

ON THE GROUND: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY VERSUS NATIONAL IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

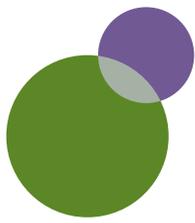
Lutherans believe their identities are found in God. In baptism we are marked with the cross of Christ, which binds us to God and neighbor in love. But we live in the world through a diverse and often messy mix of important relationships—family, friends, and fellow members of religious and civic communities. When the facets of our identity intersect, sometimes we wrestle with our identity as Christians versus our identity as people with different historical, legal, political, and cultural connections.

Since the arrival of European settlers and colonizers in North America through the founding of the United States and into the present time, the role of religion and ideas about God’s providence have fueled conflict and presented radically contrasting visions for life in this country. Some have drawn on the language of freedom and blessing to paint a picture of liberation flourishing in a new land. Others have noted the bitter contradictions between the divine peace proclaimed in Scripture and the realities of theft, enslavement, forced assimilation, and sanctioned violence in our national history.

These different visions have been revealed in current debates about “Christian nationalism.” Put simply, Christian nationalism in the United States of America describes a set of beliefs and practices where Christianity holds a central and necessary role in the country’s founding and a continued role in sustaining its values and future. Faith and patriotism are dangerously conflated. This movement often comes packaged with the idea that the survival of the nation and the church are yoked together, such that some version of dominant Christianity is necessary for the United States to continue, and faithful citizens are seen as battling against other religious and nonreligious traditions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What expressions of Christian nationalism have you noticed in recent events, either on the national stage or among your family, friends, and neighbors?
2. If somebody announced during a Bible study or church function that the United States is a “Christian nation,” how would you interpret this statement? What is an appropriate Christian response?
3. Christian identity has been claimed by political movements as varied as the Ku Klux Klan, the German National Socialists, antiapartheid activists in Namibia, and civil rights activists in the U.S. How do you faithfully assess when Christian identity can be appropriately yoked with a movement?
4. How should Christians distinguish between Christian nationalism and other forms of patriotism or civic pride?
5. How does the Lutheran teaching about God’s “two kingdoms” or “two governments” support or undermine Christian nationalism? Why is or isn’t there ever a time when one’s civic identity should overtake one’s Christian identity?



ON THE GROUND: COUNTY SUPERVISOR WEIGHS INDUSTRIAL-SCALE SOLAR DECISIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Wendy wasn't sure how she should vote. The following week, she and the other county supervisors would consider a one-year moratorium on industrial-scale solar projects. From the phone calls and emails she had been receiving, she knew that many of her constituents supported the moratorium. Some—in fact a very vocal group—preferred that the county ban such projects long-term.

The issue came to a head when the investor-owned utility that had operated a coal-fired power plant in their rural county for 75 years announced its intention to close the plant and replace at least half its generating capacity with a large, industrial-scale solar project. The company emphasized that the project was in full compliance with existing zoning laws and aligned with the company's commitment to transition as quickly as possible from fossil fuels to a clean-energy future.

Wendy could see both sides of the issue. On the one hand:

- Given the rapid onset of climate change, the United States needed to transition away from fossil fuels and toward renewables as quickly as possible. Wendy loves her grandchildren and thinks often of their future in a changing climate.
- The new solar facility would restore at least half the tax base that would be lost when the coal-fired power plant closed, thereby lessening the long-term burden on county taxpayers.
- Electricity from the solar arrays would be generated during peak hours, when electricity demand is high, and complement wind energy generated.
- Three of the county's larger farms would benefit from substantial annual land-lease payments to host the solar arrays on their land for the next 20 years.

On the other hand:

- Many of Wendy's constituents worried that this industrial solar project would take agricultural land out of production and thus harm the county's agricultural base.
- Though installation of the solar panels would create many construction jobs in the short term, the facility would not replace the 40-50 jobs lost with the coal plant closure.
- To her constituents' irritation, the power generated by the solar arrays would be transported over high-voltage lines to urban communities in other states and not all consumed locally. However, this was nothing new; the coal-fired plant exported its power in the same way.
- The electric utility would likely seek to recover the construction costs for its new solar facility through a rate increase, and even small rate increases were felt by those with the lowest incomes.

On Sunday, sitting in her usual pew in the Lutheran church where she had been baptized, confirmed, and married, Wendy found herself pondering the larger context of these arguments:

- Loss of farmland is a serious concern, but its primary cause, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Farmland Information Center, is not renewable energy development but urban sprawl.¹ No one was complaining about the beautiful new neighborhoods going up where there were once rows of corn.
- American agriculture is enormously productive, and many boast that American farmers “feed the world,” yet at least 40% of U.S. corn production is used to produce ethanol for gas tanks. Most of the rest becomes silage for animal feed, a step away from food on plates or milk in glasses.
- Wendy suspected that some opposition to the solar project was due to the threat electric cars pose to the ethanol industry. The three farmers who would host the solar facility were engaged in traditional row-crop production. They had done the math and determined that they could make more money by leasing their land for solar energy production than by growing corn and beans for ethanol and biodiesel.
- Wendy also suspected that some opposed the facility because only a few farmers in their county would benefit directly from the project. In contrast, many farmers benefited from hosting wind turbines on their land, which explained why there was greater support for large wind farms.

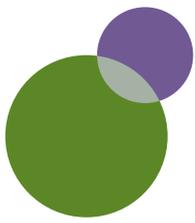
As Wendy pondered how to vote on the moratorium, she wrestled with three key questions:

- To whom is she accountable—the present generations who elected her and expect her to represent their interests or the future generations who would benefit from the reduced greenhouse gas emissions and less expensive renewable energy produced by the solar facility?
- To what extent should county-level officials make decisions that support or hinder the national expansion of renewable energy, given the federal government’s recent commitment to increase the amount of renewable energy powering the U.S. economy?
- What constitutes leadership by elected officials? Is it simply a matter of discerning the opinions of constituents, or can it include taking unpopular stands for good reasons?
- Did the ELCA have any guidance for her as she considered her responsibilities as a county supervisor?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What considerations should affect Wendy’s vote?
2. How should Wendy’s faith be woven into her decision?
3. What would you choose to do if you were her?
4. Have you had similar issues where you live?

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), “[Farms and Land in America](#),” February 2022; Farmland Information Center, “[Farms Under Threat: The State of the States](#),” American Farmland Trust, 2020.



ON THE GROUND: FAKE NEWS AND FALSE WITNESS

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INTRODUCTION

The success of the Reformation was enabled by innovations in the printed word. Gutenberg’s printing press allowed for reformers to respond quickly to challenges and share ideas with readers near and far. Martin Luther and other Reformation leaders made strategic use of educational and controversial writings, often paired with evocative images, to impress their ideas upon people. The power of words heard and received is a central conviction in Lutheran theology; we believe that, through the Holy Spirit, the Word continues to shape us.

This soaring and inspirational hope for the word is often harder to see in our civic life, especially now, when divisive and dishonest words do more to shape our lives together, instruction seems less important than outcome, and “truth” is often reduced to whatever will turn out voters or demonize opponents. How do we, as people of faith, understand and respond to these polarizing trends?

“A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on.”

—C.H. Spurgeon, *Gems From Spurgeon* (1859)

The Eighth Commandment:
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.

—Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*

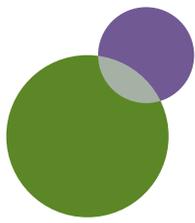
CASE STUDY

Imagine the following scenario:

As you gather for Sunday dinner with your extended family, your cousin begins to talk loudly about the threat to the nation posed by right-wing extremists. “You didn’t see the story on MSNBC last night?” he shouts. “You really missed something! Let me send you this webpage I just read; it lays out their real strategy to capture liberals and construct labor zones, sending the Texas National Guard into California to set up a puppet government.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Fake news is a form of false witness, a sin named in the Eighth Commandment. When we confess our sins in worship, we ask God to “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name.” Do you find it easier to notice when others are bearing false witness than to notice when you are? How can we check and correct ourselves?
2. Many people don’t connect our commandment against bearing false witness with believing or spreading political lies or half-truths. How likely are you to accept false witness related to politics when it comes from media or a person you agree with politically? How has social media affected your inclination to spread unsubstantiated claims as truth?
3. Social scientists often talk about social and emotional barriers. Social barriers relate to our individual experiences related to gender, ethnicity, culture, economic conditions, and so on. Emotional barriers relate to how we feel. For example, if you feel angry or threatened, your brain won’t process information in the same way as if you feel calm. What social and emotional barriers do you encounter when you challenge false witness in the form of misunderstandings, lies, conspiracy theories, and so on? What are your ideas or best experiences on how to discuss difficult topics in ways that deescalate polarization?
4. When you are corrected or challenged about something you’ve said, written, or shared on social media that is, at best, unverified or, at worst, false witness, how do you respond? How would you respond if your pastor quietly or publicly asked you to stop spreading certain information because doing so constituted false witness?
5. What might Luther’s suggestion to see our neighbor “in the best possible light” mean for our political discourse? How do we draw the line so that we don’t tolerate injustice or condone evil?
6. A recent topic of public discourse that has triggered great polarization relates to whether children are taught all aspects of American history in school—the good as well as the bad. How do you relate this debate to our Lutheran understanding of false witness?
7. Do you think Christian education should be limited to biblical stories and church history, or can your congregation be a forum for critically evaluating factual statements from media and personal contacts?



ON THE GROUND: GENERATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS OF PUBLIC POLICY

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

This is the story of 896 W. Leavy Street in Chicago, Ill.

The first couple to live at 896 W. Leavy were Magnus and Emma Olson. Their respective families had both immigrated from Norway to the United States in search of a better life after their rocky family farms couldn't be divided up any further. Magnus' parents found work in a factory; eventually, they were able to rent a safe, cozy apartment.

Upon graduating from high school, Magnus was drafted into the Navy and served honorably in World War II. He returned home to a grateful nation and married Emma, his high school sweetheart. Through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the “G.I. Bill”), Magnus and Emma were able to purchase the newly built home at 896 W. Leavy. As the babies came, they felt as if they were living the American dream.

Magnus and Emma had many happy times at 896 W. Leavy. After many years, however, they heard talk about the neighborhood being “in decline.” Many of the families who had raised their children together after the war were selling their homes and moving to the suburbs. Magnus and Emma decided they should use the equity they had built up in 896 W. Leavy to buy a bigger home that would be a better investment. When the aging couple decided to move into senior housing, they sold the home in the suburbs and used the proceeds to help pay for their grandchildren's college costs, proud that all of them were able to continue their education.

The next couple to call 896 W. Leavy home were John and Gloria Luther. Both were descended from ancestors who had survived slavery. Their parents were born in the South and, as part of the Great Migration, had moved to Chicago in search of a better life for their children.

John had served in the U.S. Army and, shortly after the war ended, returned to Chicago with an honorable discharge. John noted that he was treated respectfully when fighting for democracy in France but felt like a second-class citizen back in the U.S. After he and Gloria married, they lived with her parents. When they approached a bank to inquire about a mortgage, benefits of the G.I. Bill were not extended to John because of his skin color.ⁱ Thousands of African American veterans received the same treatment.

Eventually John and Gloria entered a contract for deed with the real estate company that had purchased 896 W. Leavy from the Olsons. The company priced the home much higher than they had paid Magnus and Emma. The interest rate was exorbitant, and if a payment was missed, the company could take the house back. This was all in the contract, but to John and Gloria, its terms seemed like the only option if they wanted to raise their children in a single-family house.

John and Gloria's family grew and thrived at 896 W. Leavy. The parents penciled the heights of their children on a length of wood trim just as Magnus and Emma had with their children. The steep contract payments prevented John and Gloria from saving, but they made the deal work until John was injured on the job and let go. Gloria's wages weren't enough to cover the contract payments. Tragically close to the end of their contract, John and Gloria were evicted from their house and left with no equity.ⁱⁱ They moved in with an adult daughter while John mended. With support from their children, they think they can retire and move into a subsidized apartment. But they grieve not being able to leave the house or funds from its sale to their children. Instead, they are relying on them for support.

The house at 896 W. Leavy sat vacant for a while. A burst pipe caused significant damage. The house was sold to investors who had been quietly taking over the neighborhood by tearing down small homes and building trendy houses in the same footprint. As developers moved in, costs went up and families moved out.

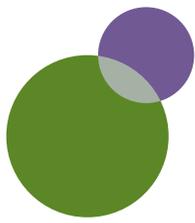
Now 896 W. Leavy is leased by four unrelated young professionals, none of whom is married or can afford to rent, much less buy, property on their own. Drinking coffee over the house's granite kitchen counter, they discuss their varying levels of student and credit card debt. Daycare and diapers just don't fit into the budget.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The same G.I. Bill that helped build a middle-class white America was denied to Black America. What other effects do you think systemic inequality have had on education, physical and mental health, redlining, crime, civil rights and so on?
2. Share, as you are willing, the impact of generational wealth on your family.
3. What role does the church have in naming injustices from the past that affect us today?
4. What role does the church have in correcting injustices from the past that affect us today?

i Martin, David, "Some Black Veterans Were Denied G.I. Bill Benefits After World War II. Some Lawmakers Want to Correct the Historical Record.," CBS News, December 27, 2021, www.cbsnews.com/news/g-i-bill-revival-black-veterans-congress/.

ii Moore, Natalie, "Contract Buying Robbed Black Families in Chicago of Billions," National Public Radio, May 30, 2019, www.npr.org/local/309/2019/05/30/728122642/contract-buying-robbed-black-families-in-chicago-of-billions.



ON THE GROUND: MIGRANT WORKERS

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how much we depend on the labor of essential workers. The heroes of the early pandemic were not only the scientists who developed a vaccine in record time but also the average people working in grocery stores, those harvesting and processing food, and those caring for our sick and elderly. Many of the hands that feed and care for us are migrants’ hands. Despite the debt of gratitude we owe to those who do some of the hardest, lowest-paid essential work, our society continues to vilify immigrant workers. Often they are treated as a problem to be solved rather than human beings who deserve the same respect and dignity as anyone else.

Imagine a member of your congregation is a young woman, the mother of two small children. For the last five years she has been productively employed as a migrant worker in a meatpacking facility. A recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid on another meatpacking facility resulted in more than 100 workers being arrested and deported, leaving her feeling panicked about her immigration status. As a teenager, she was sexually assaulted by gang members, and her grandmother, with whom she lived, sent her to the U.S. They both felt that the only way of keeping her safe was for her to leave the country, even if this meant coming to the United States illegally. Because she was a minor when she arrived, a cousin connected her with an immigration attorney to help her apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status to avoid deportation. A significant amount of money was paid to the lawyer, who told the young woman that she had submitted her application to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. But later, watching the news, she learned that the lawyer had defrauded her and many other clients, keeping the money but never submitting the application paperwork. Everything is in limbo.

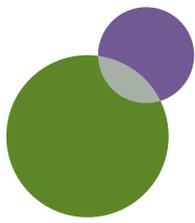
Her primary concern now is for her children should she be arrested and deported. Because they were born in the U.S., they are citizens. She reached out to her pastor, who convened a group of church members to discern how the congregation might best help her. In researching her situation, the group discovered that there are many other cases like hers in their community. Understanding the seriousness of leaving one’s family and country, the contribution that migrants make to society, and the terrible anxiety of living in limbo, they wonder how they might advocate for people in similar situations. They have named their group the Leviticus 19:34 Committee: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do or don’t you believe it appropriate for the church to get involved in this issue? Do you consider it political, or biblical, or both?
2. What are appropriate ways for the church to be involved?
3. What principles should guide the church if it decides to advocate for U.S. residents who lack legal immigration status?

ELCA RESOURCES ON MIGRATION

- The ELCA's "Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities" strategy (AMMPARO; in Spanish, *amparo* means "the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage"), [ELCA.org/AMMPARO](https://www.elca.org/AMMPARO).
- The ELCA's social message "Immigration" (1998): download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ImmigrationSM.pdf.
- ELCA World Hunger, "Migration Policy: Hunger Policy Podcast December 2021," blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/immigrationpodcast/.
- Learn about accompanying migrant children and families through the Guardian Angel Program as the physical presence of the church in the courtroom, vimeo.com/157458987.



ON THE GROUND: SEPARATION OF CHURCH (CHOIR) AND STATE

The “On the Ground” scenarios are provided as concrete examples pulled from current events. You are invited to select one or more of these options to discuss, applying what has been studied while continuing to model the civility committed to in the conversation covenant as an act of discipleship.

Your church choir has been invited by a local civic group to sing at an annual food pantry fundraiser. In prior years this event rotated among some of the larger churches in town. The public was invited (donations welcome!), and many church choirs would present Christmas songs. The entire event was broadcast live on a local radio station, and local businesses would staff the donation lines. This year, to protect older choir members during the pandemic, choirs have been invited to record a few songs. A volunteer will compile the videos into one show, and the entire thing will play on the municipality’s public access station. A phone number to donate to the food pantry will be embedded onscreen.

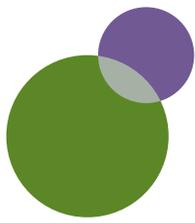
After seeing the plan for the fundraiser on the minutes of the municipality’s council meeting, a local activist from the Freedom From Religion Foundation complains to the mayor and town council that featuring Christian music on the taxpayer-funded public access television station amounts to endorsing a religion.

On advice from the municipal lawyer, the council advises the volunteer leaders for the pantry fundraiser that they can keep the church choirs if they also include secular groups and other faiths. Among the other groups now scheduled to perform are children from a nearby synagogue, a sorority from a historically Black college celebrating Kwanzaa, an atheist barbershop quartet, and members of a regional chapter of a neopagan group celebrating the winter solstice through dance. There’s also a subtle hint that more Santa and less Baby Jesus might be appropriate for song selections this year.

The choir director is extremely upset that the Christian character of this feed-the-hungry event is being changed, and wants to pull out in protest. The pastor believes that the choir should participate, seeing the program as an opportunity to promote mission and ministry among the broader community.

DISCUSSION

Based on your knowledge of biblical, theological, and constitutional principles, what would you do?



ON THE GROUND: TRIBAL NATIONS AND U.S. TERRITORIES

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In addition to the 50 states constituting the United States of America, there are also territories and American Indian tribes and nations. The ELCA membership includes American Indians and Alaska Natives as well as people from the territories, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

These diverse peoples all lack full inclusion and participation in the government whose decisions affect their well-being. None has full representation in Congress, with a vote on the floor; like the District of Columbia, they have a representative with voice but no vote. People living in the territories are U.S. citizens, subject to the Selective Service Act, and have a long tradition of distinguished service in the U.S. military—to the point of making the ultimate sacrifice—yet they lack the right to elect their own commander-in-chief.

We should note that none of these U.S. territories chose their jurisdiction; they joined the nation either as purchases (in the case of the U.S. Virgin Islands, acquired from Denmark) or as a bounty of the Spanish-American War (in the case of Guam and Puerto Rico). The territories’ sovereignty issues are many and varied, but in the case of Puerto Rico, The Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico created under the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act of 2016 by the U.S. Congress holds much power. It’s seven members are appointed by the U.S. president and given oversight and veto power over economic decisions made by the Puerto Rico’s democratically elected governor and House of Representatives. This is seen by many as further contradicting the fundamental principle of consent of the governed.

The history of the relationship between the U.S. government and American Indian tribes is perhaps more well-known by the American public than that of the territories. Theirs is a complicated history of genocidal violence, of white settlers taking possession of Indian land, of tribes being forcibly displaced or relocated from their lands, of treaties made and broken, of famine as a result of broken treaties, and of continual intrusions into sovereign tribal territories by private interests that pollute water, desecrate holy places, and do violence to people—often with impunity. This has included violence against women and girls, who are murdered or go missing, and the systemic, institutional violence of separating children from their parents and sending them to boarding schools, where they were punished for speaking their native languages, taught to look down on their own ancestral heritages, and forced to embrace the ways of the white Euro-American colonizers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What responsibility does the ELCA have to advocate for the democratic inclusion of U.S. territories, American Indians, and Alaska Natives?
2. On whose ancestral lands was this congregation built? What is known about the history of the land acquisition?
3. Why does or doesn’t it surprise you that the “one person–one vote” issues from the earliest days of our republic still haven’t been resolved in regard to U.S. territories? How might the theology of our churches have contributed to those injustices? What can our churches do to address them?

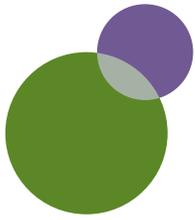
4. How can we learn more about each other and about the issues important to underrepresented groups, without blame or defensiveness? How can we show solidarity toward each other, especially in the public sphere of civic engagement?
5. When considering the plight of U.S. territories and tribal nations, what might Christian love of neighbor look like to you?

For resources on ELCA–American Indian relations see the ELCA's Indigenous Ministries and Tribal Relations page at [ELCA.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native](https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native).

For resources from the Library of Congress on the history of U.S. and Native American relations see www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/native-american/.

For a helpful chart identifying the U.S. territories see “The Territories: They Are Us,” available at www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/magazine/articles/2018/SL_0118-Stats.pdf.

For an article on the economic crisis in Puerto Rico see [cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2022/08/puerto-rico-at-a-crossroads-as-economic-crisis-takes-toll](https://www.cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2022/08/puerto-rico-at-a-crossroads-as-economic-crisis-takes-toll).



ON THE GROUND: ZONING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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YOUR COUNTY

You live in a county that is mixed urban, suburban, and rural. By population, your county is about 70% urban/suburban and about 30% rural. In recent years your county’s population has grown more slowly than the state’s overall. The county is racially and ethnically diverse, including in rural areas, though rural diversity is somewhat less than urban and suburban. There are no significant employment or income differences among ethnic and racial groups. County unemployment is below the national and state averages. Wages are at about the state average and below the national average.

About 65% of the county’s land is rural. Much of it is used for farming and ranching, with some private nonagricultural residences, public and private woods, and open areas. There are also several wildlife migration routes, some across public lands, and others where private landowners have accommodated wildlife routes. About half the agricultural land is worked by family farmers and ranchers whose families have been in your county for multiple generations.

The surrounding counties are more urban and suburban than yours; one has a large metropolitan area. Throughout the region, including in your county, housing demand is up and vacancy rates are down. There is demand by developers, backed by some state and county officials, to open up more of your county for housing and economic development.

THE PARCEL SIZE PROPOSAL

The county zoning board is considering reducing the minimum-size lot requirement throughout the county and especially in rural areas. Federal and state regulation is minimal, so the county has wide discretion.

Currently, minimum lot sizes for homes, apartment/condo complexes and businesses are quite small in urban parts of the county, somewhat larger in suburban areas, and quite large in rural areas. There are no industrial uses permitted in rural areas.

Advocates of the proposed change argue that a reduction in minimum parcel size would:

- Open rural areas to economic development.
- Increase land values in rural areas.
- Significantly increase housing supply, which would either decrease the pressure on housing (if population remained about the same) or attract new businesses and their employees from the county’s urban and suburban areas and surrounding counties.
- Improve the county’s tax revenue base, allowing the county to provide significantly more funding for education, infrastructure, and other social services.

Opponents of the proposal claim that increased economic development would:

- Increase population in the county more than is desirable.
- Increase property taxes (if land values rise significantly) to a level that would price out many county natives and longtime residents in the long term, with the strongest impact on younger residents and lower-wage earners.

- Change the character of the county at the expense of longtime residents, including farmers and ranchers and their workers, whose history, culture, and traditions in the county are important and should be preserved as much as possible.

Opponents also note that:

- Housing development possibilities still exist in urban and suburban areas through additional vertical development, though they are likely less profitable for developers than rural properties marketed as “serene nature” outside the county’s major population centers.
- While the county has been able to preserve wildlife migration routes with many rural private landowners now, the change in lot size and exponential increase in the number of landowners will make preservation of migration routes much more difficult.
- Eliminating agricultural and rural land tends to be irreversible—you rarely get it back once it’s gone—so the county should prioritize protecting it for as long as possible.

A third group opposes the zoning board’s proposal on the grounds that it doesn’t go far enough. In this group’s view, the county should have no role in zoning and should eliminate all zoning restrictions. It believes that a property owner should not be restricted in use of their land; if an owner wants to put a business or an industrial facility on their own property, or sell land in smaller parcels than currently permitted, they should be allowed to do so.

The zoning board is holding public meetings on the proposal. Board members believe that if the proposal were put to a countywide popular vote, it would win, if only because most urban and suburban residents would support it. However, there is little current interest in holding such a vote, so the zoning board’s decision will be the county’s decision.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you attend and participate in the public meetings the county holds, or is this an issue you don’t much care about? If you are apathetic, what makes you so?
2. Where do you come out on the theological, biblical, and democratic principles you’ve been discussing in regard to the proposal?
3. Take a perspective counter to your own and construct the strongest argument you can for its theological, biblical, and democratic merits. Does this change your view at all?
4. Would your stance on this issue depend on whether you are native to the county or recently arrived? Whether you are younger, middle-aged, or older? Which racial or ethnic group(s) you identify with? Whether your economic position is above or below average? Whether you’re retired or still working? Whether you live in a rural, urban, or suburban community? In each case, think about why your view changes or doesn’t, and how you might adjust public policy to help those disadvantaged by your position.
5. Why do you think the proposal should be put to a public vote or, conversely, decided by the zoning board?

Whether you support or oppose the proposal, you can also propose your own changes. For example, you might explicitly protect wildlife migration routes, set aside a certain number of housing units for lower-income families, or mandate some sort of agricultural preservation.