



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 6



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



SESSION 6: HOW DO WE GO IN PEACE TO LOVE AND SERVE THE LORD IN 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/788806942>
- 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 sixth session of the study. If there are any new attendees, introduce yourself. Then read together the welcome paragraphs in the Participant Guide:

PG The foundation of our Lutheran identity is built upon the understanding that salvation is a gift of God not earned by our good works, political rightness, or moral purity. Secure in God's love and grace, we are then freed to live our lives in response to that love, in worship and service to God and God's creation.

Worship is the starting point for our faithful response. In worship, we relearn that we are the body of Christ, that we are at work in the world as the hands, feet, and mouth of our Lord. We believe God is present not just in our buildings where we worship but in all corners of the world—and within us, as well. Therefore it is logical that our faith will be lived outside our church walls, including in our civic engagement, as we seek to live out our baptismal promises to “strive for justice and peace in all the world.”

Invite participants to think about the reasons they come to worship and to jot down a couple ideas in the box.

What are your reasons for coming to worship?

CONSENSUS ON MODELING HOLY CONVERSATIONS

Read the following:

During times of political and social upheaval and polarization between peoples, it is especially important that Christians model civil discourse and engagement in the political sphere in ways that reflect God's love and grace amid the differences, division, and disagreements of a complicated world. 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 how you can end positively. Then read the following:

By now, you understand that not everyone will agree on any given issues outside the most basic statements of faith. Let us agree that we don't have to agree. Our faith equips us for a life of discernment. For our final session, we ask you to recommit to modeling holy conversation in a way that respects how others come to a different point of view and give space for disagreement, wonder, and new understandings. The point of these study groups is not to make members of ELCA faith communities of one opinion but to model civility, because we are one in Christ, with many voices and views.

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 (Adapted from *All Creation Sings* and ancient prayer.)

PG Sovereign God, your Son, Jesus, lived within the structures of society. Empower us to be courageous disciples and responsible citizens. Grant that our life in the public realm be grounded in love for our neighbors, care for the vulnerable, and respect for the common life we share. Keep us working and praying for the day when your justice will roll down like waters and your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Replenish our strength and stir up our hope as we look for signs of your coming reign. Grant your church wisdom and boldness in times of quiet and times of trouble. Fill us with the peace that passes understanding—the peace of Jesus Christ, our Savior. **Amen.**

SCRIPTURE

PG “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink

of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27).

LITANY

Leader: People of God, we are called to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

All: Yet we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Leader: Let us turn our hearts toward those who hunger in any way, that all may know your care.

All: We pray for peace and justice in the world, the nations and those in authority, the poor and oppressed.

Leader: God, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

All: Now raise us up as the body of Christ for the world. Amen.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (ELW 841, TFF 296, LBW 562)
- “Go to the World” (ACS 991)
- “The Church of Christ, in Every Age” (ELW 729, LBW 433)
- “God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind” (ELW 400)

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. Invite one to speak, the other to listen. 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.

- **Tell a story about a time you became friends with someone whom you previously disliked or who held opposing**

views on a significant issue. How did it come to be? What surprised you?

- Describe how it feels in your body when you are having a heated discussion with someone about a polarizing issue.
- Consider your deepest longings for the future of humanity. If you could gift one thing to the generation not yet born, what would it be and why?
- How does coming to in-person worship shape you and help you face what the week may hold?

PREVIOUS SESSION REVIEW

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

STUDY (30-35 minutes)

Read Luke 10:25-37, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan":

PG ²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper,

and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

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

- The parable of the Good Samaritan would have been shocking to its original audience. The Samaritans and Jews had a long-standing hostility that grew from political and religious differences. Telling a story with the hero being Samaritan would have flipped all understanding of "them" versus "us." What might such shocking kindness and compassion from "them" toward "us" look like in our country?
- Jesus' telling of this story surely invites us to be vulnerable for the sake of others, especially showing hospitality to enemies, those with whom we have historically lived in opposition. At the risk of sounding naïve, consider some of the most hated people in recent American history. Why do or don't you think the terrible events of 9/11 could have been avoided had the attackers had been invited into relationship with the people they hated?
- How does it change your potentially hostile engagements with others to hear that the answer to "Who is my neighbor" is "the one you want to avoid or the one who hates you"?
- Being followers of Christ naturally leads us to challenge the cultural and political factions that can box us in and divide us: we are not "red" or "blue" but God's children. In that freedom, we don't have to always like each other or agree on much beyond our basic understanding of faith in God. We don't have to restrict our message or efforts in the world fainthearted positions that won't offend anyone. What does it mean to you that you are free to stand up for what you believe is right through your faith-based lens?

- A recent study¹ found that, in churches, synagogues, and mosques, there is a higher-than-average rate of friendships formed across disparities in income. That is in keeping with religious belief lived out in practice. Those same countercultural instincts can also help bridge other differences, including ideological and political polarization. With that in mind, how do you think our church can be a model for civil civic engagement?
- What will Jesus' command to "Go and do likewise" look like in your civic life?

PLAY VIDEO (12 minutes long) | <https://vimeo.com/788806942>

Make sure all can see and hear the video. Invite participants to jot down notes on the chart in their Participant Guide. The empty column signifies how different parts of worship may relate to how we are sent into the world. Emphasize to participants that there are no wrong answers.

WORSHIP COMPONENT	WORSHIP ELEMENT * **	EXPLANATION	HOW THIS MAY RELATE TO OUR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
GATHERING	Invocation	Calling on God's presence in our gathering.	
	Congession and Forgiveness	Asking for forgiveness for when we have sinned and fallen short as individuals or in the structures of society. Living in a spirit of humility and forgiveness; letting go of resentment.	
WORD	Liturgy: Kyrie, Hymn of Praise, Prayer of the Day	"Kyrie eleison" means "Lord, have mercy," a cry for help. The Hymn of Praise gives thanks to God. The Prayer of the Day or collect typically summarizes of the theme of the readings.	
	Scripture Readings	God's word from prophets, letters, poetry, law, gospel, wisdom sayings, and accounts of joys and struggles in the early church.	
	Sermon	Proclamation, explanation, and application of God's word to everyday life.	
	Creed	Statement of faith and grounding in our shared belief.	
	Prayers of the People	Prayers are directed to life in the church and in society. Prayers give thanks and seek healing, faith, inspiration, wisdom, and comfort.	
	Hymns (in all components)	Voices are raised together, expressing all our joys and pains.	
MEAL	Sharing the Peace	A sign of our unity, shared with all people.	
	Offering/Offertory	Gifts to God that support the church and its work in society.	

¹ Raj Chetty, et al., "Social Capital I: Measurement and Associations with Economic Mobility," Nature, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04996-4>.

	Lord's Prayer	Taught to disciples by Jesus, the prayer invites us to approach God with familiarity as we pray for our needs and forgiveness.	
	Preface/Sanctus ("Holy, Holy, Holy"), Words of Institution, Distribution	We gather all people around Jesus' table. Eucharistic hospitality is practiced, affirming that all people are loved by God.	
	Post-communion Canticle ("Thank the Lord") and Prayer of Thanksgiving	We thank God for the grace we have been given.	
SENDING	Blessing and Dismissal	We are sent in thanksgiving for service in God's world.	

*Not an exhaustive list.

** Though the elements may be similar in Lutheran churches across the globe as well as in other Christian assemblies, there is rightfully much diversity in their expression. Worship of God is naturally shaped by the culture and context of worshippers.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

- PG
1. When you listen to the words of the prayers of the people, you might notice that some of the things prayed for are tall orders: peace, the end of suffering, for all to be fed, and so on. Why do you think this is important?
 2. Hatred, animosity, and division have always existed in the world, including in the time and space Jesus was born into, lived in, and was hung on a cross in. How does the current time feel different from other eras of your life?
 3. Our faith is lived out in the world, so when the world or our country has problems and challenges, we have problems and challenges too. If you were a pastor, how would you decide which potentially divisive topics to address in a sermon? Should there be anything churches cannot talk about? How do you react when you disagree with something said in prayers, biblical readings, or a sermon?
 4. As the video points out, there have been many examples of churchgoers who engaged in very un-Christlike activities that harmed others. How do you gauge where to draw the line between respecting differences of opinion and condoning opinions and actions that are hateful, dangerous, or threatening to our democracy?
 5. Part of our baptismal calling is to "strive for justice and peace in all the world." Most people don't automatically relate their faith to their interactions on social media. How do you see your faith and this calling lived out in your online presence?
 6. Repeating inaccurate, polarizing news is a form of the false witness named in the Eighth Commandment. How do you think churches should address the challenge of modern technology that has likely contributed to people's rising mistrust of news media and each other? How does your discipleship factor into your news media choices?
 7. Advocating for issues (especially those connected to biblical commands that relate to hunger, justice, economic insecurity, refugees, and so on), being an informed and active voter, serving in elected office, and praying for our elected officials can all be considered acts of discipleship. How do you see each of these examples of civic participation as arenas in which to reflect God's love and grace in a complicated world? How do you relate them to what we see, do, and hear in worship? Why do you think civic participation as it relates to our discipleship as followers of Christ has often been ignored or disregarded?

SEND (5-10 minutes)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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

- PG
1. What ideas do you have for fostering productive dialogue in this congregation as a model for the ministry of reconciliation?
 2. How do you understand your belief and faith in God to be intertwined with your civic participation? How has this study changed your understanding of the civic engagement of the Christian?

GROUP SHARING OF REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

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

FACILITATOR SUMMARY

Read the following summary:

We believe that, because there is no aspect of life in which God is not present and active, we are called to live out in society the faith we practice in worship. Civic engagement is inspired by our faith—faith grounded in an understanding of God's love and grace. As children of God, we draw no distinction between the different aspects of our lives; our civic engagement is an extension of our discipleship. Our challenge to love our neighbor (including our enemy) is a continuation of our love of God. Our words posted on social media become our prayers. Our worship at church is taken into the world through our civic engagement; our concern for the hungry, the vulnerable, and the oppressed; and our interaction with all God's children. We are called, gathered, then sent to live our faith in the world.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSE FORM

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

In this final 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.

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Complete the response form either online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DL69SHR> 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:

Gracious God, you have bundled us together in life and given us gifts—the gift of your church gathered and sent, the gift of government for the safety and flourishing of human life, and the gift of each other. May this study, the conversations that formed it, and the social statement that will grow from it be a blessing to a nation and people in need of healing. May the servants of your church, guided by the Holy Spirit and gathered around the love of Jesus Christ, reflect that love in a world in need, in the unity of our mission of the good news in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

POST-SESSION RESOURCES

PROMPTS FOR ACTION OUTSIDE THE STUDY GROUP

- PG • Read about the “One Small Step” movement from the creator of StoryCorps, Inc. Create a “Small Steps” group in your congregation that meets periodically, with the goal of forming friendships among people of opposing viewpoints as a model for bridging divides.
- Form current-events small groups that meet (perhaps over a meal) for moral deliberation and considering different responses to current societal issues. Consider partnering with another faith group or denomination to enrich interaction among diverse groups.

ARTICLES

PG “The Church in the Public Space. A Study Document of the Lutheran World Federation” (2021), www.lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-church-public-space-study-document-lutheran-world-federation.

Ninke, Rebecca, “Loving Your Neighbor, Your Enemy, and God,” Sparkhouse Blog, Nov. 3, 2020, <https://blog.wearesparkhouse.org/loving-your-neighbor-your-enemy-and-god>.

WEBSITES

The “One Small Step” Project from StoryCorps—coming together in conversations to feel less torn apart: <https://storycorps.org/discover/onesmallstep/>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s “Publicly Engaged Church” page: ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church

BOOKS

Brubaker, David R., *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization* (Fortress Press, 2019).

Erlander, Daniel, *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism As a Way of Life* (Fortress Press, 2020).

SESSION 6 VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

In many of our congregations, at the end of the worship service, the pastor or assisting minister proclaims some version of “Go in peace; serve the Lord!” And the gathered congregation responds, “Thanks be to God!” We say “go in peace,” but how do we live that out? What does it mean to go in peace and serve the Lord in our often-challenging civic life?

For ELCA Lutherans, worship is the central act of the church. Established by Scripture and reaffirmed by our confessional documents, worship of God is the means by which the word is proclaimed, sacraments are given, forgiveness is announced, and the mission of discipleship is reinforced for our witness and service in the world.

Almost everything we do in worship, from the gathering to the sending, prepares us to join God’s activity in our world. The dynamic movement of the liturgy may allow us to relax in God’s mercy but always, and at every turn, prepares us to be sent forth into the world to work for justice and peace.

Thus, none of the elements of worship exist in isolation from the rest of our lives. And rightfully so: as God’s people, the body of Christ, we live out God’s ministry in civic life just as Jesus did—in our vocations, our families, our relationships and interactions with others, and our civic engagement—not inside the church building. We are a people who do not stay but are sent.

But do you ever wonder how 30 or 300 people sitting in the pews can come away with different ideas of how to live out faith? There’s no one way to incorporate faith into our civic life, but what we practice in worship can inform and be incorporated into the rest of our lives.

First, we must acknowledge that church is inherently a countercultural place. We are in but not of the world, so in worship we practice seeing the world differently. In church, you might walk in and sit down next to a stranger or even someone you strongly disagree with. You greet them with a gesture of peace. You hear things in the Scriptures and sermon that you wouldn’t hear anywhere else. You say and do things that would seem strange in another setting.

The order of our worship generally consists of four components—gathering, word, meal, and sending—that are common to Christian churches around the world. Though these components are much the same, there is much diversity in their expression. Unity in Christ, not uniformity in practice, is emphasized.

Within those four components of worship are different elements of the service in which we believe the Holy Spirit is present, all of which rightfully are shaped by local culture and tradition.

First, we invite God’s presence in our worship, and most often continue with the confession and forgiveness, when we acknowledge the presence of sin. We begin our time together not bragging about what we got right but confessing where we missed the mark as we consider what implications our sins have for others. We are invited to release resentment for those who have wronged us as we acknowledge God’s forgiveness, freely given for our own shortcomings. This process invites a sense of humility before God and in the world. Our faith is not in our own infallibility, but in God’s grace. The pastor then declares God’s forgiveness.

The service of the Word includes the liturgy with Kyrie (which means a cry for help and strength) and the Hymn of Praise to God. This can come in many different forms, whether in an elegant church building or around a campfire. A prayer is followed by the readings—which may include Old Testament and Psalm readings from the Hebrew Bible, a New Testament reading, and a Gospel reading. Many of our Scriptures reflect the holy struggles our ancestors in the faith had in figuring out how to apply faith to life outside of worship, just as we have been doing in this civic study.

The sermon that follows is also the proclamation of God's word, though some hit the mark better than others! The declaration of the love of God shown through Christ crucified and risen is the foundation of all preaching. Life is claimed, even in the midst of death, discouragement, and sorrow, with words that typically aim to be informative spiritually while offering relevant tie-ins for the application of faith.

The sermon, of course, is the obvious place to address current matters related to our civic engagement as followers of Christ. But not surprisingly, many pastors fear doing just that. As one mentor told me, if everyone loves your sermon week after week, you're probably not doing your job. But this is a challenging line to walk because of how members may react when preachers address controversial issues. The phrase "separation of church and state," of course, was never meant to mean that our faith shouldn't inform our voting, civic engagement, stances on issues, and so on. While it is not the preacher's role to tell you which candidates or party to vote for, it is the calling of rostered leaders to connect Scriptures and our understanding of law and gospel to contemporary issues, including those touching on civic engagement.

An immediate response to the hearing of the Word is the confession of faith in the triune God through one of the creeds of the church.

Likewise, prayers follow where the congregation lifts up special concerns from the local to the international, gives thanks to God, prays for those in authority, and remembers those who have died. The prayers of the people reflect the bridge between worship and world.

Before moving into the meal, the peace is shared. This is a sign of our unity, grounded in the peace of the Lord, and a symbol of our intention to live into it, both in worship and beyond.

The offering is collected, both the monetary collection and the symbolic offering of ourselves. The funds contribute to the support of the church and are generally also shared to address human need in many forms.

And then, Holy Communion. It is a shared meal, instituted by Jesus before his death on the cross. We practice eucharistic hospitality, affirming that all people are created in the image of God, opening the table to all believers, and sharing Christ's meal with friends, strangers, and those with whom we disagree. We understand it is Christ's table, not our own.

Integrated into all four components of worship are hymns in which we sing our praises and laments, often echoing words from Scripture. We join our voices with the heavenly chorus, understanding that we are part of something larger than ourselves that transcends that moment in time and space.

The dismissal from the service sends us in thanksgiving from what we have received from God into service to God's world.

We've got our work cut out for us.

For thousands of years people have been figuring out how to live together. Even figuring out how to worship together has triggered division! The rise of polarization, distrust, and contempt for those who do not think as we do is certainly not a new phenomenon, but technology and other social dynamics of our era have given it a new ferocity in our daily lives. These elements aren't going away, so we need to learn to live with each other during difficult times in a way that reflects our faith in God as the undergirding of all our lives.

How? We must remember that it is the good news in Jesus Christ that unites us.

As followers of Christ, we have been invited into a way of seeing the world through the lens of our faith. It is not the easiest path! It is not a means of earning God's love. But it is our baptismal calling. We are to "live among God's faithful people; hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper; proclaim the good news

of God in Christ through word and deed; serve all people following the example of Jesus; and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”

To follow this calling, we must resist scorn and hatred of those who do not think, look, act, or vote just as we do. We must also remember that, for instance, some slaveholders, Nazi leaders, Klan members, and people who committed atrocities against Native American children at boarding schools were regular churchgoers. We can't assume that church attendance automatically sends us out as good citizens; we are challenged to consider how our faith is alive and whether our words and deeds, including in our civic engagement, align with Christ's teachings.

We benefit when we worship God together with people of conflicting views and opinions, remembering we are all fallible human beings. I hope your participation in this study has helped you consider how faith relates to discipleship within a democracy and civic life in an always-complicated world. On behalf of our task force, I express our appreciation for your commitment of time and civil conversation.

A thank-you to you if you have been filling out your response form through each session. If you haven't, I remind you to fill out a response form today. The task force wants to hear what ELCA members think!

In closing, I say, “Go in peace and serve the Lord in your civic life!”

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.**