



A STUDY CURRICULUM ON CIVIC LIFE AND FAITH

LEADER GUIDE - SESSION 4



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America



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?