



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.

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

[ELCA.org/socialmessages](http://ELCA.org/socialmessages)

## Introduction

This social message was adopted unanimously by the ELCA Church Council on June 24, 2020. The ELCA's 2019 Churchwide Assembly requested the development of a message and indicated an urgency for doing so. Those urging a social message pointed out that the upcoming election cycle meant our church needed an immediate and accessible official teaching document that addressed how and why Christians are to be active in the public square. The ELCA Church Council responded to the request by authorizing the development of a message at its November 2019 meeting.

This brief study guide is built around questions for discussions that can be selected for the particular interests of a study group. It is not a comprehensive curriculum but identifies key ideas of ELCA teaching (quotes from the message) and links those with multiple questions that aid participants to discuss the message in light of their current context. A fuller study guide—Bible study, prayers, learner activities, etc.—is expected in the future, but it was thought necessary to provide an immediate, if brief, guide to the message by mid-August 2020. While brief, the content of the social message and the questions will be relevant for many years and in all seasons, whether in an electoral cycle or not.<sup>1</sup>

### SESSION 1:

#### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM TODAY AND WHAT HAVE LUTHERANS TAUGHT ABOUT GOVERNMENT?

Questions regarding  
Section 1—the  
Introduction. (pages 1-4)

1. “Lutherans care about government because it is a gift from God intended for the safety and flourishing of human life.” *Would you agree? Why or why not?*
2. “There is a spirit of broad dissatisfaction, mistrust, protest, and even contempt of government in the United States.” *What has been your experience of government? Would you consider yourself to be in the 17% of people who trust federal, state, and local government, in the 83% who mistrust them, or somewhere in between?”*
3. “... consider life without the safety and services that a just and well-functioning government typically provides.” (See list beginning on p. 2) *To what extent has government worked for you and your neighbors?*
4. “All residents of the United States have a responsibility ... not to abandon our democracy but to engage it in a spirit of robust civic duty. For Lutherans, this responsibility is lived out as a calling from God.” *As a Christian, how have you thought of yourself as sharing responsibility as a citizen to make government work better? How have you participated in government at a local, state, or federal level? What would you like to find out more about?*
5. “Politics is key to self-governance” because it involves “negotiating how the benefits and burdens of living in a society are shared.” *What do you think is a proper role for our church as a corporate body in addressing the benefits and burdens of living in society? How do you define what is partisan?*

<sup>1</sup> See the Leader's Guide for tips on leading discussions of this guide and for additional information about the social message and its development.

## SESSION 2:

### GOD'S TWO WAYS OF GOVERNING

Questions regarding  
Section 2—the ELCA's  
theological framework.  
(pages 4-8)

1. "God's law is God's will for human life." *How do you see God's law as connected with human law? In your thinking, does God's law have any connection to government as an institution, or does God have nothing to do with human government?*
2. "God's rule in both hands is marked by equality." *Is it important to you that all humans be equal in the sight of God? What is the basis for that equality?*
3. "God's right-hand rule inspires a powerful impulse of empathy," defined as "the sympathetic capacity to feel for and with others." *Do you think it is important that we, as Christian citizens and residents of the United States, feel empathy toward others? Or is that irrelevant to the work of government? Why? Can you describe a time when you felt God was inspiring empathy in you?*
4. "God has concern for justice." *What do you think God's justice requires government to do? To provide "fair and proportionate punishment for wrongful deeds" or something more, to provide "restoration to individuals and groups who are injured by wrongful deeds"?*
5. "God imparts purpose to the roles of worldly governance." That is, "government, citizenship, and public service are gifts to be exercised with integrity and respect for the well-being of human communities." *Is this your understanding of the purpose of government?*
6. *Some believe that government's purpose is mostly to provide order in society. Would you agree with this minimal view, or do you think government has a broader purpose in preserving the well-being of human communities?*
7. *What about those who believe that government's purpose is simply to negotiate "power and gain"? Why is the ELCA's teaching against this view? Would you agree?*

## SESSION 3:

### GOVERNMENT ROLES AND FUNCTIONS: IS THE NEIGHBOR BEING SERVED?

Questions regarding  
Section 3—practical  
guidelines. (pages 9-14)

1. “Lutherans ask one simple but all-encompassing question: Is the neighbor being served?” *As Christians we know we are called to serve all neighbors, but should we expect government to do the same? Are there limits? What are some examples?*
2. This section makes 13 claims about how government should operate. Here are a few overall questions: *Did any claims on the list surprise you? What three do you think are the most important? Why? Would you change or drop any?* The following are questions about some of the specific claims.
3. **Unrestricted participation.** “Efforts to restrict access to voting should be condemned and resisted.” *Would you agree that “The political health of our nation still suffers from the stain of antidemocratic exclusion?” Are there examples in your area of this happening? What about in neighboring states?*
4. **Public service as vocation.** “One way Christian vocation finds expression is through dedicated, competent public service.” *How does the ELCA see that government employees, political candidates, campaign workers, and engaged citizens are doing their work as a God-given vocation? Why?*
5. **Functions and roles for public benefit.** “Laws, regulations, and enforcement are needed to separate officeholders from their personal interest, so that the neighbor is served.” *Do you think enough effort is being made to keep public servants focused upon public good? If not, what needs to be done?*
6. **Neighborly service to strangers.** “Government service should operate without discrimination in regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or other individual characteristics.” *Should this be a priority? Or has it already been achieved?*
7. **Adequate regulation.** “The proper concern of government is with the safety and well-being of the people within its boundaries, so it must serve as a referee in economic life.” *How should the government be involved in the regulation of economic life?*
8. **Reform of government.** “Government becomes evil when its goals, policies, and programs are designed or transformed into vehicles for harming the neighbor.” *Can you think of examples where government became evil? How does the message say citizens and residents should respond?*
9. **Protecting individual freedom and accepting limitations on freedom.** *How would you draw the line between individual liberties and the good of others in society?*

## SESSION 4:

### CALLED TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Questions regarding  
Section 4—a matter of  
discipleship. (pages 14-17)

1. “This church teaches that civic engagement is a vital aspect of discipleship for baptized Christians.” *What reasons do you find in the message to support the idea that ELCA members have an obligation for “civic engagement” – being active, conscientious citizens and community members? How have those reasons influenced your thinking?*
2. *The social message lists several ways for citizens and other residents to become involved. Circle the box of those you have done. Make a triangle around boxes of those you would like to try. Put an “x” through any you think inappropriate for church members. Share your thinking with at least one other person.*
  - informed and regular voting, including local elections
  - participation in government efforts such as the census
  - attending public meetings
  - public service as a government employee or in public office
  - involvement with political parties and campaigns
  - advocacy around particular issues
  - volunteering for public-service organizations
  - community organizing for social change
  - nonviolent protest
3. *As part of God’s church, why does the message indicate that we have a special obligation to witness to “justice, racial and social equity, reconciliation, and healing with compassion and imagination”?*
4. *“Lutheran citizens and residents also have a calling to address the destructive consequences of evil in government.” Would you agree or disagree? Which evils would you place as highest priority for addressing?*
5. *What do you take from this message that would be especially relevant during an election season?*
6. *What do you take from this message that would be relevant at times when there is no election underway?*
7. *Has this message given you any new insight about the relation of your faith and government?*