



A STUDY GUIDE FOR THE SOCIAL MESSAGE ON:

Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

LEADER'S GUIDE

ELCA.org/socialmessages

Leader's Guide



THANK YOU!

Thank you for stepping up to be the leader of a discussion session. Your main role will be to identify the questions you think most relevant in the context of your group. (The focus of each session is quite varied, so do look at the questions in each one!) Once you pose some questions for the group, the conversation is likely to take off on its own. May God bless your leadership and may the study guide enable all participants to understand better how and why “God’s care for human society calls us ... to appreciate—and do—the work of self-government.” (p. 18)



HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

Besides opening with prayer (see below), start each session reminding people to speak for themselves using “I” language through which they take responsibility for their own thoughts and feelings. Urge participants to avoid “you” language, which can often sound accusatory, unless it is in the form of a question such as: “What’s your perception of ... ?” or “How do you understand this?” Listeners can also reflect back to a speaker and check in on what they thought they heard, such as: “What I heard you saying was Is that correct or what you intended?” Encourage participants to draw nonjudgmental clarification from each other.

Attention to respectful listening and constructive wording should assist with avoiding disruptive disagreement. Participants should expect to hear ideas with which they disagree, but respectful listening is a genuine practice for civic engagement. As a leader it is also important to remind participants that humility about the “rightness” of one’s own perspectives is an essential characteristic for respectful discernment.



IMPORTANT TIPS

- This study guide is meant to offer a buffet of questions from which to choose what benefits your group’s interests. For instance, if there will be only one session for your group, choose a question from each of the first three sessions and several from the section on civic engagement. The first three sessions prepare participants to think about several of the practical questions in section four.
- Note that the four main sections of the social message are tied to questions in one study guide session. The questions are keyed to quotes from the message. It helps if participants have recently read the section of the message under consideration, but it is not necessary if the leader is prepared. You as leader should have read the message and can be prepared to identify where each quote comes from.

- While it is not necessary to have four study sessions, the questions for each section are provided on a separate sheet of paper. If you're meeting in person, make one copy with the questions for each anticipated learner and have a couple extras should visitors or friends decide to attend. An alternative is to put the questions on newsprint, a whiteboard, or some media visible to everyone. It is important to participants that they can read and refer back to the questions.
- The best engagement with the message will use a mix of discussion arrangements. Some participants discern better by writing things down, others when they speak one on one, others in a group of three or four, others in a large group. Sometimes our best thinking happens by using all four formats. Instead of simply throwing out questions for full group discussion, use a variety of arrangements. For instance, ask participants to begin by writing down an answer on their paper, then have them turn to discuss that one-on-one for a couple of minutes. Perhaps then double into groups of four, etc. As another example, assign different questions to different break-out groups. Make sure to include time for a summary from each group, but there simply are too many questions for every participant to discuss each one in the full group.
- Explain at the beginning and remember the goal is understanding of what's in the message and to clarify participants' own thinking; the goal is not having arguments to win a point. Firmly move the group on to another question when participants get bogged down in argument.
- Download the message at: [ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Government](https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Government). Paper copies will be available to order there in the fall.
- Remember to start each session with the reminder about using "I" language and being open to the thoughts and opinions of others. See introduction in Leader Guide.



ABOUT OPENING AND CLOSING WITH PRAYER

There are quite a few prayers in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* that could be adapted easily to open and close your discussion. See especially those dedicated to "Civic Life, Government, Nations" (page 76 and following). These two examples are adapted from ELW.

Opening: Gracious and holy God who governs this world, we ask you to bless us in this discussion time. Give us diligence to seek what is true, patience to listen, and wisdom to perceive what you wish us to understand. This we ask through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, Our Savior and Ruler. Amen.

Closing: Almighty God, as we end our discussion we lift before you all those who govern. May those who hold power understand that it is a trust from you to be used not for personal glory or profit but for the service of the people. Drive from us cynicism, selfishness, and contempt. Grant in your mercy greater just and honest government. Give us grace to strive together in unity and peace so that all people may benefit. Amen.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why was this social message developed?

This project was set in motion on Nov. 10, 2019, when the ELCA Church Council authorized “the development of a social message on the vocation of citizenship, civic engagement, and church and state as requested by the Churchwide Assembly 2019, in light of existing social teaching, in accordance with ‘Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns’ (2018).”

What is a social message?

Social messages are topical teaching documents of the ELCA adopted by the ELCA Church Council to focus attention and urge action on timely, pressing matters of social concern to church and society. They are to be consistent with existing ELCA social teaching even while they elaborate on and extend the ELCA’s address to pressing topics.

How are messages developed?

ELCA social messages are developed through an established process, which includes attention to existing ELCA teaching, consultation with specialists and church leaders, and public feedback. The ELCA director for Theological Ethics in the Office of the Presiding Bishop has responsibility for this work, using a team of consultants who have served as resources for the project. As with other social messages, a draft was posted for public comment—in this case from March 27 to May 27, 2020. The draft then was revised in light of feedback and presented as a proposed social message. This proposed message was reviewed by members of the Conference of Bishops and the Church Council. A two-thirds vote of the Church Council is required for adoption, but the vote on June 24, 2020, was unanimous.

What was the identified need?

- The social teaching of the Lutheran heritage and of the ELCA on themes such as the call to citizenship, civic engagement, and the view of government was not well-known to many, was not gathered in one place, and was not presented in language accessible to the average church member.
- There needed to be particular attention to addressing the duties of Christian citizenship.
- The contemporary political rhetoric and climate, as well as the upcoming election cycle, meant this message needed to be completed in 2020. It could then help Christians as they negotiated this election cycle and thought about its outcome.
- While the current political situation had sharpened the need, a churchwide process that invited all ELCA members to join a discernment was overdue and a message process could open conversation and provide a tool for years to come.

Parameters for the message’s development

Social messages are framed and constrained by existing teaching and major sources. The message’s major themes are identifiable from these sources:

1. Scripture
2. The ELCA constitution
3. Existing ELCA social statements such as *Church and Society*, *The Church and Criminal Justice*, and *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*
4. The ELCA constitution and the Book of Concord