

# A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 5



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America



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

*Discerning the callings of discipleship, both corporate and individual.*

### SUPPLIES

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

### OPEN (5-10 minutes)

#### WELCOME

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

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

#### CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

***Read the following:***

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

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

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

## OPENING PRAYER

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

## SCRIPTURE

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

## LITANY (based on psalm 67)

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

## HYMN SUGGESTIONS

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

## HEARING EACH OTHER (5-10 minutes)

### PARTICIPANT PAIRINGS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/STORY PROMPTS

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

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

### PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

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

## STUDY (30-35 minutes)

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Discuss the following questions in the Participant Guide:**

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

**PLAY VIDEO** (11 minutes long)

<https://vimeo.com/788805985>

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

Key Ideas in the Video:

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



## POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

PG

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

## SEND (5-10 minutes)

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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

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

PG

### GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

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

### FACILITATOR SUMMARY

*Read the following summary:*

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

## PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

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

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

PG

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

## CLOSING PRAYER

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

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

## POST-SESSION RESOURCES

### PROMPTS FOR ACTION OUTSIDE THE STUDY GROUP

PG

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

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

PG

## WEBSITES

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

PG

## BOOKS

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


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

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

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

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

PG



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

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

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

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

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

## SESSION 5 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH STUDY GROUP COVENANT

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

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