



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 1



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



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

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

SUPPLIES

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

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

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

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

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

OPENING PRAYER

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

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



SCRIPTURE

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



HYMN SUGGESTIONS

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

HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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STUDY (30-35 minutes)

PLAY VIDEO (16 minutes long)

<https://vimeo.com/788799781>

Make sure all can see and hear the video.

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

PG Key goals of this video:

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

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

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

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

CREATING A CONVERSATION COVENANT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SEND (5 minutes)

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

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

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

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

Session 3: What Are Lutheran Views on Civic Life?

Session 4: What Are Our Objectives in American Democracy?

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

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

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

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

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

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

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

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

CLOSING PRAYER

Close in prayer using your own words or the following:

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

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

WEBSITES

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

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

BOOKS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SESSION 1 VIDEO SCRIPT

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

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

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

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

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

In this video, I want to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here's one striking illustration.ⁱⁱ

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

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

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

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

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

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

i From P&P (2018), p14.

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

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

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

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

COVENANT RITUAL OF COMMITMENT

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

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

One hope in our calling,

One Lord, one faith, one baptism.

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

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

We acknowledge our varied identities and views.

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

We commit to hear one another,

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

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

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

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

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

Whether with conviction or confusion, but always with respect.

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

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

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

We commit ourselves to value community with one another,

Even when there is tension and discomfort.

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

And for forgiveness when we stray from it.

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

And open to your presence in our midst.

In the name of Jesus we ask this.

Amen.