ethics presents the principle of self-**  
1010 **determination as a primary value of a healthy political community because it encourages the idea of**  
1011 **sharing power.**  
1012

1013 The Christian vocation to serve the neighbor through our common civic life has multiple facets, but  
1014 inevitably it involves some participation in the essential civic dimension of government and politics. The  
1015 word “politics” often is used today to express disgust with dishonest practices, partisan shenanigans,  
1016 power grabs, ploys of deceit—with authority being used in a sinful way. These practices take place, but  
1017 politics, rightly understood, is a necessary and beneficial gift. God creates humans as political beings. In  
1018 the word’s original and fullest meaning, it describes action in the *polis* (Greek), a state or society  
1019 especially when characterized by a sense of community.  
1020

1021 “Politics” then, describes a necessary and positive aspect of human life. It describes negotiating how the  
1022 benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are shared. Politics, in this sense,  
1023 happens whenever two or more people are gathered to live in community together. (This includes life in  
1024 the family and the church!) It describes the activity in which each person’s interests and the well-being of  
1025 the community are navigated and negotiated. Politics is an essential and good thing because it is vital to  
1026 self-governance.<sup>32</sup>  
1027

1028 Politics is always complicated and messy because it involves diplomacy, compromise, persuasion, and  
1029 sometimes coercion. The reality is that living in community requires scrappy negotiations about the  
1030 ongoing (re)distribution of resources, rights, responsibilities, opportunity, access, and all other things that  
1031 are needed to form a healthy community. It includes legislation (law-making), enforcement, judicial  
1032 evaluation, community planning and organization, advocacy, and distribution of goods and services (such  
1033 as postal delivery, overseas aid, etc.).  
1034

1035 It is important to distinguish between politics and ethics. Ethics is careful discernment about what is right,  
1036 good, or appropriate. It asks what ought to be done (or not), what we should value (or not), and who we  
1037 should be (or not) as a community. In other words, ethics seeks to guide what we (as a community and  
1038 members of it) will seek, be, and do to form a community of well-being. ELCA social statements are  
1039 ethical documents that provide this church’s teaching for addressing civic life.  
1040

1041 Politics and ethics are necessarily related. Ethics discerns; politics implements. As an example, ethics  
1042 presents the principle of self-determination as a primary value of a healthy political community because it  
1043 encourages the idea of sharing power. Government and political activity can be evaluated then by how  
1044 well they foster mutual self-determination for each community in a society (Article 21). The following  
1045 sections turn to the principles and assessments of our church on the essential element of civic life of  
1046 political authority.  
1047  
1048

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<sup>32</sup> “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy,” 2.

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

1049  
1050  
1051 **Article 20) Political authority is one way that God protects and promotes the well-being of human**  
1052 **society. Political authority is also human and social, permeated by sin. Some governments and**  
1053 **societies fulfill God’s intent for political authority better than others. In the Lutheran tradition the**  
1054 **question to ask of government is “How faithful is it to God’s purposes of well-being, including**  
1055 **caring for the most vulnerable members of the community?” Lutherans ought to live in troubled**  
1056 **restlessness with all government, both supporting political authority and criticizing its misuse, as**  
1057 **appropriate.**

1058  
1059 The Lutheran Confessions affirm the principle of political authority and good government<sup>33</sup> as one way  
1060 the Triune God protects and coordinates the complex web of social and economic relationships for human  
1061 well-being. Over time, Lutherans have come to understand that we ought to live with a troubled  
1062 restlessness about all forms of government. Some provide better measures of well-being than others even  
1063 though sin permeates every human intention and structure.

1064  
1065 In the Lutheran theological tradition, the question is how faithful government is to God’s purposes of  
1066 justice and good order, especially in caring for the most vulnerable members of the community. The  
1067 reformers of the 16th century directed attention to those who held positions of responsibility in civic  
1068 institutions, including government, the church, and the household.<sup>34</sup>

1069  
1070 Such discernment about political authority reaches as far back as Luther’s catechisms. The Large  
1071 Catechism says, “It would therefore be fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned  
1072 with a loaf of bread instead of a lion or a wreath of rue [a medicinal herb], or if a loaf of bread were  
1073 stamped on coins.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than conquering more land or gaining more wealth, the role of government  
1074 should be focused on ensuring that each person received all the necessities for daily well-being.

1075  
1076 The Lutheran tradition supports an attitude of respect for and cooperation with political authority, but also  
1077 maintains that there is a responsibility to assess and call individuals and institutions to account. Because  
1078 government is an indispensable structure of society, Lutherans have historically called for great deference  
1079 and obedience to civil authorities and institutions, in line with Romans 13. The Lutheran heritage contains  
1080 examples of people denouncing the misuse of those institutions and also cooperating with them when  
1081 appropriate.

1082  
1083 **Article 21) To determine how the well-being of the neighbor is being served by political authority,**  
1084 **criteria for assessment are necessary. God’s power sustains and gives power to creation. Therefore,**  
1085 **the principal criterion used to assess governmental and political authority is whether it increases**  
1086 **power and its beneficial use among the people governed. Power expressed as mutual self-**  
1087 **determination enhances people’s lives and is a presumption that should be encouraged and**  
1088 **respected by government and others. Both the model of divine power and the political presumption**  
1089 **of self-determination include a criterion of fostering plurality.**

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<sup>33</sup> Apology, Article 16, BC 2000, 231.

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> Large Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, Article IV, para. 75, BC 2000, 231.

1091 Human social life is an arena of multiple forms of power. This church teaches that an essential assessment  
1092 for any use of power, whether in law, policy, or action, is whether it amplifies the power that God intends  
1093 for people and groups. This assessment is especially important with those who have been denied power  
1094 historically or marginalized by social systems.

1095  
1096 As the source of all that is, God *is* sovereign. But God’s sovereignty brings forth creatures who are not  
1097 God, and God gives power and sustenance to creatures. God’s power creates their power rather than  
1098 depriving them of it (Article 2). Divine, self-giving power is always and everywhere plural, producing not  
1099 one center of power but multiple transmissions of power.

1100  
1101 As such all power can be assessed by its adherence to the divine creative and self-giving purpose or by  
1102 the extent to which it is distorted and misused for the sake of domination and exploitation. This is true  
1103 whether in politics, civic life, religious organizations, business, law enforcement, society, or the family.

1104  
1105 To the extent that human power is directed solely or primarily to the control or domination of others, it is  
1106 a sinful distortion of the purpose of power. Dominating power, intentionally or unintentionally, ultimately  
1107 destroys the independent power of others rather than increases or intensifies God’s gift of creative,  
1108 sustaining power. Power exercised as domination hollows out those who are subject to it, whereas those  
1109 in control lose the vitality that allows them to adapt.

1110  
1111 Like all power, governmental power is subject to sinful impulses and systemic distortions. This is the  
1112 case, in part, because those in government, like all other people, are sinners. Governmental actors,  
1113 however well-meaning, are also subject to limitations of knowledge and the temptation to not  
1114 acknowledge those limits. Government, too, may often seek its own advantage or that of its most  
1115 influential constituencies at the expense of many of its people. This is especially likely if one thinks of  
1116 politics and civic engagement as merely a collection of warring interest groups, battling in a zero-sum  
1117 game of wins and losses.

1118  
1119 There are circumstances that may require the use of dominating power to overcome others who are doing  
1120 immense harm—such as another government. In certain circumstances, even war might be legitimate, for  
1121 example, to defend one’s country against existential threats or to oppose totalitarian regimes. Under such  
1122 circumstances, dominating power can be justified in good conscience to counter immense harm. This idea  
1123 has been expressed in the Lutheran tradition as “the strange work of love to destroy what is against  
1124 love.”<sup>36</sup> Even there, however, Christians and others believe there are constraints. For example,  
1125 noncombatants and former combatants should be treated with care, as God’s creatures, not mere objects  
1126 of control or domination.

1127  
1128 God’s self-giving creative and sustaining power gives human creatures agency, the ability to set their own  
1129 course. In addition to creating plurality, the gift of power therefore includes a presumption for self-  
1130 determination. An important criterion for assessing government action is whether it extends the self-  
1131 determination of the people—and thus *their* power.

1132  
1133 Practically, this means that the necessary starting point for considering what is good for others should be  
1134 what those others believe is good for them. Consequently, whether government action extends the mutual  
1135 self-determination of its people—and thus *their* power—is an important criterion to assess government  
1136 action. A national government may be far removed from certain local realities. Local or state  
1137 governments may be more removed from the effects of their actions on those outside their jurisdiction.  
1138 That distance increases the possibility for error in determining what will lead to another’s well-being and

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 49.

1139 what will damage another’s self-determination and power. This is not a value judgement but a mere  
1140 description of the limits of government, even in a representative democracy.

1141  
1142 These possibilities in turn mean government and the governed must ask what level of government is most  
1143 appropriate and how best to design policies that foster self-determination. That is also why it is important  
1144 to create opportunities for those who will be most directly affected by those decisions to participate and  
1145 be heard seriously in the process of making the decision.

1146  
1147 A presumption is, however, not a rule, and self-determination is not an absolute value. It is a *presumption*,  
1148 a guardrail. Sometimes laws and regulations might oppose what people believe to be their own good.  
1149 Individuals and groups can also mistake what is good for them.

1150  
1151 The presumption for self-determination is especially necessary when what seems good for my group  
1152 significantly harms others and their self-determination. This is because self-determination directly implies  
1153 a norm of reciprocity. As a *universal* presumption deriving from God’s creative and sustaining power, it  
1154 gives priority to others’ self-determination as well. Self-determination *always* includes mutual or plural  
1155 self-determination. It does *not* mean doing whatever one wants at the expense of others. Self-  
1156 determination is necessarily mutual self-determination. To rephrase this for ethics in the form of the  
1157 Golden Rule: I should extend to others their self-determination just as I wish to have it extended to me  
1158 (Matthew 7:12).

1159  
1160 Both the model of divine power and the political presumption of self-determination include a criterion of  
1161 fostering plurality. These are indispensable elements for thinking through the nature and purpose of the  
1162 government of the United States as the country where most ELCA congregations operate.

1163  
1164 **Article 22) In the United States, the Constitution is the federal framework of political authority.**  
1165 **When it was written, the Constitution was unique in some ways, including its neutrality in matters**  
1166 **of religion and its making “we the people” politically sovereign. The Constitution’s separation of**  
1167 **powers and their checks and balances were designed in part to prevent the monopolization of**  
1168 **sovereignty by any branch or locale of government. The Constitution is both grounding and**  
1169 **aspirational; that is, it did not fulfill its own objectives completely. The Constitution’s preamble (or**  
1170 **preface) expresses this government’s purpose. The values expressed in the preamble can be used to**  
1171 **assess whether the government is serving the purpose that its own Constitution has laid out.**

1172  
1173 In the United States, the Constitution (ratified in 1788) provides the federal framework of what political  
1174 authority may and may not do with respect to its citizens and other governmental and nongovernmental  
1175 institutions.<sup>37</sup> It provides for a national government consisting of three authorities with distinct roles and  
1176 power sharing—executive, legislative, and judicial. It reserves certain matters to the states and others to  
1177 citizens of the country regardless of the state in which they live. It also acknowledges Indigenous  
1178 sovereign governments.

1179  
1180 The U.S. Constitution was not utterly unique. There are precedents in human history for what we  
1181 recognize as “democracy” or “a republic.” The Constitution was not even the first governing framework  
1182 of the fledgling United States. That distinction belonged to the Articles of Confederation, adopted by the  
1183 Continental Congress in 1777 (and ratified by the 13 states in 1781).<sup>38</sup> But within a few years, it became

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<sup>37</sup> For one comprehensive discussion of the Constitution’s history, including its uniqueness and history of amendments, see Akhil Reed Amar, *America’s Constitution: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> 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 Chicago Press, 2017).

1184 clear that the young country likely would not survive under the Articles of Confederation. There was no  
1185 effective executive power to enforce the national Congress' decisions, and the nation was in danger of  
1186 defaulting on its debts. The states had separate, often conflicting, policies (sometimes aimed at other  
1187 states) as well as separate currencies. These and other failures gave rise to the Constitution.

1188  
1189 The Constitution *was* unique in crucial ways. The 1788 Constitution makes no mention of God or religion  
1190 except to prohibit requiring religious tests for holding federal office. And for the first time in recorded  
1191 history, the governing document of a people had to be adopted (ratified) by people it would govern rather  
1192 than be imposed by a monarch, a sovereign state, or religious authority (Article 23).

1193  
1194 The Constitution also strives against the monopolization of power and pure self-interest by instituting  
1195 checks and balances across institutions and with the states. The structure of the new government was  
1196 explicitly designed to combat extreme self-interest, which the drafters had experienced both under a  
1197 parliamentary monarchy and among the states included in the Articles of Confederation.

1198  
1199 It was controversial to provide for a strong executive, as the Constitution did. Because of that, the framers  
1200 limited the executive branch, reserving certain matters for the legislature or the judiciary. Similarly, the  
1201 Constitution provides for an executive not elected by Congress, to limit Congress's power and influence.  
1202 In addition to reserving some areas of authority for states, the Constitution provided all states with equal  
1203 representation in the U.S. Senate to combat the fear that the larger states would ignore or destroy the  
1204 vitality of smaller states. The courts were established to settle disputes and interpret laws. The authority of  
1205 the courts was also checked by certain legislative and executive means.

1206  
1207 The Constitution is both grounding and aspirational. It serves as an example *and* points this society to  
1208 values and practices that the nation has fulfilled incompletely. Its preamble (or preface) clearly expresses  
1209 this government's purpose and provides a reference for assessing national faithfulness to that purpose:

1210  
1211 We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union,  
1212 establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence,  
1213 promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves  
1214 and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States  
1215 of America.

1216  
1217 These are secular standards for evaluating government that also give specificity to the  
1218 Christian question "Is the neighbor's well-being served?"

1219  
1220 **Article 23) The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: "we the people."  
1221 Politically, the people are sovereign, not a monarch or other authority imposing a government on  
1222 its people. The ratification of the Constitution itself enacts a preference for self-determination. Its  
1223 enactment was deeply flawed, since the enfranchised "people" in the late 1700s were largely limited  
1224 to white, property-owning males. The subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution have  
1225 expanded "we the people" to include people of color, women, and young adults.**

1226  
1227 The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: "we the people." Never before had  
1228 those who would be governed been required to vote their government into effect, to "ordain and  
1229 establish" it. "The people" would determine how they would be governed (and that vote was close in  
1230 some of the original 11 ratifying states). A clear preference for self-determination was inherent in the  
1231 Constitutional process, as much as or more so than in the Constitution itself.

1232  
1233 Much of the subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution made this preference for mutual self-  
1234 determination more explicit. At the time of ratification, "the people" were largely limited to free white

1235 men. Many states also imposed a property-owning qualification on the right to vote. Slavery was  
1236 recognized and accepted by the Constitution. Indeed, slaveholding states received additional  
1237 congressional representation through the constitutional clause counting slaves as three-fifths of a person,  
1238 even though those states denied slaves' personhood legally and gave them zero-fifths of a vote.

1239  
1240 Most members of Indigenous nations, who were noncitizens of the United States until 1924, had no say in  
1241 representation. Though American Indian sovereignty is recognized in the Constitution, that commitment  
1242 was blatantly ignored as states and the federal governments violated treaty after treaty, and it remains a  
1243 source of struggle today. Women had no universal right to vote in the United States until 1920.

1244  
1245 The preference for self-determination was thus partly realized in the Constitution and partly unrealized.  
1246 Amendments to the Constitution have tended to make that aspiration more effective by reducing the  
1247 number of groups who were "governed" without their "consent" (for instance, expanding the right to  
1248 vote).

1249  
1250 Regarding citizens of African descent, the Reconstruction amendments essentially said that the 1787  
1251 Constitution's "grand bargain" to preserve slavery got wrong who "we the people" should be. Later  
1252 amendments guaranteed the vote to women (1920) and young adults ages 18-20 (1971). Levying any tax  
1253 as a condition to vote was prohibited (1964). Except for the soon-repealed Prohibition amendment (1919,  
1254 the Eighteenth Amendment), every amendment related to the ability of citizens to participate in civic life,  
1255 or determine how they will live their own lives, has expanded, never limited, citizens' capacity for mutual  
1256 self-determination.

1257  
1258 **Article 24) The Constitution explicitly supports religious neutrality and diversity by forbidding**  
1259 **religious "tests" for U.S. officeholders. Had it not done so, the country would have been deprived of**  
1260 **the service of many, including notable U.S. presidents. The Constitution's choice was for religious**  
1261 **self-determination. The later First Amendment to the Constitution expressed neutrality toward**  
1262 **religion, thereby encouraging plurality of religion in society.**

1263  
1264 The 1788 Constitution made a firm decision for religious **pluralism**—the right of each person to practice  
1265 the religion of their choice—in Article VI: "No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to  
1266 any Office or public Trust under the United States." That was a radical choice because 11 of the 13 states  
1267 at that time had religious qualifications for public officials. The same attitude of neutrality and plurality  
1268 regarding religion was expressed in the very first words of the First Amendment to the Constitution  
1269 (discussed in Section IV), ratified as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

1270  
1271 The Constitution's choice to forbid religious tests was historically novel and has had momentous  
1272 consequences. For example, neither Thomas Jefferson nor Abraham Lincoln had any institutional  
1273 religious affiliation. A religious test would have left the country without their service and that of others  
1274 from non-Christian faith traditions or no faith tradition. The United States opened public offices to people  
1275 of all religions, as well to the nonreligious, and limited the ability of government to interfere with self-  
1276 determined religious choice.

1277  
1278 **Article 25) Governmental action can be evaluated by how well it grants power to those subject to it,**  
1279 **including the aim of mutual self-determination. Legitimate government action therefore includes**  
1280 **both coercive action and the positive production of power for its citizens. There are many examples**  
1281 **of this. This article identifies specific questions that we might ask when evaluating particular**  
1282 **governmental policies at the local, state, or federal levels.**

1283  
1284 The framers of the Constitution recognized that self-dealing by states under the Articles of Confederation  
1285 was already destroying the country and the states themselves. Humans continue to demonstrate, in greater

1286 or lesser measure, the tendency to want to dominate and control, to seek our advantage over our neighbor,  
1287 not for their power but, in the end, for our own. Theologically, this is part of the meaning we Lutherans  
1288 recognize in teaching that even the justified are also sinners.

1289  
1290 Article 21 explains that government is subject to the same impulses. Accordingly, governmental action  
1291 should be subject to the presumption that those governed have a right to identify what they see as their  
1292 needs. Here, too, that presumption can be overcome, and government can act coercively upon those who  
1293 are subject to it, particularly where those subjects are needlessly damaging others' capacity for self-  
1294 determination. That assessment is the source of much criminal law, for example.

1295  
1296 As the government acts to prevent harmful behavior, the government should also seek to share power in  
1297 ways to promote the common good. Examples of this communication of power and well-being include  
1298 compulsory school attendance, Social Security, regulations to incentivize accomplishing social goals, and  
1299 many more.

1300  
1301 A few of the questions to assess a government at federal, state, and local levels include: Has this act  
1302 opened room for the self-determination of those in its jurisdiction? Has this coercive authority adequately  
1303 protected valuable mutual self-determination to a reasonable extent? Has this regulatory authority made  
1304 the operation of the economy smoother than it otherwise would have been, so that those affected can live  
1305 their lives more fully? Has this action assisted or encouraged those who want to participate in civic life to  
1306 do so? Will the act do these things in the future? Does it effectively rectify failures of the past, especially  
1307 failures to include the marginalized?

1308  
1309 All of these are examples of asking whether, on balance, an action has increased or will increase the  
1310 power, mutual self-determination, and well-being of those affected by a government. The answers to  
1311 these questions provide the means for people of faith, and others, to enter into important civic  
1312 conversations about what is taking place in U.S. civic and political life.

1313  
1314 **Article 26) The United States is not a “Christian nation.” It was not founded on specifically**  
1315 **Christian principles, though Christians and Christianity did influence its ethos. The premise of the**  
1316 **Constitution and its ratification is that the sovereign is “we the people,” not “we the Christians.”**

1317  
1318 The religious diversity and neutrality of both the original Constitution and its First Amendment (see  
1319 Section IV) clearly reject past or present claims that the U.S. was founded as a “Christian nation.” During  
1320 George Washington’s first term this claim was explicitly addressed in a treaty, an act of state. It reads,  
1321 “The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian  
1322 Religion.”<sup>39</sup>

1323  
1324 Many people involved in the movement for U.S. independence and the ratification of the Constitution had  
1325 devout Christian faith, though others did not. The dominant religious practice of the times were certainly  
1326 Protestant, and this helped weave the founding social fabric with a Christian ethos. However, it must be  
1327 recognized that many who lived in and contributed to the establishment of the United States were not  
1328 Christian. They included people of various religions and worldviews.

1329  
1330 The ELCA gives thanks for many of the ways in which God worked through Christian individuals and in  
1331 that ethos. In this sense it is possible to speak of Christianity as contributing to the founding of this  
1332 country and to claim that the original U.S. ethos was influenced by Christianity. However, this church

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<sup>39</sup> 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](http://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.



1333 rejects the baseless claims that the U.S. was founded on specifically Christian beliefs or that the U.S.  
1334 Constitution is a result of special revelation, thus establishing a Christian nation. The Constitution  
1335 established that the nation’s sovereign is “we the people,” not just “we the faithful” or “we the  
1336 Christians.”

#### 1337 1338 1339 **IV. Religion and the First Amendment**

1340  
1341 **Article 27) The First Amendment to the Constitution begins: “Congress shall make no law**  
1342 **respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The first clause**  
1343 **(“no law respecting an establishment of religion”) is known as the establishment clause. The second**  
1344 **clause (“no law ... prohibiting the free exercise thereof”) is known as the free exercise clause.**  
1345 **Though these clauses are sometimes in tension, they both foster religious plurality, despite some**  
1346 **exceptions in historical practice in the United States.**

1347  
1348 The U.S. should never be claimed as a Christian nation. Yet the ELCA gives thanks that the founding  
1349 documents of our country do not exclude religious commitments from public life. The First Amendment  
1350 to the Constitution (ratified in 1791) begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of  
1351 religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

1352  
1353 The amendment’s first clause (“shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”) or  
1354 “establishment clause” was cut from the same cloth as the Constitution’s prohibition against religious  
1355 tests for public office. Government is not the church, and the church is not the government. Government  
1356 must not select one faith as “official” nor promote religion in general. Support for religion arises from the  
1357 people, not the government. Nonestablishment undergirds a vibrant religious plurality in the U.S., despite  
1358 historical examples of religious discrimination.

1359  
1360 The establishment clause also bars excessive government entanglement in religious institutions. For  
1361 example, the government has no authority to decide who is a fit minister or teacher of a faith or to  
1362 micromanage the governance of religious institutions. It does not say that a person’s religious  
1363 commitments cannot or should not be shared or visible in that individual’s civic life.

1364  
1365 The amendment’s second clause (“no law ... prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]”) or “free exercise  
1366 clause” means that government cannot prohibit individuals from worshiping, or not, in the manner each  
1367 sees fit.

1368  
1369 The establishment and free exercise clauses are sometimes in tension, and there are complex and  
1370 sometimes contradictory assertions about the nuances of their meaning. Nevertheless, their general intent  
1371 is clear. Government by the people means there is no favored religion. At the same time, government  
1372 cannot prohibit people from practicing their religions. The two clauses establish self-determination in  
1373 religious matters.

1374  
1375 As with all expressions of self-determination, there are limits to free exercise of religion. Free exercise is  
1376 not an absolute right. Otherwise, individuals and groups could claim anything they do as religious. There  
1377 are no general religious exemptions from laws designed for public safety or against harm to others, for  
1378 example. Religious liberty does not include the ability to injure the neighbor or violate the neighbor’s  
1379 civil rights.

1380  
1381 **Article 28) The establishment clause mandates the institutional distinction between religious bodies**  
1382 **and the state. The state may acknowledge the distinctiveness of religion but may not favor or**

1383 **disadvantage religion generally, or one religion in relation to another. There are two main**  
1384 **traditions of interpreting “nonestablishment,” and the ELCA takes no position on either while**  
1385 **affirming the institutional distinction between government and religion.**

1386  
1387 The ELCA is aware of a society wide concern about a shift in the interpretation regarding the  
1388 establishment clause. It is a contemporary struggle of traditions about the distinction between religion and  
1389 the state.

1390  
1391 Historically, the tradition of robust “separationism” prevailed during the life of ELCA predecessor bodies,  
1392 1960-1987, and is evident in their social teaching.<sup>40</sup> This separationist perspective emphasized the need  
1393 for government to act with secular purpose only.<sup>41</sup> A second historical interpretation focused on a  
1394 different U.S. tradition in which civil government promoted “non-sectarian Protestantism.” This view  
1395 contributed to the practice of establishing school prayer in “common” (public) schools. It is sometimes  
1396 called a “religionist” tradition and contends that the religion clauses should take into account a  
1397 community’s deeply held and widely shared religious convictions.

1398  
1399 The church’s fundamental concern in this social statement is not whether it should support either tradition  
1400 but that the critical distinctions between religion and civil society are always maintained. The state is not  
1401 an instrument of a common religion or tradition. The state may acknowledge the wide variety of religious  
1402 expression but is not responsible for, or a participant in, preserving and transmitting a particular religious  
1403 tradition.

1404  
1405 **Article 29) The Constitution’s prohibition against establishment of religion clears the ground for**  
1406 **the free exercise of religion secured by the free exercise clause (second clause). The two clauses**  
1407 **together promote religious plurality in the United States. Free exercise means that religious people**  
1408 **may enter public debate and decision-making with their religious convictions, as many abolitionists**  
1409 **and civil rights leaders and advocates have done. Free exercise is different than Christian freedom,**  
1410 **which, for Lutherans, arises solely from God’s promise of salvation and does not depend on any**  
1411 **specific political arrangement. Christian freedom is a matter of the gospel; free exercise of religion**  
1412 **is a matter of human law.**

1413  
1414 The relationship between faith and public life is more the focus of the free exercise clause. That  
1415 relationship is less constrained than the one between the state and established religions. In fact,  
1416 prohibiting the establishment of a religion clears the ground for plurality. Nonestablishment allows people  
1417 of various faiths to determine their own best way of connecting faith with their own public lives. It opens  
1418 space for self-determination. Prohibiting the practice of sharing religious values publicly would also have  
1419 deprived the U.S. public of much of the basis for the abolition of slavery and for the civil rights  
1420 movement, to name just two examples.

1421  
1422 It is critical to distinguish Christian freedom from the religious liberty guaranteed in the U.S.  
1423 Constitution. For Lutherans, the distinction is one between gospel and law. Christian freedom, given  
1424 through Christ, is a gift of God received by faith and does not depend on any particular political  
1425 arrangement. Arising from God’s promise of salvation, this is an eternal freedom from condemnation by

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<sup>40</sup> See [www.elca.org/Resources/Predecessor-Social-Teachings](http://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.

<sup>41</sup> *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),

1426 the demands of God that we do not fulfill. It also gives us the positive freedom to love God and neighbor.  
1427 Christian freedom has only indirect significance for organizations and individuals in the civil realm.<sup>42</sup>  
1428

1429 The Lutheran tradition teaches that Christian freedom includes the presumptive duty to obey civil law.  
1430 There are exceptions, such as circumstances when the law has become tyrannical and abusive, especially  
1431 to the most vulnerable. Then love may require something other than obedience to civil law.<sup>43</sup> But in  
1432 normal situations, Christians obey for the sake of the neighbor—for the sake of good civil order.  
1433

1434 **Article 30) The free exercise clause of the Constitution is a political good that, for the church, is**  
1435 **consistent with our belief in the creation of humans in the image of God. The free exercise clause**  
1436 **ensures the right to worship (or not) as each person desires. There are limits to free exercise,**  
1437 **including that a person’s free exercise does not unduly damage important public interests. At the**  
1438 **same time civic life is complex enough that sometimes it may require that civil laws and regulations**  
1439 **“accommodate” a religious adherent’s practice that would otherwise violate civil law.**  
1440

1441 Religious liberty (or religious freedom) as asserted in the First Amendment is a political term describing a  
1442 civil liberty. Historically, the ELCA considers it a gift from God developed through common human  
1443 faculties but with grounding in our creation in the image of God. Christians and other traditions together  
1444 assert the value of religious liberty in society as a political good. The idea of religious liberty thus  
1445 connects both of the religion clauses in the First Amendment.  
1446

1447 The free exercise clause assures individuals and religious communities the right to believe and worship,  
1448 or not, as they choose (provided that the form of worship does not unduly burden important public  
1449 interests). In addition, it assures the right to be free from compulsory statements of faith as a condition of  
1450 holding civil positions (public office tests were already forbidden in the 1788 Constitution). It also grants  
1451 freedom from religion-based discrimination that would bar people from receiving general public benefits  
1452 like public education or participating in general public programs operated on behalf of the state for a wide  
1453 range of human care programs, including adoption and foster care.  
1454

1455 In the complexity of civil life, the concept of religious liberty may sometimes require that civil laws and  
1456 regulations “accommodate” a religious adherent’s practice that would otherwise violate civil law. An  
1457 accommodation may be affirmative—one that permits the adherent to do something otherwise  
1458 prohibited.<sup>44</sup> Or the accommodation may be negative—one that allows the adherent to avoid performance  
1459 of some required act. Not all requested accommodations are justifiable, nor must all laws contain a  
1460 religious accommodation. Nonetheless, the idea of accommodations, when justifiable, plays a role in  
1461 religious liberty.  
1462

1463 **Article 31) The First Amendment does not prohibit or discourage the application of religious**  
1464 **convictions to public life. The phrase “separation of church and state” is not found in the First**  
1465 **Amendment and usually is shorthand for nonestablishment. Nonestablishment, however, was not**  
1466 **meant to prevent the free exercise of religion. Instead nonestablishment allows each person, without**  
1467 **fear of negative legal consequence, to determine for themselves their religious practice, including in**  
1468 **civic life. The two clauses of the First Amendment do not contradict each other. If nonestablishment**  
1469 **meant that religious commitments should not enter public life, religious people would be uniquely**

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<sup>42</sup> Other faiths or others who depend on natural moral knowledge express a different understanding of spiritual freedom.

<sup>43</sup> Apology, Article 16, BC 2000, 231.

<sup>44</sup> For example, churches were exempted from the Eighteenth Amendment during Prohibition so they could use wine for communion.

1470 **harmed. They would be the only people not allowed or encouraged to bring their highest**  
1471 **commitments to bear on public questions.**  
1472

1473 On the basis of the First Amendment, some, including religious people, believe that religious  
1474 commitments and claims stemming from religious values are out of bounds in public life. This can  
1475 include claims that there should be no interaction with or funding of religious organizations by the  
1476 government, or that discussion of government policies or political matters should never happen within  
1477 assemblies of believers.  
1478

1479 For support, some invoke the phrase “wall of separation” of church and state. This phrase, however, is not  
1480 in the Constitution<sup>45</sup> and should not be substituted for what the Constitution actually says.  
1481

1482 Though “separation” is an accurate description of the proper distinction between the roles of state and  
1483 church (see Section V), the Constitution does *not* suggest that religious individuals or communities should  
1484 keep their deepest beliefs out of public life. Not only would that suggestion conflict with the free exercise  
1485 clause, but it would also uniquely disadvantage religious people in that they—and they alone—would be  
1486 unable to bring their deeply held convictions to bear on public issues. Public life would be impoverished.  
1487 We need only recall the specifically religious invocations of many slavery abolitionists and participants in  
1488 the civil rights movement for example.  
1489

1490 We should not, then, reduce the proper relationship of personal religious commitment to political and  
1491 civic life merely to the proper relationship of “church” (or other religious institutions) and state. At the  
1492 same time, personal religious commitment may be guided in civic life by the constructive relationships  
1493 that religious organizations hold with political bodies. The next section addresses the character and  
1494 boundaries of such constructive relationships.  
1495  
1496

## 1497 **V. Describing the Constructive Relationships of Religious Organizations** 1498 **and Political Authority** 1499

1500 **Article 32) The ELCA holds that the constructive relationship of religion and political authority is**  
1501 **summarized by the phrase “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining**  
1502 **institutional separation of religious organizations and institutions in a relation of functional**  
1503 **interaction.” This summary description (codified in the ELCA constitution) provides guidance for**  
1504 **the ELCA’s corporate life and for individuals.**  
1505

1506 As God’s people pray for God’s will to be done on earth, it is necessary to set forth ELCA teaching about  
1507 the constructive relationship of religious organizations to political authority and as a guide for individuals  
1508 in their civic life. The U.S. Constitution, including the First Amendment, neither prohibits nor requires  
1509 that religious institutions actively engage in civic and political life. The Constitution leaves those  
1510 decisions mostly to religious institutions themselves.  
1511

1512 What is the ELCA’s view of its relationship with government? This church holds that the holistic  
1513 Christian message, comprising law and gospel, includes a message to be spoken to public matters as well  
1514 as private life.<sup>46</sup> The social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* expressed this living

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

<sup>46</sup> *The Church in Society*, 1.

1515 tension: As a church (and as Christian citizens) who are dwelling in, but are not of, this society, we also  
1516 take to heart God’s gift that earthly sovereignty resides in “we, the people.”

1517  
1518 These beliefs intersect to undergird the ELCA’s contemporary understanding that God calls us to “work  
1519 with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state  
1520 in a relation of functional interaction.”<sup>47</sup>

1521  
1522 That summary phrase reinforces the idea that the functions of religious organizations and of political  
1523 authority are distinct: the state does not run religious institutions and religious institutions do not control  
1524 the state. At the same time, religious organizations and institutions share spaces of mutual concern and  
1525 action with government. The ELCA holds that the functional interactions should be governed by  
1526 institutional boundaries created on the one side by the particular purpose and competence of government  
1527 and on the other side by the particular purpose and competence of religious faith and institutions.

1528  
1529 **Article 33) The directive to “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor” follows from**  
1530 **both our faith’s commitment to join God’s work in civic life and the sovereignty of “we the people.”**  
1531 **The purpose of citizenship is summed up in the preamble to the Constitution—to promote the**  
1532 **general welfare. “Working with” seeks to address human needs, which can involve critical**  
1533 **challenges such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people or God’s**  
1534 **creation.**

1535  
1536 The phrase “work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor” makes clear that the church should  
1537 deal with political authority actively and flexibly. Theologically, “work with…” points to the Lutheran  
1538 understanding of God’s two hands in which God calls religious organizations to join divine activity in  
1539 society. The Triune God, our all-encompassing source and commitment, works in society and calls us to  
1540 public action.

1541  
1542 The relationship with political authority is not cozy. Sometimes, to be sure, “working with” affirms the  
1543 mutual endeavor of addressing human needs. Sometimes, however, “working with” entails critical  
1544 challenges such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people and the earth.

1545  
1546 This church also understands “work with” as grounded in the foundational commitment that sovereignty  
1547 in the United States rests in “we the people.” It is fair to say that the purpose of citizenship is summed up  
1548 in the preamble to the Constitution—to promote the general welfare.<sup>48</sup> These constitutional underpinnings  
1549 allow the people and their social institutions to work with governing authorities to that end. Citizenship  
1550 implies a promise and opportunity to seek both the welfare of all residents at every level of civic life.

1551  
1552 **Article 34) The phrase “maintaining institutional separation of church and state” does not point to**  
1553 **an absolute separation of public (government) versus private (religious) arenas. Rather it points to**  
1554 **the importance of preserving the functional integrity of independent political authority and**  
1555 **religious institutions. Christ’s church should not bless any particular political theory; no political**  
1556 **system or theory is final or ultimate. To the extent that U.S. government is formed for the general**  
1557 **welfare and guided by good principles, whether rooted in Christian ideas or not, it should be**  
1558 **affirmed. It is for these reasons that our church objects to religious bodies endorsing or supporting**  
1559 **candidates or parties, or exercising partisanship in any way. At the same time, religious bodies and**  
1560 **individuals have a responsibility to call government to account, especially when it fails in its**  
1561 **function to provide for all peoples such “goods” as human rights, economic justice, and the like.**

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<sup>47</sup> “Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (2022), 4.03.n., [www.elca.org/constitution](http://www.elca.org/constitution).

<sup>48</sup> Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, [constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble](http://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble).

1562 The phrase “maintaining institutional separation of church and state” does not point to the separation of  
1563 public (government) versus private (religious) arenas. Rather it points to preserving the functional  
1564 integrity of both independent political authority and religious institutions, based on their distinctive  
1565 purposes and organization principles and their powers and competences.  
1566

1567 The integrity of the phrase “in a relation of functional interaction” depends on this understanding of  
1568 proper function and jurisdiction. Civic institutions have no competence to teach religion, no authority to  
1569 coerce faith in God. Conversely, religious faith does not provide revelatory or other special knowledge  
1570 beyond common human faculties regarding the practical policies or means for government’s work. To the  
1571 extent that the U.S. government is formed for the general welfare and guided by good principles, whether  
1572 rooted in Christian ideas or not, it should be affirmed.  
1573

1574 Religious organizations, then, cross the boundaries of their role when they campaign for parties or  
1575 candidates or assert specific legislation or policies as if these were God’s plan. Religious communities are  
1576 mistaken when they identify a particular political movement as God’s or claim divine revelation for the  
1577 Constitution, or identify the U.S. experience with salvation history. No political system or theory is divine  
1578 or ultimate. This teaching applies to Christianity, the dominant religious expression in the United States,  
1579 and also to other religious traditions.  
1580

1581 For these reasons, this church, unlike some Christian churches, teaches that it is not the church’s role to  
1582 endorse candidates or parties. The ELCA also recognizes the legal soundness of the Johnson  
1583 Amendment<sup>49</sup> in prohibiting religious bodies or their representatives from verbally or financially  
1584 supporting candidates or parties. Individual parishioners may, of course, advocate for specific candidates  
1585 and parties on the basis of religious values and common criteria but should not claim to do so as  
1586 spokespeople for a church.  
1587

1588 At the same time, this dynamic, function-driven approach *encourages* the public contribution of religious  
1589 values for the sake of society’s good. The ELCA teaches that religious communities may speak publicly  
1590 about their values to express support for policies and legislation that seem to support the well-being of all  
1591 better than alternative legislation or policy. This church, for example, assesses and speaks to how policies  
1592 will affect those who are hungry (Matthew 25:35).  
1593

1594 **Article 35) Rostered ministers face particular issues regarding the relationship of the church and**  
1595 **political authority because of their divine office to preach and teach both law and gospel. Rostered**  
1596 **ministers also are public figures because they lead public institutions and have a valuable role to**  
1597 **play as leaders in civil society. The ELCA affirms these intersecting roles as right and salutary**  
1598 **while also recognizing that any given scriptural text or any given social and political situation is**  
1599 **complex and multilayered and requires discernment from multiple perspectives. Rostered leaders,**  
1600 **then, should be attuned to their community or public setting in offering guidance and aiding**  
1601 **discernment practices as assemblies determine how to participate in civic life. When they speak on**  
1602 **public issues, their words should be rooted in the Scriptures and are to be governed by official**  
1603 **ELCA teaching. Though there necessarily is a public face to the rostered role, this does not justify**  
1604 **partisanship, such as telling members how to vote. Our church provides guidance for churches and**  
1605 **congregations regarding participation in the electoral process.**

1606 The tasks of maintaining institutional separation in a relation of functional interaction create particular  
1607 issues for rostered ministers entrusted with the ministries of Word and Sacrament or Word and Service  
1608 because of their calling to preach and teach both law and gospel. This living word, through the power of  
1609 the Holy Spirit, can transform lives as Christ begins to take shape in us. The theological (second use) of

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<sup>49</sup> 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.

1610 the law convicts us of our individual *and* collective sins, and that includes naming social and structural  
1611 evils. Preaching and teaching the civil (first) use of the law necessarily raises questions about whether a  
1612 society—individually and corporately—is failing to fulfill the common good. The gospel frees us to serve  
1613 the neighbor through civic participation.

1614  
1615 In this sense it is the calling of rostered leaders (deacons, pastors, and bishops) to connect the meaning of  
1616 the faith and contemporary issues. There are necessarily, then, appropriate kinds of civic and political  
1617 implications to their calling, as was true of Jesus (Article 17). The ELCA affirms this as right and salutary  
1618 while also recognizing that any given scriptural text and any given social and political situation is  
1619 complex, multilayered and requires discernment from multiple perspectives.<sup>50</sup> The rostered minister’s  
1620 calling is not limited to preaching alone. Adult forums and the like provide valuable occasions for  
1621 injecting biblical and church social teaching into discussion and discernment.

1622  
1623 The ELCA’s role in civic and political involvement depends significantly on laypeople in their lives as  
1624 citizens and the ways they bring their discipleship into civic life. At the same time, rostered ministers are  
1625 public figures because they lead public institutions and have a valuable role to play as leaders in civic life.  
1626 They often serve as the public face of their worshiping assembly and have the responsibility to represent  
1627 the assemblies’ life experiences and perspectives, woven together with their pastoral experiences and  
1628 theological training.

1629  
1630 Rostered leaders, then, should be attuned to their community or public setting in offering guidance and  
1631 discernment practices as assemblies determine how to participate in civic life. They also are charged to  
1632 speak on public issues as rooted in Scripture and governed by official social teaching. Though there  
1633 necessarily is a public face to the rostered role, this does not justify the practice of partisanship, such as  
1634 telling members how to vote regarding candidates or parties. Our church provides guidance for churches  
1635 and congregations regarding participation in the electoral process.<sup>51</sup>

1636  
1637 **Article 36) The directive to “work with civil authorities ... in a relationship of institutional**  
1638 **separation, with functional interaction” suggests a constructive relationship but must be guarded**  
1639 **by neutrality among partners. It also is commended as a public proposal for a healthy approach**  
1640 **between all religious bodies and political authority in the United States.**

1641  
1642 The consistent principle of the ELCA has been to “work with civil authorities ... in a relationship of  
1643 institutional separation, with functional interaction.” Our church is grateful for the interaction with  
1644 government that is possible because of religious liberty. It should be noted that the church and other  
1645 nonprofits in the U.S. have become increasingly dependent on aid from public entities. The crucial  
1646 criterion for maintaining the appropriate relationship is that selected government support for faith-based  
1647 social services is possible when religious organizations serve people without regard to their faith. ELCA  
1648 ministries meeting this criterion include chaplaincy in armed services, correctional institutions, hospitals,  
1649 and other care facilities.

1650  
1651 “Institutional separation” maintains a complicated protection that enables support while insisting on the  
1652 distinction between religion and civil authority. This is not a “wall of separation,” but to maintain the  
1653 distinction, the ELCA holds that:

- 1654 • Government must not fund programs that discriminate between religions in providing their  
1655 services and benefits.

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<sup>50</sup> 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.

<sup>51</sup> See [download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Being\\_A\\_Public\\_Church.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Being_A_Public_Church.pdf).

- 1656
- 1657
- 1658
- 1659
- 1660
- 1661
- 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.

1662 This dynamic, function-driven interactionist relationship<sup>52</sup> has guided constructive, valuable interactions  
1663 between the ELCA and political authority. Our church will continue to be so guided. As a church we also  
1664 commend this approach as salutary for consideration by other religious bodies in interaction with political  
1665 authority in the U.S.  
1666

1667 **Article 37) The ELCA understanding of civic life and faith is at odds with Christian nationalism**  
1668 **because the latter seeks to fuse the exercise of political authority with a selected set of supposed**  
1669 **“Christian” ideals. It also asserts that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United**  
1670 **States. Such core beliefs represent a political ideology of religious nationalism, whether explicitly**  
1671 **acknowledged or not. In its hardline strains, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are**  
1672 **considered genuine U.S. citizens. Christian nationalists pledge allegiance to their version of the**  
1673 **United States, first making the U.S. into an idol and seeing God’s plan in U.S. society as including**  
1674 **only those whose religious beliefs fuse with a certain view of that society.**  
1675

1676 In contrast to the constructive approach used by the ELCA, which balances institutional separation with  
1677 functional interaction, there is a distorted approach gaining traction at the time of this writing: Christian  
1678 nationalism. In public forums this term is used to mean various things, but among its core beliefs are  
1679 that.<sup>53</sup>

- 1680
- 1681
- 1682
- 1683
- 1684
- 1685
- 1686
- 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.

1687 The constellation of such beliefs represents a political ideology of religious nationalism, whether  
1688 explicitly stated or not. Christian nationalist belief seeks to fuse selected Christian ideas about what  
1689 should be the national way of life with a comprehensive cultural framework. That framework incorporates  
1690 selective narratives, practices, symbols, and value systems. “In a Christian nation, social power is placed  
1691 in the service of the Christian religion,”<sup>54</sup> and Christian nationalism seeks to legislatively implement its  
1692 framework.  
1693

1694 The supporters of Christian nationalism may not identify with every belief or perspective in this holistic  
1695 ideology, but they are adamant about many of these values and beliefs. Conversely, acceptance of an idea  
1696 also held by Christian nationalists does not make one a Christian nationalist. For example, one might  
1697 believe that God’s providence includes a role for one’s country without being a Christian nationalist. That  
1698 can be true if one also believes (against Christian nationalism) that other nations have equally valuable  
1699 roles and that, therefore, God’s will cannot be reduced to special privilege for one’s own nation.  
1700

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<sup>52</sup> The designation “function-driven interactionist approach” is found in Roger A. Willer, “Religious Organizations and Government: An Ecclesial Lutheran ‘Take,’” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 62:1, spring 2023.

<sup>53</sup> 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.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2022), 208.



1701 Proponents or benign supporters of Christian nationalism range from those who believe Congress should  
1702 declare the U.S. a Christian nation (approximately 29% of the U.S. population<sup>55</sup>) to those people involved  
1703 in more virulent strains that are overtly racist, patriarchal, and authoritarian.<sup>56</sup> In hardline strains only  
1704 white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens. Christian nationalism, thus,  
1705 denies the U.S. motto, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one.) Hardline Christian nationalism effectively  
1706 substitutes “we the (self-declared) true Christians” for “we the people.”  
1707

1708 Christian nationalism does not reflect Christlike values or other values found throughout the Scriptures. It  
1709 fuses a particular form of human government and a nation (and sometimes a race) with a vision of God’s  
1710 ultimate will, something Jesus explicitly rejects (John 18:36). It perverts the Christian message in cherry-  
1711 picking texts that interpret the Scriptures in ways that connect it to domination, even coercion.  
1712  
1713

## 1714 VI. Addressing Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life

1715  
1716 **Article 38) The following articles address selected contemporary issues about civic life, grounded in**  
1717 **the themes and insights above. These do not revisit questions the ELCA has already addressed in**  
1718 **existing statements or messages and are not intended to be comprehensive. Some articles here offer**  
1719 **definitive conclusions whereas others establish parameters that enable continued discernment on**  
1720 **the part of our church.**

1721  
1722 As we pray to discern God’s will for today, our church addresses particular issues in contemporary civic  
1723 life through its social teaching. For example, the 2020 social message “Government and Civic  
1724 Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy,” requested as a resource for use during election cycles, dealt  
1725 with contemporary problems such as the widespread breakdown of trust in government and provided  
1726 criteria for assessing the work of government, among other concerns.  
1727

1728 Since 1988 social statements have addressed nearly every facet of contemporary life: economics, criminal  
1729 justice, science and human power, war and the military-industrial complex, sexuality and family, health  
1730 care, and others (visit [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements)). ELCA social messages have spoken to civic and  
1731 political concerns such as human rights, terrorism, community violence, and others  
1732 ([www.elca.org/socialmessages](http://www.elca.org/socialmessages)). ELCA social policy resolutions, adopted by ELCA assemblies, have  
1733 addressed narrow policy questions. Some, for instance, speak to voter apathy, racially motivated  
1734 restrictions to voting, and gerrymandering ([www.elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society](http://www.elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society)).  
1735

1736 The issues addressed in this section do not revisit questions the ELCA has already addressed and  
1737 therefore are not intended to be comprehensive. Rather they supplement the existing teaching of this  
1738 church, grounded in the themes, insights, and criteria developed earlier in this statement.  
1739

1740 **Article 39) Hyper-partisan polarization is rampant in the United States, harming both individuals**  
1741 **and the social fabric. The U.S. political system appropriately involves, of course, the presence and**  
1742 **efforts of partisan activity. Unfortunately, today, social dynamics have taken partisanship to**  
1743 **unhealthy levels that damage democratic interaction rather than foster respectful, responsible give**  
1744 **and take. Many accept this winner-take-all approach as right or as, at least, unavoidable. Such**  
1745 **approaches threaten the fabric of our nation and the lives of those in it. These threats are often felt**

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<sup>55</sup> Whitehead, 6, cited from the 2017 Baylor Religion Report.

<sup>56</sup> For a psychologist’s discussion of how and why people are drawn in by extremist belief, see Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).

1746 **most keenly by the marginalized. The ELCA calls for a different approach as both necessary and**  
1747 **possible for a vital common life in which all can participate.**  
1748

1749 One widespread and troubling reality in the United States at this time is hyper-partisan polarization,  
1750 which continues to increase and does significant damage to individuals and the social fabric. The U.S. has  
1751 seen times of acute polarization in its past and experienced immense harm. The Civil War is an example.  
1752

1753 What seems on the rise when compared to our recent past is a type of separation and opposition for which  
1754 this statement uses the term “hyper-partisan polarization,” which is different from the simply partisan.  
1755 The U.S. political system has almost always included the active presence and work of partisan activity.  
1756 Though parties are fallible, the system itself provides an avenue for organizing, educating, and advocating  
1757 for issues of political concern. In much of U.S. history and the recent past, this partisanship did not bar  
1758 cross-party work or even friendships. Parties commonly formed coalitions, made compromises, and could  
1759 work together toward their overlapping views of the common good. Working together often forged more  
1760 effective ideas than working alone.  
1761

1762 At the time of writing, a quite different hyper-partisan polarization is widespread and at work even in  
1763 normal government efforts. Political identity now is often closely linked with other identifications such as  
1764 ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, race, urban or rural residence, cable news preference, and even  
1765 restaurants and stores frequented. Overlapping interests are increasingly overwhelmed by rigid us-versus-  
1766 them identities. It is harder to create collegial—and even familial—relationships despite political  
1767 difference, or to recognize commonalities despite differences in political affinity. Our social linkages  
1768 become constellations of identifications and may be designated “mega-identities.”<sup>57</sup>  
1769

1770 These mega-identities take partisanship to new levels—to hyper-partisanship—reinforced by cable news  
1771 preference, social media echo-chambers, the assertions of elected officials (especially at the federal level),  
1772 and other factors. Those reinforcements are also accompanied by a “nationalization” of issues and an  
1773 oversize focus on those issues. Local campaigns are becoming overwhelmed by outside money and,  
1774 though there is a lot of vibrant discussion of, say, zoning policy at the local level, those vibrant  
1775 democratic discussions get little play in the media.  
1776

1777 The result is that loyalty to hyper-partisan identities becomes absolute. These identities are considered  
1778 necessary to one’s family safety, to protection from “them,” to the survival of core values or “our way of  
1779 life.” Not incidental is the frequent assumption of my or my group’s innocence and the guilt, even evil, of  
1780 those not part of that identity. Sin is no longer widespread; it is almost exclusively “over there.”  
1781

1782 The problem is that loyalty to a mega-identity has become oversize and has taken on huge emotional  
1783 stakes. Crucially, hyper-partisan polarization is practiced as “zero-sum power,” as a winner-take-all  
1784 struggle for domination. Those with alternative perspectives are designated as enemies rather than fellow  
1785 citizens with a different view.  
1786

1787 Many today are cynical, as if polarization is unavoidable. It is certainly a reality, and many accept such  
1788 outsized loyalty and harsh practices as necessary, or even right and good. Such hyper-partisan animosity  
1789 threatens the fabric of our nation and the lives of those in it, especially the marginalized.  
1790

1791 The ELCA teaches that a different approach is both possible and necessary for a productive common life  
1792 in which all can participate. There is a better path forward than one motivated primarily by fear of others

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<sup>57</sup> 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).

1793 (and belief in the greater purity of one’s own group) or one practiced in rancorous attack and hyper-  
1794 partisan animosity. These are vices to be confronted, both within the church and within the wider society.  
1795

1796 This alternative approach is not primarily about tolerance but about respectful engagement. Article 14  
1797 describes how practicing discernment together is a gift for civic life and a witness to God’s love because  
1798 it models how people with opposing views can give priority to the practice of careful listening and  
1799 respect.

1800  
1801 For Christians, our identity in Christ as forgiven sinners undercuts any polarization and urges love for  
1802 every person as a creature of God who is not to be dominated and whose well-being we should try to  
1803 improve. Our Christian identity encourages us to take seriously both our well-considered perspectives *and*  
1804 the limitations of our knowledge, thoughtfulness, empathy, and goodwill.

1805  
1806 Therefore, our identity in Christ encourages careful listening to others who also have well-considered  
1807 perspectives, which may be quite different from our own. The presumption of self-determination and the  
1808 criterion of mutual self-determination similarly require the starting point of listening (Article 21). These  
1809 are comparable to values aspired to in the U.S. Constitution—truly democratic values, commitment to  
1810 diversity, and the public good of all. The objective is to search for and find constructive ways to enhance  
1811 the well-being of human society and the wider creation.

1812  
1813 On that basis, the ELCA calls for an end to the practices that contribute to hyper-partisan polarization.  
1814 We, both as a society and as a church, must end any winner-take-all mindset, which approaches our  
1815 common life together as if it were a football game. We must not accept hyper-partisan polarization and its  
1816 practices to be inevitable. Political opponents are not enemies simply because they have a different  
1817 opinion of what is the best course forward for a specific issue or because they travel in different social  
1818 circles.

1819  
1820 It is possible to face difference without aggression and with an eye to the common good. It is even  
1821 possible to close gaps between us by an exchange of values and ideas that changes *all* participants for the  
1822 better. The solutions we come up with together are often better because of collaboration. Most of us know  
1823 that from personal and social experience—there is no reason our political experience should be different.  
1824

1825 **Article 40) Civic leaders bear a particular responsibility to seek constructive debate and solutions.**  
1826 **Civic leaders include a wide array of individuals beyond just elected officials or heads of media. To**  
1827 **bring people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that**  
1828 **hinders careful listening among neighbors. They should offer models of vigorous and constructive**  
1829 **civic leadership.**

1830  
1831 In our current polarized context, civic thought and opinion leaders and information sources bear a  
1832 particular responsibility to work toward constructive debate and solutions. While this is the responsibility  
1833 of each of us, individuals and groups look to thought and opinion leaders and information sources to  
1834 negotiate life in a fast-paced, information-saturated society. U.S. residents look to both certified and  
1835 unconventional experts, and both are influential in shaping the values and behaviors of the public.

1836  
1837 Civic thought leaders do not always see themselves as such, but leadership comes in many forms and  
1838 exists in many forums. Elected and publicly appointed leaders are obvious. However, civic thought  
1839 leaders include community league coaches, social media influencers, news reporters, religious ministers,  
1840 activists, think tank staff, the heads of nonprofit and volunteer organizations, and many others.

1841  
1842 A healthy society requires such leaders to be models of vigorous and constructive participation. To bring  
1843 people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that hinders

1844 conscientious listening among neighbors. Civil disagreement about issues and the interpretation and  
1845 relative importance of facts is important, but inflammatory rhetoric and personal attacks have no place in  
1846 the public arena. Our society needs to be a place of informed public dialogue enabling people to hear one  
1847 another and find solutions.

1848  
1849 The ELCA commends leaders that model such practices, which are essential to honest analysis and  
1850 creative solutions to social problems. Our church also encourages associations, think tanks, and other  
1851 sources of analysis and information to seek to understand cultural and political differences as a crucial  
1852 step toward building political accommodation and fact-based negotiation.

1853  
1854 **Article 41) Robust and constructive civic engagement in today’s society depends on clear distinction**  
1855 **between fact and various forms of misinformation, from falsehoods to exaggeration. Avoiding**  
1856 **forms of false statement is a civic responsibility for both providers and users of social media.**  
1857 **Christians should be “innocent as doves” when it comes interpreting the intentions of the neighbor**  
1858 **but “wise as serpents” (Matthew 10:16) when it comes to discerning what information they**  
1859 **encounter in any media. For the sake of U.S. civic life, the ELCA calls upon social media platforms**  
1860 **to take responsibility to align policies and procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and**  
1861 **rigorous online protocol available.**

1862  
1863 The saying is hundreds of years old that “falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it,”<sup>58</sup> but it is  
1864 widely acknowledged that the spread of lies, rumor, and ignorance in civic life has reached new levels  
1865 today, particularly through social media. In one study, researchers found that falsehoods were 70% more  
1866 likely to be re-shared on a social media platform (X, formerly Twitter) than true statements. Moreover,  
1867 people were more likely to repeat or amplify a false statement than automated bots were.<sup>59</sup>

1868  
1869 Robust and constructive civic engagement in today’s society depends on clear distinction between fact  
1870 and various forms of misinformation, from falsehoods to exaggeration. The reach of social media, the  
1871 lack of clarity about the origins of many of its posts, and the ability of AI to conjure utterly false images  
1872 and video all necessitate strong self-regulation by social and other media platforms. If self-regulation is  
1873 not sufficiently robust, government intervention may be appropriate.

1874  
1875 The Eighth Commandment directs people of faith to exert efforts against bearing false witness. The  
1876 Catechism teaches that “we are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors,  
1877 betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of  
1878 them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” Our church, then, encourages us all to  
1879 ask, in every personal interaction and on social media, whether our words or those we repeat represent the  
1880 best possible understanding of our neighbor.

1881  
1882 We should be “innocent as doves” when it comes interpreting the intentions of our neighbor but “wise as  
1883 serpents” (Matthew 10:16) when it comes to discerning what information we encounter in any media. We  
1884 should not share:

- 1885 • Sensationalist headlines.
- 1886 • Insulting memes.
- 1887 • Information whose source we cannot verify.
- 1888 • Information from sources whose purpose or chief likely effect is to stir up anger or hate and  
1889 to undermine, rather than foster, our civic unity.

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<sup>58</sup> This saying is attributed to satirist Jonathan Swift, Anglican cleric (1667-1745).

<sup>59</sup> 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](https://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.

- 1890 For the sake of U.S. civic life, the ELCA also calls upon social media platforms to:
- 1891 • Align policies and procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and rigorous online
  - 1892 safety regulations available,
  - 1893 • Regularly assess and publicly disclose the extent to which their platforms may be involved in
  - 1894 violations of civil and human rights,
  - 1895 • Allow oversight of operations in human rights hotspots,
  - 1896 • Allow transparency in their algorithms and advertisements,
  - 1897 • Regularly assess, report on, and address hate speech and misinformation on their platforms,
  - 1898 removing such hate speech and misinformation as quickly as possible.
  - 1899

1900 **Article 42) Financial contributions to political campaigns are a form of free speech protected by the**  
 1901 **First Amendment and a significant part of campaigning that demonstrate a level of commitment**  
 1902 **consistent with the donor’s views. The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity**  
 1903 **to play a free and active part in the foundation of our communities. Therefore, we are concerned**  
 1904 **that being heard should not be effectively limited to those individuals and organizations who have**  
 1905 **overwhelming financial wealth and resources at their disposal. The ELCA urges legislation by state**  
 1906 **and federal lawmakers to set reasonable limits on campaign contributions and increase**  
 1907 **transparency in our elections and financial reporting by public officials.**  
 1908

1909 In the political sphere, money plays an indispensable role. Individuals, corporations, lobbyists, PACs,  
 1910 super PACs, nonprofits, and interest groups spend money to influence political campaigns. Contributions  
 1911 may be disbursed in a variety of ways including political advertising to influence public opinion on  
 1912 candidates and ballot measures. Public officials are generally required by law to report on their personal  
 1913 finances to ensure that ethical guidelines are followed. So-called “dark money,” or funds raised by  
 1914 nonprofit organizations that are not required to disclose the identities of their donors, is known to be spent  
 1915 to influence elections, public policy, and political discourse.  
 1916

1917 The ELCA recognizes that financial contributions to political campaigns are a form of free speech  
 1918 protected by the First Amendment. Publicly accountable contributions are both legal and a significant part  
 1919 of campaigning that demonstrate a level of commitment consistent with the donor’s views. Historically,  
 1920 laws have included reporting requirements that may require disclosure of a contributor’s name, address,  
 1921 and occupation. Individuals who choose to engage in contributing are expected to adhere to the  
 1922 appropriate laws and consider the implications such disclosures could have with their employer(s) or  
 1923 other entities. While some federal, state, and local laws continue to limit the sources and contribution  
 1924 limits for elections at their respective levels, it is widely recognized that recent Supreme Court rulings  
 1925 have altered the system of campaign finance.<sup>60</sup>  
 1926

1927 The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity to play a free and active part in the  
 1928 foundation of our communities. This ability should not be effectively limited to those individuals and  
 1929 organizations who have overwhelming financial wealth and resources at their disposal. Democracy is  
 1930 threatened if only those with the most means (disposable income and time) have the dominant voice with  
 1931 politicians while others, especially those who are less well off, are effectively silenced. Free speech does  
 1932 not include the right to drown out the speech of one’s neighbors. To do so is to violate God’s intention for  
 1933 abundant life for all.  
 1934

1935 This church urges legislation by state and federal lawmakers to set reasonable limits on campaign  
 1936 contributions and increase transparency in our elections and financial reporting by public officials. It is up

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<sup>60</sup> 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.

1937 to legislators to take steps that limit the hidden and overpowering corporate and super PAC money given  
1938 to political action committees that distort the political debate and influence our representatives. Our  
1939 church urges policies and reforms that help:<sup>61</sup>

- 1940 • Enhance transparency and increase public awareness of campaign contributions and financial
- 1941 reporting by public officials.
- 1942 • Expand access for citizens across the economic spectrum to run for political office.
- 1943 • Reduce the influence of money in shaping political debates and media, including political
- 1944 advertising.

1945  
1946 **Article 43) This statement recognizes that governmental policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial**  
1947 **opinions sometimes do more harm to the well-being of all than to promote it. Harm results from**  
1948 **poorly conceived and implemented policies and from intentional actions that discriminate against**  
1949 **some in favor of others. All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to**  
1950 **its purpose of protecting and fostering the good of all. Citizens and residents also have an obligation**  
1951 **to seek reform through the procedures of democratic self-rule.**

1952  
1953 ELCA teaching has long held that it is the proper concern of government to regulate aspects of social life  
1954 in order to provide for the safety and well-being of its people. For example, government must serve as a  
1955 referee in economic life to protect consumers and check harmful inequalities of wealth and power.<sup>62</sup>

1956  
1957 This statement recognizes that sometimes government policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial opinions  
1958 harm well-being more than they promote it. Harm results from poorly conceived and implemented  
1959 policies and from intentional actions that discriminate against some in favor of others.

1960  
1961 There is a critical distinction between fallible structure and structured oppression. Government is fallible  
1962 because it is made up of humans. It has not served its purpose when its goals, policies, and programs are  
1963 poorly designed or implemented, or cause undue waste or hardship. In contrast, government becomes  
1964 oppressive when its goals, policies, and programs are designed or transformed into vehicles for  
1965 oppressing the neighbor—such as voter suppression laws and gerrymandering.

1966  
1967 All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of protecting and  
1968 fostering the well-being of all. Public partnerships between nonprofits (including faith-based  
1969 organizations) and the private sector can be means to enhance the work of both partners when dedicated  
1970 to the common good. Finally, citizens and residents have an obligation to seek reform when government  
1971 goes astray through the procedures of democratic self-rule.

1972  
1973 It is not possible for this church, or any civic actor, to identify a complete set of ethical norms that apply  
1974 in all cases for discerning failures in civic and political life. Some criteria for discernment are elaborated  
1975 in Articles 25 of this statement and in previous ELCA social messages and social statements.<sup>63</sup> However,  
1976 at a minimum, discernment regarding these everyday but weighty questions should strive to include the  
1977 perspectives of those affected as well as fair representation of those served, because that is the starting  
1978 point for mutual self-determination and deciding whether the neighbor is being well-served.

1979

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<sup>61</sup> For more see the ELCA document at [download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCAvotesMoneyReissue.pdf?\\_ga=2.187824555.2057898085.1695207063-2124814884.1671473207](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCAvotesMoneyReissue.pdf?_ga=2.187824555.2057898085.1695207063-2124814884.1671473207).

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, the ELCA social statement *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, cited above, 7-10.

<sup>63</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements).



1980 **Article 44) The ELCA has members in Washington, D.C., and in several of the U.S. territories. For**  
1981 **this reason our church is attuned to the problematic relationship between the United States and its**  
1982 **nonincorporated territories. We recognize complicating factors that include a legacy of racism**  
1983 **because the vast majority of local residents in the territories belong to racially minoritized groups.**  
1984 **We also recognize that the issues are complex. The principle of mutual self-determination dictates**  
1985 **humble, intentional listening as the first step toward justice and healing.**

1986  
1987 The ELCA has significant membership in Washington, D.C., and several of the U.S. territories, e.g.,  
1988 Guam, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands.<sup>64</sup> The  
1989 ELCA's Caribbean Synod, in fact, consists largely of these territories. This fact and the lives of millions  
1990 of people in these areas urge our church to discern the responsibility of the United States for these areas  
1991 under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Congress as possessions or unincorporated territories.<sup>65</sup> The ELCA  
1992 recognizes that issues pertaining to the relationship between these territories and the wider U.S. society  
1993 are manifold and complex, but they must not be ignored.

1994  
1995 Many view the political relationship between the U.S. government and its nonincorporated territories as  
1996 problematic because of the inherent inequality between the territories and the states. There is also the  
1997 specter of continued colonial-style relationships in which territories lack any real power for self-  
1998 determination. Territories get a representative in Congress with voice but no vote, despite residents being  
1999 required to sign up for military selective service and having a long and distinguished record of service to  
2000 the U.S. in general. Territorial residents pay taxes but do not have equitable representation. Many believe  
2001 that the U.S. Congress has actually undermined the democratic processes in the territories.<sup>66</sup>

2002  
2003 This church recognizes complicating factors. One of those is the legacy of racism involved since the vast  
2004 majority of local residents in all the territories belong to racially minoritized groups—historically Black,  
2005 Indigenous, Latiné, and Pacific Islander people. The relationship between U.S.-based churches and the  
2006 territories is also complicated because the churches sometimes were complicit in the colonizing of  
2007 territories, including stripping ancestral inhabitants of their traditional religions.<sup>67</sup> The goal was to replace  
2008 those religions with Christian faith, but that faith was deeply entangled with U.S. expansionist ideology.  
2009 Though we should acknowledge that good was done, the ELCA also bears some responsibility to help  
2010 repair the harm also done. We believe, as Lutherans, that the Holy Spirit brings faith to people—it should  
2011 not be forced or coerced by human action.

2012  
2013 An intentional, humble listening is the starting point of the principle of mutual self-determination and is  
2014 the first step on the path toward justice and healing. This process of careful listening can be difficult and  
2015 challenging, yet when rooted in sincerity and a genuine willingness to understand each other, it can lead

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<sup>64</sup> 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](http://www.doi.gov)”).

<sup>65</sup> The ELCA holds “that equitable voting representation in Congress be granted to the citizens of the District of Columbia.” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Social Policy Resolution CA01.07.62, “Congressional Voting Representation for the District of Columbia” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001), [elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society#Socialresolutions](http://elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society#Socialresolutions).

<sup>66</sup> A case in point is the Promesa law (see [oversightboard.pr.gov/debt/](http://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.

<sup>67</sup> See José David Rodríguez, *Caribbean Lutherans: The History of the Church in Puerto Rico* (Fortress Press, forthcoming).

2016 to new possibilities of reparation, healing, and wholeness.<sup>68</sup> In collaboration with ecumenical partners and  
2017 others of good will, we believe it is possible to foster and facilitate processes of listening and  
2018 accountability between the territories and those in positions of power over them in the U.S. government.

2019  
2020 Consistent with the principle of mutual self-determination (article 21), the ELCA is committed to  
2021 advocating for equality in government representation for the District of Columbia and U.S. territories for  
2022 economic and social equity, and for their right of self-determination.

2023  
2024 **Article 45) American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians have a unique, historical, and**  
2025 **nation-to-nation trust relationship with the United States that should acknowledge the sovereignty**  
2026 **of tribal nations and Indian self-determination and self-governance. There are many layers to the**  
2027 **often horrid history of treatment of indigenous peoples, but it is imperative to acknowledge the**  
2028 **relationship has been grounded in the Doctrine of Discovery that codified both colonialism and**  
2029 **religious intolerance. The ELCA has repudiated explicitly this European-derived doctrine as a**  
2030 **“theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous**  
2031 **people.”<sup>69</sup> Our church also has acknowledged and called for repentance for this church’s complicity**  
2032 **in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal governments and tribal members. This statement**  
2033 **reaffirms the ELCA’s need for continued attention to just policy via advocacy in the areas of treaty**  
2034 **rights, tribal sovereignty, and other matters that affect the well-being of Native Americans. It also**  
2035 **calls upon both U.S. residents and U.S. governments to honor the trust relationship and the**  
2036 **sovereignty of tribal nations as well as to be guided by just principles supporting Indian self-**  
2037 **determination and well-being.**

2038  
2039 American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians have a unique, historical, and nation-to-nation  
2040 relationship with the United States. In terms of the official relationship, it is a trust relationship  
2041 acknowledging the sovereignty of tribal nations and Indian self-determination and self-governance. This  
2042 relationship is based on Indian treaties, the U.S. Constitution, and Supreme Court decisions.

2043  
2044 It is a relationship in which treaties and other legal guarantees have repeatedly not been honored by those  
2045 who began settling in the 1600s and swept across the continent. It is also a relationship in which Native  
2046 people endured racial, social, and economic oppression during some of the darkest chapters of American  
2047 history. The ELCA, with many others in this country, recognizes that this history must be acknowledged,  
2048 the status of Native Americans in the United States protected, and efforts at reconciliation and justice  
2049 increased.

2050  
2051 There are many layers to this history, but it is imperative to acknowledge that it is grounded in the  
2052 Doctrine of Discovery that codified both colonialism and religious intolerance through the  
2053 pronouncement of several papal bulls in the 15th century. It specifically was introduced into United States  
2054 municipal law by U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall in *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823). In  
2055 Marshall’s formulation of the doctrine, discovery of territory previously unknown to Europeans gave the  
2056 discovering nation title to that territory against all other European nations, and this title could be perfected  
2057 by possession.<sup>70</sup>

2058

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<sup>68</sup> 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](http://www.elca.org/truthandhealing).

<sup>69</sup> “A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to American Indian Alaska Native People” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2016), 2.

<sup>70</sup> One easily accessible discussion of the complex meaning and history may be found in [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery\\_doctrine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine) (accessed November 19, 2023).



2059 The doctrine was, and is, not only political but also explicitly theological, Christian legal discourse.  
2060 Though global in scope, this principle undergirded the actions of religious and nonreligious bodies that  
2061 made claims to Native land in North America.<sup>71</sup> Supported by this doctrine, those who moved across  
2062 North America, including predecessors of this church, claimed Indian land as their own property.

2063  
2064 The ELCA has acknowledged that the Doctrine of Discovery “created a theological framework that  
2065 supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. Today it continues to support  
2066 those evils and injustices found in our church, U.S. law, and legal interpretation.”<sup>72</sup> The ELCA has joined  
2067 other religious bodies in explicitly repudiating this European-derived doctrine, calling it an “improper  
2068 mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword.”<sup>73</sup> It has acknowledged and called for  
2069 repentance in this church’s complicity in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal governments and  
2070 tribal members.<sup>74</sup>

2071  
2072 Early in its life this church named and acknowledged the sovereignty of Native American tribes and  
2073 committed to speaking out for their just treatment.<sup>75</sup> This social statement reaffirms that acknowledgment  
2074 and the need for the practices of accompaniment in so doing. It calls for continued attention to supporting  
2075 just policy via advocacy in the areas of treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, religious freedom, and other  
2076 matters that affect the well-being of Native Americans. It calls upon both residents and all governments in  
2077 the United States to:

- 2078 • Honor the trust relationship acknowledging the sovereignty of tribal nations and Indian self-  
2079 determination and self-governance.
- 2080 • Be guided by concerns for justice, reconciliation, visibility, equity, and healing as central to these  
2081 sovereign relationships.
- 2082 • Prioritize consultation with tribal nations that ensures equity and honors parity with tribal nations.
- 2083 • Give particular attention to policies and legislation that increase Native American self-  
2084 determination.
- 2085 • Support efforts to increase voter registration and access to polling places and early voting while  
2086 opposing state efforts to raise barriers to the ballot box.
- 2087 • Engage in careful listening and consultation with Native Americans on matters with  
2088 environmental impact affecting their sovereign lands.

2089  
2090 **Article 46) The ELCA calls for renewed emphasis on comprehensive civics education as an essential**  
2091 **element for robust and revitalized civic life. Such education should teach the whole story of U.S.**  
2092 **history in its aspirations, successes, and failures so that it might shape well-informed, thoughtful,**  
2093 **and wise citizens.**

2094  
2095 Comprehensive, honest civics education is an essential element for robust and revitalized civic life. It  
2096 provides the building blocks of a society. The ELCA has addressed the social institution of education in  
2097 the United States and is on record that “schools, therefore, ought to teach the principles and virtues of  
2098 living together in responsible freedom in a democratic society, which includes respect for the diverse  
2099 cultures and beliefs of their students.”<sup>76</sup>

2100

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<sup>71</sup> “Declaration,” 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, Augsburg Confession Article XXVIII, Latin text.

<sup>74</sup> ELCA Social Policy Resolution CA16.02.04., “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.”

<sup>75</sup> ELCA Social Policy Resolution CA91.5.28., “1992: Year of Remembrance, Repentance, and Renewal.”

<sup>76</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Our Calling in Education* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007), 26ff.

2101 A comprehensive, honest civics curriculum must teach the whole story of U.S. history in its aspirations,  
2102 successes, and failures. It should emphasize the values inherent in the U.S. Constitution. It should draw  
2103 upon what the community holds in common and explore in a fair and impartial way those issues on which  
2104 the community is divided. To have a strong democracy, its citizens must know how it is supposed to  
2105 function and how they are called to participate.  
2106

2107 **Article 47) No single solution will reduce the increasing, fevered polarization or mend the damage**  
2108 **that endangers the U.S. social fabric as a representative democracy. However, robust civic**  
2109 **participation is critical for democratic self-governance, for support of public servants, and for well-**  
2110 **crafted policies. The ELCA urges both its members and all U.S. residents to renew their efforts**  
2111 **toward such a robust civic participation, guided by concern for the well-being of all.**  
2112

2113 No single solution will reduce the increasingly fevered polarization or repair the damage that endangers  
2114 our social fabric and democratic republic. One fundamental element is a renewed, constructively  
2115 grounded, and thoughtful commitment to civic life across this nation. Hyper-partisan polarization is, in  
2116 part, the result of individuals withdrawing from robust participation in civic life. This church holds that a  
2117 return to robust civic engagement that seeks the public good is the responsibility of all residents of this  
2118 country and is our calling as Christians.  
2119

2120 The social message “Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy” addresses at  
2121 greater length the nature and purpose of a robust civic engagement, especially in relation to citizenship.<sup>77</sup>  
2122 Among other elements, that message teaches that civic engagement takes numerous forms—informed  
2123 voting, attending public meetings, holding public office, political party involvement, policy advocacy,  
2124 community organizing, and nonviolent protest.  
2125

2126 The message points out that civic engagement arises both from concern about disorder and injustice and  
2127 from hope for the well-being of all. It affirms elements of a robust civic engagement such as democratic  
2128 self-governance, support for public servants, and well-crafted policies that foster justice, racial and social  
2129 equity, and reconciliation. The ELCA urges its members and all residents of this society to contribute to  
2130 and urge robust civic participation.  
2131

### 2132 **Conclusion**

2133  
2134 **Article 48) “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven” is both our prayer as a church and our**  
2135 **calling into civic life for the well-being of all. May we, as forgiven people in Christ’s church,**  
2136 **respond boldly and join all others of goodwill to work toward the aspiration and responsibility of**  
2137 **“we the people” through wise civic participation.**  
2138

2139 “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.” As Jesus taught the disciples,  
2140 so we pray in this church. We do so in concert with Christians down through the ages and into the future,  
2141 who, in the Spirit, offer witness to God’s will for just peace and well-being. We do so in faith,  
2142 understanding that God’s creative power is shared throughout all creation and is given to human beings to  
2143 use in civic life for the good of all.  
2144

2145 May we as your church live wisely by your law as a guide for joining your work in human society. May  
2146 we walk humbly with you as we strive for justice, kindness, and peace. May we as your people join all  
2147 others of goodwill in the work of government as gift, aspiration, and responsibility to serve the common  
2148 good of “we the people.” May we, as your forgiven ones, be empowered by your gracious word and  
2149 sacraments and boldly seek the good of the neighbor through our participation in civic life.

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<sup>77</sup> “Government and Civic Engagement,” 14.

## Glossary

All terms are **underlined** when introduced in the text.

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**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 its 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.

2200 **Discernment:** As used here, the practice of evaluating multiple factors in an issue so as to find an  
2201 appropriate response that seems God-pleasing. It generally implies active theological or ethical  
2202 reflection involving study, prayer, and dialogue. It seeks wisdom through God’s Spirit and reaches  
2203 decisions not according to individual desires but, as much as possible, according to God’s will as  
2204 understood through a community process (Romans 12:1-2). (See also “Community of moral  
2205 deliberation/discernment.”)  
2206

2207 **Establishment clause:** The first clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It states that  
2208 government “shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion.” This means that government  
2209 cannot establish a state/national religion or impose any form of worship or devotion upon its citizens. It  
2210 does not mean that a person’s religious commitments cannot or should not enter into or influence their  
2211 public life in the form of political activity or broader civic engagement. (See also “Separation of church  
2212 and state” and “Free exercise of religion.”)  
2213

2214 **Ethics:** The science and art of asking “How then shall we live?” or “What is the good?” Ethics  
2215 implies extended reflection and dialogue toward defining, negotiating, structuring, and critically  
2216 engaging what ought to be or what ought to be done. It is a practice done as individuals and as a  
2217 community. It often involves analyzing a current, accepted moral idea to determine its rationale or  
2218 ways it should be altered. The terms “ethics” and “**morals**” are somewhat different but are often used  
2219 interchangeably. (See “Morality.”)  
2220

2221 **Ethos:** The distinguishing web of largely implicit cultural practices, social assumptions, values, and  
2222 guiding beliefs of an organization or a society.  
2223

2224 **Faith:** Has many meanings and uses, but the fundamental Lutheran emphasis is a trusting response  
2225 to and trusting relationship with God. This relationship of trust is expressed through means such as  
2226 active participation in religious communities and attention to key teachings of the church universal.  
2227

2228 **Free exercise clause:** The second phrase in the First Amendment (“Congress shall make no law  
2229 prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]”) focuses on the relationship between faith and public/civic  
2230 life. The first clause, prohibiting establishment of a state religion, clears the ground for the faithful to  
2231 determine their own best way of exercising faith in their own public life. (See “Establishment clause”  
2232 and “Separation of church and state.”)  
2233

2234 **God’s sovereignty:** Has had multiple meanings in Christian thinking but fundamentally describes  
2235 God’s supreme power or God’s rule and reign over and in the universe. This statement speaks  
2236 theologically of God’s sovereignty as the source of all power and thus of political sovereignty. Both  
2237 power and sovereignty are fundamental to civic life. (See “Power.”)  
2238

2239 **Justice:** Generally, an underlying sense of fairness, right treatment, and reciprocity. This statement  
2240 emphasizes the aspects of justice that include fair and equal treatment under the law, ending  
2241 oppression based on power differences, and, as emphasized in the Scriptures, a right and wholesome  
2242 relationship with God and within community.  
2243

2244 **Law and gospel:** Expresses the key Lutheran emphasis that God’s word and work in human society  
2245 occur under different means. “Law” is understood to have two forms: (1) as a directive and  
2246 corrective for society (first, or civil, use) and (2) judgment on sin (second, or theological, use). The  
2247 law is a summary term for God’s directives for human living, such as the Ten Commandments.  
2248 “Gospel” is the good news of God’s mercy, received in faith on account of Jesus Christ.  
2249  
2250

2251 **Luther, Martin (1483-1546):** German priest, theologian, author, and professor. Luther was a seminal  
2252 figure in the Protestant Reformation and is the namesake of Lutheranism.  
2253

2254 **Mega-identity:** An interlocking set of social identifications: ethnic, religious, urban/rural,  
2255 conservative/liberal. When these identifications cohere in a set that is semifixed and loaded with huge  
2256 emotional stakes, they become a mega-identity that walls off people from others, especially those who  
2257 don't share the same characteristics or beliefs.  
2258

2259 **Morality/morals:** Originates from the Greek word "mores," which designated the binding customs of  
2260 a culture or society related to what is good or right. It designates an existing or already negotiated  
2261 moral structure. In every society, certain actions, goals, and character traits are considered moral,  
2262 immoral, or some combination thereof, according to established norms. "Ethics" and "morals" often  
2263 are used interchangeably, but see "Ethics."  
2264

2265 **Neighbor:** A member of one's community. This could be someone in a person's local neighborhood  
2266 or town but can also refer to members of the global community.  
2267

2268 **Neighbor justice:** Meeting neighbors' needs in public life. Though rooted in the biblical directive to  
2269 "love your neighbor as yourself," the term expresses how faith active in love requires seeking justice  
2270 in relationships and in the structures of society.  
2271

2272 **Partisanship:** Strong loyalty and, often, blind adherence to a specific party, group, faction, set of beliefs,  
2273 or person.  
2274

2275 **Polarization:** As used in this study, a partisanship so strong that partisans are rigidly set apart from other  
2276 groups, whose beliefs and views are considered utterly opposite and most often inferior, dangerous to  
2277 society, and unworthy of consideration. There is no value of or respect for "those people." In everyday  
2278 speech such polarization is often expressed in the saying "my way or the highway."  
2279

2280 **Politics:** From the Greek term "*polis*," for the city or place of the people. As used here,  
2281 designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this  
2282 sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about "who gets what, when,  
2283 where, and how" to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish. It is the necessary art of guiding or  
2284 influencing government to seek the common good. (See "Common Good.")  
2285

2286 **Power:** Most fundamentally, the ability to make something happen or the capacity to affect,  
2287 even if minimally, an outcome. In civic life the idea of power carries the implication of  
2288 authority, control, or influence upon social activity, whether that indicates power over others or  
2289 the ability to control the outcome of actions. Theologically, all power is based *in divine power,*  
2290 *which creates, sustains, and redeems creatures who are not God. Power that is only dominating*  
2291 *distorts the fulfilled divine power on which it is based.*  
2292

2293 **Religious pluralism:** The state of affairs in which more than one religion operates openly in the same  
2294 community. In the United States the term generally indicates a situation in which the society sees the  
2295 value of each person having their own religious beliefs and practicing them openly and safely. This  
2296 includes the freedom to practice no religion.  
2297

2298 **Self-determination:** Most basically, the ability of people or communities to determine their own  
2299 objectives and actions with minimal external compulsion. In terms of political authority, it means that  
2300 people have the right to freely choose their government.  
2301

2302 **Self-governance:** The ability of people to play a fundamental role in the functioning of their  
2303 government.  
2304

2305 **Separation of church and state:** Often used as shorthand for the establishment clause of the U.S.  
2306 Constitution, which forbids state-sponsored religion. The applied meaning of the phrase is contested.  
2307 For example, many people believe it means that religious convictions or religious institutions should  
2308 have no real role in political life. The ELCA constitution, on the other hand, endorses institutional  
2309 separation with functional interaction and argues that the church as a civic body should avoid  
2310 partisanship but engage in civic life because God calls people of faith to join God’s activity there.  
2311

2312 **Shalom:** The Scriptures use the Hebrew word *shalom* to refer to God’s goal of whole, healthy, peaceful,  
2313 joyous, just relations among all elements in God’s creation. It is often translated as “peace,” but it means  
2314 far more than mere peace of mind or absence of violence. In the Scriptures shalom indicates universal  
2315 well-being and wholeness—a state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts  
2316 fruitfully employed. Though the term appears in what Christians call the Old Testament, it also has a  
2317 long, rich history as a central and complex concept within Judaism that Christians should acknowledge  
2318 and respect.  
2319

2320 **Sin:** Expresses the human proclivity for being in opposition to God. Sin is variously described as  
2321 disobedience, lack of trust, self-centeredness, pride, or complacency, among other things. Sin occurs in  
2322 an individual’s thoughts and actions but also is expressed in organizations, institutions, and systems. In  
2323 the last three cases it is often termed “structural” or “systemic” sin.  
2324

2325 **Solidarity:** A kinship within all of nature that issues from God’s creative activity. The term expresses the  
2326 contention that the interests of the entire community of life should be legitimate concerns when decisions  
2327 are made and actions evaluated.  
2328

2329 **Systemic sin:** Argues that social and political systems are developed by humans and that, because of this,  
2330 the sin embedded in them is greater than the sin of any individual action. For instance, consider a society  
2331 where a racial minority has dramatically less access to political power because of laws or widespread  
2332 discrimination and that, therefore, has less chance of living and thriving. All political systems are flawed  
2333 but can be assessed by the extent of inequality or inequity that perpetuates harm.  
2334

2335 **Theology:** Can indicate academic or abstract reflection, but in this study the term generally refers to  
2336 faithful talk about anything related to God. Every person of faith, therefore, engages in theology when  
2337 expressing thoughts about God, the church, God in relation to civic life, etc.  
2338

2339 **Theology of the cross:** Coined by Martin Luther to refer to theology that sees “the cross” (that is, divine  
2340 self-revelation) as the only source of ultimate knowledge concerning who God is and how God saves. It  
2341 is contrasted with the “theology of glory,” which places great emphasis on human capacity and human  
2342 reason to know who God is and how God saves.  
2343

2344 **Three estates:** Used to designate the broadest divisions of social structures in Christendom (Christian  
2345 Europe) from the Middle Ages to early modern Europe. While there is some variation in meaning, the  
2346 three overarching divisions (estates) in the Reformation period were identified as the church, the  
2347 government, and the family (which included all economic functions).  
2348

2349 **Two kingdoms:** A traditional theological term from the Reformation regarding the distinction between  
2350 God’s activity in the world through secular means, such as government, and God’s gracious activity in  
2351 the church. ELCA teaching describes this as God’s two ways or two hands rather than as two kingdoms.  
2352 God’s “right hand” conveys the tangible power of God’s love and forgiveness to people of faith, which



2353 stirs us to forgive others, to express mutual love and care, and to strive for justice. God’s “left hand”  
2354 works through human roles, structures, and institutions to foster the social well-being of the people and  
2355 the world God creates. The ELCA teaches that God’s two ways of governing are both necessary and that  
2356 they are interrelated.

2357  
2358 **Vocation:** In this statement, a calling from God that comes both as gift and responsibility. The ELCA  
2359 understands baptismal vocation as fundamental; it is God’s saving call lived out in joyful response  
2360 through service to the neighbor in daily life. This overarching vocation is expressed in multiple  
2361 callings (or specific vocations) such as being a responsible citizen, parent, student, worker, etc.

2362  
2363 **Word:** Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom God’s message to us as both law  
2364 and gospel reveals God’s judgment and mercy. The ELCA constitution holds that the word is  
2365 expressed in creation and in the history of Israel but is centered in all its fullness in the person and  
2366 work of Jesus Christ. The canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament are the written  
2367 word of God in the sense that they are inspired by God’s Spirit in the writers as they describe and  
2368 announce God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain  
2369 Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

2370  
2371 **Works righteousness:** As conceived during the Reformation period, describes the practice or belief  
2372 that some level of right activity, belief, or character is required to achieve righteousness in God’s  
2373 eyes. The Lutheran tradition encourages people to seek righteousness (right action, character, and  
2374 relationship) in civic life but emphasizes the biblical idea that works righteousness cannot achieve  
2375 God’s salvation (Romans 3:21). Rather, righteousness is given by God’s mercy as a gift on account of  
2376 Christ, and is received by faith.