



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 4



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



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

Discerning the goals of our evolving constitutional democracy.

SUPPLIES

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

OPEN (5-10 minutes)

WELCOME

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

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

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

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

CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

Read the following:

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

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

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

OPENING PRAYER

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

SCRIPTURE

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

LITANY

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

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

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

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HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

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

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

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

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

PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

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

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read Micah 6:6-8:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

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

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

SEND (5-10 minutes)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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

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

GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

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

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

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

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

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

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

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

CLOSING PRAYER

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

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

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

PROMPTS FOR ACTION OUTSIDE THE STUDY GROUP

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

WEBSITES

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

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BOOKS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SESSION 4 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

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

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



Notes for Leader

SUPPLIES:

- A copy of the Introduction and Questions
- Have on hand copies of Covenant Handout or the wall poster. See Leader's Overview
- Pens

This "Going Deeper" discussion guide invites participants to expand the conversation begun in Session 4 by discussing questions based on the ELCA social message "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy." It may be downloaded at download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Government_and_Civic_Engagement_Social_Message.pdf.

This social message addresses the legitimacy and purpose of government function as seen from the standpoint of faith and briefly reviews the question of how Lutheran Christians live out our discipleship in the midst of the various successes and failures of government.

This "Going Deeper" offers a supplement to Session 4 of the Study Curriculum and may be used in any way that fits your setting. For instance, use it as an extra or lengthier session or as a guide for an interested subgroup. Parts of it could also be used in a confirmation class or youth group setting. Participants can read the message at the beginning of the session but reading in advance is far more beneficial. The minimum for advance reading includes pp. 1-4, 9, 17, 18.

The questions below may be discussed in small groups or one group. For larger groups, consider forming clusters of 3-4 people who discuss each question together. Then invite small groups to share a summary with the whole group. Utilize the

conversation covenant found in the study guide curriculum to set boundaries on respectful dialogue.

Participants may not be familiar with the difference between a "social message" and a "social statement" in the ELCA. Social messages of the ELCA are topical, briefer documents adopted by the ELCA Church Council to focus attention and action on timely, pressing matters of social concern to the church and society. They are used to address pressing contemporary concerns in light of the prophetic and compassionate traditions of Scripture and do not establish new teaching or policy. The message on Government and Civic Engagement was requested by the ELCA Churchwide assembly in 2019 and adopted by the Church Council in June of 2020.

The study curriculum of which "Going Deeper" is a supplement was created by the ELCA Task Force on Studies of Civic Life and Faith. That task force was brought into existence to develop a social statement, a broader framing document. This statement also was authorized by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly in order to provide for social teaching a framing document "on government, civic engagement and the relationship of church and state that will allow thorough attention to scriptural, historical, theological, and social issues as a means to probe for shared convictions and establish this church's comprehensive teaching...." While there are some overlaps the social statement will cover a much broader array of themes and topics than the 2020 message.

Welcome participants to this special session. Introduce yourself to new attendees. Then have individuals read or summarize the Introduction, followed by probing the questions and opening up discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The ELCA social message “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy” was adopted in 2020 as preliminary to the longer and broader work toward a social statement. This message lists everyday functions of government that are so routine we usually don’t recognize the constant work that goes into providing them (until something goes wrong). The social message asks us to “consider life without the safety and services that a just and well-functioning government typically provides:

- Drinking water ... without purification.
- Human sewage ... without treatment.
- Wildfires ... without firefighters.
- Crime ... without recourse to law enforcement, courts, and prisons.
- Natural spaces ... without protection.
- Flying ... without air traffic control.
- Banking ... without deposit insurance or any regulations.
- National security ... without armed forces or homeland security programs.”¹

These are just a few examples; some were important even when the country was turning from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution in the 1780s. Many involve cooperation of national government and various state and local governments or cooperation of governmental and community partners. All depend on the work of public servants.

Such safety and services exemplify why Lutherans consider government a gift from God intended for the safety and flourishing of human life. We believe God exercises divine power and purpose in creation toward the flourishing of the creation and each creature within it. Government is good because it

is supposed to contribute toward that safety and flourishing.

At the same time, Lutheran teaching recognizes how much society is entwined with human sin. In practice, that means that much human activity in creation will help fulfill some creatures while perhaps diminishing others. This is true of governmental and nongovernmental action (and of governmental and nongovernmental inaction) because government is made up of individuals and of systems of structural sin. In principle, government is neither more nor less sinful or just than we are.

In addition, most action in complex societies has unexpected consequences, for good, ill, or both. Part of human sin is acting as if we know more than we do. Another part of human sin is the tendency to privilege ourselves and those most like us. We see the speck in another’s eye, but not the log in our own or that of our social group, including our religious group (see Matthew 7:3). We often do not act and think with the humility and love for neighbor that God asks of us. This is true of individuals and governments alike.

Still, decisions must be made, acts must be performed. God does not call us to paralysis by analysis. God does call us to responsible, informed action that fulfills each creature in creation as much as possible right now. That is a call to each of us and to governmental actors.

We are, all of us, people in this country at this time, with all the promise and difficulty that brings. Being Christian doesn’t mean that you are only a Christian or have *only* Christian commitments; it means that your *ultimate* commitment is to God as proclaimed in Christ Jesus.

As discussed throughout Session 4, you are invited to consider governmental activity from a biblical and theological perspective. Keep in mind the purposes of God’s power and presence in creation, as well as the noisy distortions of human sin. You may use the list above of things that government does, or the longer list in the social message, as a starting point to guide your consideration; feel free to add more from your own knowledge or experience of government activity.

¹ “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020), 2-3.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the areas in which you think government falls short or, conversely, tries to do too much? Why? What specific policy changes would you support? Do these enhance or endanger God's creation? Do they benefit your neighbor, even if they do not directly benefit you?
2. Think of a person who, in good faith and also believing in God's purposes and human sin, disagrees with you on those views of government involvement. With humility, think of why that person might hold their view, and state that view as smartly and strongly as you can (perhaps to a discussion partner). Does that in any way modify your views, the policies you support, or your view of those who disagree with you?
3. Are there areas you believe government should not be involved in at all? In thinking about this, consider the effect of individual actions on one's neighbor. If a person's action largely affects that person alone, should government interfere with that person's self-determination? If the same action has wide effects on that person's neighbors in creation, is there greater cause for government to act?
4. Are there things you believe can only or best be addressed by government? If yes, why? Again, think of the faithful person who disagrees with you, define their view as best you can, and consider whether that affects your perspective.
5. The U.S. constitution establishes a vast separation of powers at different levels. (The U.S. president, state governors, local executive leadership, and the various agencies of each), legislatures (lawmaking bodies on federal, state, and local levels), the courts (federal, state, or local), and sometimes a combination of these.) Do you think the separation of powers effectively serves you and your fellow citizens? Through the lens of your Christian principles, did the Constitution get the separation of powers right? Consider why a faithful person might believe differently.
6. Do you think that citizen participation in government should be expanded or shrunk, and in what ways? Do you think that there are challenges to political participation now? How do you believe those should be addressed?
7. Think again of the traditional theological virtues of faith, hope, and love mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13:13. How can faith, hope, and love lead to participation in government or other civic engagement? How might those values alter our current trends in government? What effect might recent changing trends have on citizens, creation, and so on?
8. Think about government officials or others in public life who speak openly about their faith or who base political platforms on a specific set of religious beliefs. How does your understanding of the establishment and free exercise clauses and of Scripture and Lutheran theology inform your opinion on this? How might others who share your beliefs disagree? Would this change your perspective?
9. What questions do you have about the intersection of faith and government?