Recommendation:
Background and Resolutions for Recommended, Proposed Social Statement on Faith and Civic Life & Its Implementing Resolutions

Background

Authorization and explanation of process

The development of a social statement on civic life was authorized by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, which meant the ELCA Task Force for Studies on Civic Life and Faith began its work in the summer of the COVID-19 pandemic. The task force had to find innovative ways to listen to the concerns of ELCA members and to meet with the specialists who informed their study of the issues. Through online means they carried on the work until in-person listening events and meetings were possible. After listening to the church and engaging in deep enquiry, the task force created a study with six modules for congregation use that was available throughout 2023. Feedback from the study indicated congregations found it quite useful as a way to enter challenging conversations around civic life, government, faith-based public action, religious liberty, Christian nationalism, and other topics.

Input from study responses helped the task force understand more deeply the concerns of ELCA members about civic life as the task force crafted the *Draft Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith.* During the 10-month comment period on the draft, literally thousands of individuals shared feedback via the online survey, emails, and approximately 50 hearings around this church hosted by task force members. Drawing on this feedback, and with further reflection, the task force found consensus around a proposed statement entitled "Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All." The task force also crafted a set of implementing resolutions.

In line with ELCA social statement protocol, the ELCA Conference of Bishops and the ELCA Church Council reviewed both the proposed text and the implementing resolutions in early 2025 with the opportunity to make suggestions to clarify and strengthen the proposed documents. The ELCA Church Council has strongly recommended both the text and the implementing resolutions to the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly for adoption. First the statement and then the implementing resolutions will be considered, and each requires a two-thirds vote for adoption.

Executive summary

This social statement is a "big-picture" document. The six sections systematically mediate between broad theological, ethical, political, and social principles to provide reasoning that responds to questions about and obstacles to the flourishing of civic life. The statement title captures the primary theme, that God intends for civic life to seek the well-being of all persons in a community. Section I assembles and explicates key Lutheran themes about civic life, stressing how God: a) is at work in society and b) summons Jesus' followers to join in that work through civic institutions. Section II provides a thick description of the nature of civic life and addresses themes including the call to public service, the role of congregations as sites of lively discernment, and guidance for responsibly navigating the relationship between the rostered ministers' office and their public role in society.

Sections III and IV give principled assessments of the U.S. Constitution and of the meaning of the First Amendment, respectively, which are rare investigations for religious documents. In the process, the statement provides a thick, theologically grounded description of power. That is, it makes specific claims about how all power is grounded in God, how God intends that power to be used, and what criteria follow for the proper use of power in civic life.

Section V provides a constructive proposal for understanding the critical relationship between religious organizations and political authority framed by ELCA principles that religious organizations should "work with civil authorities" while "maintaining institutional separation in a relation of functional interaction." The final section applies these general principles to selected questions not addressed in other ELCA social teaching. Examples include discussions of "hyperpartisan polarization," the nature of constructive political discourse, American Indian tribal sovereignty, criteria for comprehensive civics education, and others.

Because civic life is a massive topic, the statement naturally feels overwhelming, especially because it does not shrink from addressing "big" controversies such as religious liberty, Christian nationalism, and others. While the statement does flow as a sustained argument, it also provides annotated contents pages and built-in links that allow readers to go directly to matters of interest. Annotated contents pages are not summaries of each article but make it

easy to locate materials relevant to a particular reader. There also are cross-references within articles to other articles. Key terms are defined in a glossary.

Recommended for assembly action:

To adopt the proposed social statement "Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All" as a social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in accordance with the "Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns" (2018).

Recommended for assembly action:

To adopt the recommended proposed implementing resolutions from "Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All" as resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in accordance with the "Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns" (2018).

1. **To urge members of this church to pray for, participate in, and advocate for civic life in the United States that reflects God's activity and call, seeking the well-being of all people and creation marked by justice and peace;**
2. **To encourage members to draw inspiration from the ELCA social message on "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy," which highlights the call to embrace daily our baptismal vocation through active participation in self-governance;**
3. **To reaffirm and encourage use across this church of other existing social teaching and policy documents that promote robust and wise civic participation, such as those that address matters of voting, campaign finance, public service, nonviolent protest, and the like;**
4. **To recognize with deep appreciation the commitments and efforts by those in this church—including but not limited to churchwide organization teams such as Witness in Society and Building Resilient Communities, as well as the many church-related social ministry organizations and educational institutions—that contribute to healthy civic life through service, advocacy, or education;**
5. **To call upon all members of this church to intentionally evaluate the dangers of polarization and the threats posed by disregard for democratic practices and self-government;**
6. **To encourage ELCA worshiping assemblies and ministries to build bridges, foster reconciliation, practice communal discernment, provide opportunities for difficult conversations, and address polarization constructively in their communities;**
7. **To encourage synod leaders, in collaboration with other appropriate bodies, to explore creating or expanding state public policy advocacy in their domains as part of the ELCA Witness in Society network, similar to those already existing in several states;**
8. **To direct the churchwide organization, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, theologians and ethicists, and rostered ministers, as well as elected lay leaders, to develop guidelines and protections consistent with this social statement regarding the roles in civic life of representatives of this church with official responsibility to preach, teach, and lead on behalf of this church;**
9. **To call upon the publishing and educational ministries of this church, including but not limited to Augsburg Fortress Publishers, to consider the need for civics education curricula, civic participation guidance, and related theological reflection, and to create these in multiple formats, including multimedia and online;**
10. **To call upon the publishing and educational ministries of this church, including but not limited to Augsburg Fortress Publishers, to explore the need for resources dedicated to nonviolent resistance and peaceful engagement in civic life, with special concern for materials dedicated to religious and political histories, liturgical guidance, and training for rostered and lay leaders;**
11. **To direct the Witness in Society team of the churchwide organization and call upon all expressions of this church in their advocacy efforts to support and advocate for policies and laws consistent with this social statement and to give sustained attention to the fresh convictions and commitments found here in its creation of programs and projects;**
12. **To direct the Ecumenical and Inter-religious Relations team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop to share this statement as a resource for dialogue, discernment, and collaboration with ecumenical and inter-religious partners toward the well-being of all people and creation from within the U.S. context;**

13. **To urge faculty, staff, and administrators of ELCA-related colleges, universities, and seminaries to renew and emphasize education toward callings in public service and to model and encourage dynamic civic participation among their students;**
14. **To direct appropriate units in the churchwide organization, coordinated by the Office of the Presiding Bishop, to establish or oversee processes for implementation of these resolutions, with an initial report to the Fall 2027 meeting of the Church Council.**

Recommended Proposed Social Statement for ELCA Churchwide Assembly '25 action

A social statement on:

Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All

[Note to reader: This is NOT official ELCA teaching but has been recommended by the Church Council for adoption by the 2025 Churchwide Assembly. The annotated guide to content here allows readers to move easily to specific topics if they wish. It is <u>not</u> a summary of each article or of the whole. The items in yellow highlight indicate internal links that are intended but not yet inserted.

An Annotated Guide to Content

*The following annotations **do not** summarize each article but provide a reference to the article's content.*

Article 8 God provides an abundance of human capacities such as reason, imagination, experience, and emotion for use toward seeking healthy civic life. We are to use these through communal discernment to determine what will further the well-being of society here and now. [Page 11]
Article 9 The gifts of God for the good of civic life are available to all people, and the Scriptures accordingly instruct all to do justice and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Christians do not have privileged knowledge about civic life but rely on good reasoning and welcome the good ideas and contributions of all people who seek to bring about well-being in society. [Page 12]

Section II. God Calls All People to Robust Civic Participation

Article 10 Civic life includes all activities and institutions enabling life in public community, from the local to the international. Our church affirms that anyone contributing to a community's well-being through civic participation is using gifts provided by God, knowingly or not. The ELCA celebrates the many ways in which God calls people into lives of service for the good of the community. [Page 13]
Article 11 The ELCA affirms that civic service is a valued and dignified way to carry out God's calling. This means that the public's default stance toward those engaged in public service should be one of respect but also that civic leaders and officials are accountable for the ways they fail to work for the good of all. [Page 14]
Article 12 The church's worshiping assemblies are rooted in Word and Sacrament. Worship, from gathering to sending, prepares and encourages us to join God's activity in civic life. [Page 14]
Article 13 Religious traditions can offer gifts of vision and compassion sorely needed in contemporary civic life but can also be unproductively divisive, even damaging. This means that religious people must discern carefully how best to engage in civic life to promote justice and reconciliation. [Page 15]
Article 14 Our church teaches that there is no person for whom Christ did not die and that, in baptism, Christians are made one people in Christ. This means that we should seek to create Christian communities of moral discernment even when, and especially when, we have disagreements. [Page 15]
Article 15 The ELCA has a long-standing commitment to engage civic life through its members, congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, and church-related institutions. Foundational aspects of what that means were addressed initially in the social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (1991). [Page 16]
Article 16 The Scriptures teach that following Jesus includes a prophetic dimension, which lifts up a vision of social well-being. This means Christians are to act in civic life for the benefit of the neighbor, especially our marginalized or oppressed neighbors. We should evaluate actions and policies according to whether they best serve the needs of these neighbors as a guide to determining the common good. [Page 16]
Article 17 The varied forms of advocacy discussed in this article, including faith-based organizing, can play a transformative role in a polarized political world by bringing people together in discernment and action for the common good. [Page 17]
Article 18 The Lutheran tradition teaches that God creates humans as political beings and that political authority is, in principle, God's gift. This church believes that political decisions must be guided by well-considered ethics. "Politics," properly understood, means negotiating how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are shared. Politics and ethics are necessarily related. Ethics discerns; politics implements. [Page 18]
Article 19 Jesus was not political in the sense of affiliating with a particular political party or ideology. At the same time, when Christians affirm that "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9), it is a political as well as a theological claim. This affirmation pulls Christians into civic and political life as Jesus was, so that they might love and serve neighbor justice. At the same time, Jesus is Lord means Christians cannot give their primary loyalty to *any* government, nation, civic order, or individuals. [Page 19]

Article 20 Baptism includes a commitment to participate in civic life. The public role of rostered ministers in the church produces unique opportunities and challenges for their civic leadership and participation. This article provides guiding reflections as they seek to live out their calling. [Page 19]

Section III. Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government

Article 21 The Lutheran Confessions teach that governmental authority is an instrument of God to help order social benefits and guard against human evil. Yet political authority is itself subject to sin. This means that Lutherans ought to maintain a watchful stance toward all government and its actions. This stance values government and cooperates when appropriate, while it is ready to question and resist the misuse of political authority when necessary. [Page 21]

Article 22 The recognition that God's power seeks the good of society is central to the Lutheran tradition. This church teaches that any use of power can be assessed by whether it amplifies God's purpose for people and groups. This view provides a standard by which all power can be evaluated and is quite different from the usual political model of power. [Page 22]

Article 23 The criterion of God's power and purpose leads to additional criteria for assessing government action, including the value of mutual self-determination. This concept shares little in common with the ideology of "individualism." [Page 23]

Article 24 In the United States, the Constitution is the fundamental framework of political authority and expresses the aspirations for government in this country. This means that the values expressed in the Constitution can be used to assess whether governments (federal, state, and local) serve social well-being. [Page 25]

Article 25 The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: "we the people." This phrase indicates a preference for mutual self-determination, though originally that preference was largely limited to property-owning white males. Over time, constitutional amendments have expanded the right of mutual self-determination through voting. [Page 26]

Article 26 This social statement identifies both theological and constitutional criteria to assess government authority and its activity. This article describes several specific applications of those criteria and specific questions to help assess governmental policies, laws, and regulations. [Page 26]

Article 27 The Constitution forbids religious tests for U.S. officeholders, and the First Amendment to the Constitution is neutral toward religion. This means that the Constitution favors religious freedom for every individual in this country. [Page 27]

Article 28 The U.S. sovereign is not "we the Christians" but "we the people." The U.S. governing structure and authority is not fundamentally Christian in origin, structure, or intent. [Page 27]

Section IV. Religion and the First Amendment

Article 29 The First Amendment begins with two clauses: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion [known as the Establishment Clause], or prohibiting the free exercise thereof [known as the Free Exercise Clause]." Section IV examines these clauses, their relationship, and their meaning for civic life today. [Page 28]

Article 30 The Establishment Clause imposes limits on government's involvement with religion. Government's authority extends only to secular matters, not to people's relationships with the sacred. This means that government may neither promote one religion's view nor decide for any religious institution on matters that are explicitly religious in nature. [Page 29]

Article 31 The Establishment and Free Exercise clauses work together to promote religious diversity. This means that each religious community can gather and worship as it chooses and that each community and its members can engage in public life on an equal basis with all others. [Page 30]

Article 32 "Free exercise" of religion has never been interpreted by the courts as an absolute right. When religiously motivated conduct conflicts with civil law or regulation, this church affirms that government

should try to accommodate religious practices so long as doing this does not damage important public interests or burden the rights of others. [Page 31]

Article 33 The Establishment Clause applies to the government's conduct in relation to religious institutions. The First Amendment does not discourage, much less prohibit, religious individuals or communities from participating in public life. [Page 33]

Section V. Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations and Political Authority

Article 34 What does the ELCA believe to be the constructive relationship between religious institutions and political authority? The ELCA reaffirms concepts expressed in its constitution: that this church should "work with civil authorities" while "maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction." [Page 33]

Article 35 "Work with civil authorities" is a consequence of faithful recognition that God is at work in civic life and of the people's sovereignty as expressed in the U.S. Constitution. It means that the church and church-related organizations should work with governmental and other civic agents to address the needs of society and creation, which the U.S. Constitution describes as "promoting the general welfare." [Page 34]

Article 36 "Maintaining institutional separation of church and state" means that the distinctive integrities of both government and religious institutions should be preserved, but it does not mean there is a "wall" between them. Rather, the "relation of functional interaction" means that religious bodies have a responsibility for critical interaction with government that may affirm or challenge government policies and practices. [Page 34]

Article 37 This view of critical interaction with government commends specific criteria for assessing programs and services to maintain a healthy relationship between religious bodies and political authorities in order to serve society's well-being. [Page 35]

Article 38 The ELCA affirms healthy forms of patriotism. It opposes unhealthy, distorted forms of patriotism that divide a country and endanger it, including religious nationalism. At this time, Christian nationalism is the dominant distorted form. It seeks to fuse selected Christian ideas with a comprehensive cultural framework and crosses into idolatry. It also subverts the U.S. constitutional sovereignty of "we the people." [Page 36]

Section VI. Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life

Article 39 Section VI addresses contemporary issues in civic life that are guided by the insights of sections I through V. These articles do not revisit questions about civic life that the ELCA has already addressed in existing social statements and messages. [Page 37]

Article 40 Hyperpartisan polarization, now increasing in the United States, is exceedingly harmful to our social fabric and especially to vulnerable people. The ELCA calls all people to insist on and practice respectful engagement. [Page 37]

Article 41 All civic leaders, and especially elected officials, bear a responsibility to model constructive civic leadership for the good of all. As public leaders, they should foster constructive discourse, enabling reasoned moral discernment toward solutions. They succeed in their roles when they renounce personal attacks, misleading statements, false information, and inflammatory discourse. [Page 39]

Article 42 Constructive civic life today depends on clearly distinguishing between fact and falsehood, which ranges from exaggeration to outright lies. Media organizations have a responsibility to root out falsehoods they provide or host. Media users have a responsibility to assess for accuracy what they receive from media (including social media). [Page 40]

Article 43 Money has become an outsize influence in U.S. elections and political processes. The ELCA recognizes the legitimacy of political contributions as a demonstration of donor commitment. The ELCA also advocates for transparency and limits on the size of contributions and gifts. These are vital to

A social statement on

Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All

Terms underlined in the text are defined in the glossary.

Introduction

Article 1 We are to pray daily as Jesus taught, saying, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:10-11). What does this mean? The Lutheran catechisms teach that daily bread means "everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our lives such as food, drink, … upright and faithful rulers, good government … good friends, faithful neighbors and the like."[1]

These words also teach us that the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates and seeks the well-being of creation, including human society. Christians believe that this God calls people of faith to take responsibility for the good of all through civic participation. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

This social statement sets forth the ELCA's teaching about how disciples and this church may faithfully speak and act in civic life. While existing ELCA social statements and messages address specialized elements of social life,[2] this statement addresses the broad responsibility for seeking the good of all through civic participation. It sketches a vision of a just and robust civic life dedicated to the well-being of all while giving extended attention to the relationship of faith and political authority.

The statement's six sections draw from the Scriptures, from the wellspring of Lutheran theological themes, and from contemporary social science. Sections I and II clarify theological themes and the calling to civic participation. Sections III and IV consider the meaning and significance of the founding documents of the United States from a perspective of faith. Section V sketches the elements in a constructive relationship between religious organizations and political authority, whereas Section VI speaks to selected contemporary topics.

I. Foundational Teaching: God Acts for the Well-being of All Through Civic Life

Article 2 The Scriptures tell us that "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1) and reveal God's tender care for all creation (Psalm 145:15). In the Scriptures, the Hebrew word *shalom*[3] epitomizes the rich fullness of that loving aim of the Creator for all creation. *Shalom* describes God's intention in

[1] The Small Catechism, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 357, hereafter referred to as "BC 2000."

[2] ELCA social teaching documents can be found at elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements. In particular, see the 2020 social message "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy," hereafter "Government and Civic Engagement."

[3] Christians should take seriously the comprehensive vision embedded in this fundamental biblical term and what it means for our calling. The term itself also has a long, rich history as a central concept within Judaism, where its usage and emphasis sometimes differ but from which Christians can learn. The two religious communities can explore together how best to understand the biblical concept and, on this basis, to find ways to work together to advance the divine intention for humans and for the entire created world.

creation for an abundance of peace, well-being, goodness, truth, beauty, justice, freedom, joy, wholesomeness, and love, all woven together. This social statement is undergirded by that biblical term, but in the context of civic life it employs other terms such as "the well-being of all" or "the common good" because they are earthly measures toward God's intention.

The ELCA witnesses to the Holy Trinity in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose power is expressed in offering abundant life now and eternally. We teach that God is all-powerful in that only God is the source of *all* power. God's power alone brings forth and sustains the universe, redeems the sinner, and promises creation's ultimate fulfillment.

In God's activity toward the well-being of all, we encounter a use of power that is unlike many human practices of power (Matthew 20:25-26). God is sovereign, but God's sovereignty *gives* power to creatures rather than deprives them of it. In contrast to the usual political "zero-sum" understanding of power, God gives freely, sharing abundantly without loss. God's sovereign power produces human power; it does not diminish it. However, humans are given their power in order to serve God, creation, and their fellow humans (articles xx, 22).

God's power is often hidden from human view and experienced in varied and surprising ways that can be beautiful or painful. Sometimes God's power is experienced as disruption and judgment. It can be experienced as the tearing down of human structures and of misplaced values (Jeremiah 6:14).

This is described by Martin Luther's teaching about the struggles of faith and the "theology of the cross." Whereas human beings expect domination, God's power appears in weakness (1 Corinthians 1:25). When we are overly confident, God unsettles our presumptions. In the light of faith, we are empowered to see the future of God's fulfillment, and we see that God's purpose and power always move toward the divine promise of the well-being of all people.

At the end of the Lord's Prayer, we affirm that "the power, the honor and the glory are yours." Not ours! When Christians forget that all power belongs to God and God's purpose, they risk creating idols. These include wealth, country, race, party, gender, class, and ideology. God's power in Jesus Christ redirects forgiven ones from such idolatry and reshapes the way we use the power entrusted to us.

This church bears witness to God's purpose and power in the world. We teach that human civic activity and political power are sustained by divine power and can be evaluated ethically by God's intention that humans use, increase, and share such power so that human structures and systems serve the well-being of all with good order and justice.[4]

Article 3 The Scriptures teach that God creates human beings in God's image, in the *imago dei* (Genesis 1:27). This image is God's gift, which means that every human being has inherent dignity and agency and a vocation to share God's work toward the well-being of creation.[5] From the beginning, the Scriptures depict the human vocation as a shared activity in tending gardens, tilling soil, and building communities. These activities require cooperation, conversation, and social coordination. This church celebrates that God creates human beings as relational beings who live in social and political communities.

[4] The Augsburg Confession, XVI, BC 2000, 48.

[5] See further explanation in the ELCA social statement *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2011), 10, www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

Even the narrative of the fall (Genesis 3-4) shows the value of social and political life. Sin is depicted as moving from trust, honesty, and care into fear and disobedience, as a broken relationship with God and one another.

The Christian faith sees God's power and purpose specifically revealed in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There is no neighbor, no enemy, no politician for whom Christ did not die. The Christian practice of baptism affirms this ongoing work of Christ and its connection to the human vocation. This church teaches that "the gifts of the Spirit form and transform the people of God for discipleship in daily life."[6] The baptismal liturgy includes commitments to "serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."[7]

Correctly understood as a calling to serve the well-being of all, human vocation does not invite arrogance or misplaced pride, nor does it represent one's domination of others. This vocation is lived out in the basic structures of social life as places of responsibility. Lutheran theology has referred to these places of responsibility by various terms such as "three estates," "orderings," and "mandates." The point is that God acts through the basic structures of government, church, family, and economy, and that humans have varied responsibilities in each.

All people depend upon these social structures of communal life because they provide scaffolds or sites for growth and responsibility. Because these are dynamic, the precise form, arrangement, and values vary across time and place, and they are open to ongoing revision and change.

Within these places of responsibility, the Lutheran tradition speaks of all humans as serving in civic life as "channels of God's work."[8] God intends that humans should use their knowledge, wisdom, and power to foster the common good. When that is done by institutions through policies and regulations, or by individuals in acts of caring, humans are fulfilling their vocation to serve God's activity in the world.

Article 4 God's intention for joyous well-being is too often not enacted or experienced in the world. Many religious traditions discuss this human brokenness and disorder. The Lutheran tradition speaks of sin in various ways but fundamentally understands sin to be the condition of human existence in which we fail to love and trust God above all else. Martin Luther understood sin to be an excessive focus on the self at the expense of the neighbor.[9] Human sin distorts a right relationship with God and others, damaging the well-being that God intends for all creation.

The pervasiveness and complexity of sin that damages human well-being must be recognized. Sin is present in our constant unwillingness to accept our human vocation to serve as creatures created by God. Sin can also take the insidious form of self-denial and a lack of self-love. This happens when, for example, a person diminishes their own contributions to human life or denies that they possess the ability, dignity, and value of any human being created in God's image.

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[6] *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991), 4, www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements, hereafter *The Church in Society*.

[7] "Affirmation of Baptism" in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pew Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236, hereafter referred to as "*ELW*."

[8] The traditional Lutheran term for this was "masks of God," but today that term suggests duplicity and passivity.

[9] Luther refers to sin in many ways but often as an excessive concern with the self at the expense of the neighbor. He describes the human condition as *homo in curvatus in se* (being turned in on oneself). See, for example, Martin Luther, "Lectures on Romans" in *Luther's Works*, vol. 25., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, et al. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 345.

Sin is expressed both personally and collectively, which means that social and political institutions are bound in sin just as individuals are. There are a great many examples of this in civic life.

It is sin when the power in social structures, such as government, is distorted so that it is not used for the common good of neighbors and creation (Matthew 22:36-40). For instance, the individual domination of one person by another became multiplied in the social structure of slavery, which was supported by laws, policies, religious beliefs, and cultural practices in the United States. Such systemic sins are particularly horrendous because the things done and left undone dramatically deepen the oppression of other people.

It is sin when civic or political power is used at the expense of others. One group's self-interest cannot justify denying the humanity or dignity of others. The need for order does not justify subjugation, denial of power, marginalization, or tyranny. The need for government cannot justify the idolatrous worship of a nation.

It also is sin when human beings completely avoid civic life and thereby do not work to serve neighbor justice through it.

At the same time, it is sin when we support leaders who put their own power and self-interest above the needs of their constituents. It is sin when we uncritically support a member of a political party because of party affiliation or for our own personal gain. It is sin when we demonize others' motives while glorifying and sanctifying our own.

Article 5 Lutherans teach that people of faith come to know both sin and God's grace as God comes to us. In Christ, God reveals and gives God's divine self to restore or foster right relationships with God, with neighbors, and with our very selves. The Scriptures teach about two different strategies God uses to achieve this, and Lutherans call these "Law" and "Gospel."

This church understands the Law (God's directives) and the Gospel (God's promises in Christ) together as expressing the living Word of God for human life and well-being. The Law addresses our relationships and actions to others in this mortal life and to God, whom we are to worship. The Gospel, by contrast, proclaims God's relationship and merciful action to us from now into eternity.

God uses the Law to sustain life and the good of all through different functions or uses.[10] The civil use (first use) of the Law is to govern our behavior toward one another in human communities. In contrast, the theological use of the Law accuses and convicts human beings of sinfulness, even when a wrong is allowed by a government's law or not covered by human laws. God's directives (God's Law) are realistic about human beings. They reveal the corruption of many human motives, drive people to contrition, and prepare them for repentance.

[10] The Formula of Concord asserts a "third function [use] of the Law," (FC Ep. VI and FC SD VI, BC 2000), but debate continues in Lutheran circles on whether a third use is redundant. Some hold that the third use is important because it makes clear that the externals of the Law are to be performed by the godly not in hostile fearfulness but in loving faithfulness. Others think this unnecessary. Since the externals of the Law remain the same regardless of the disposition of an individual's faith and love, this statement notes the presence of the debate and will not otherwise engage in it.

The Gospel is the good news of God's love in Christ, given by grace and gift alone and received in and through faith alone. The Gospel arrives as a blessed surprise, an unexpected gift that frees us from efforts to earn God's love or forgiveness. The Gospel has the liberating power to convert, transform, and re-create us in heart, mind, and spirit. Thus, Lutherans assert that the life of a Christian is described paradoxically as being simultaneously saint and sinner.

The Lutheran tradition commonly describes God's use of these two strategies, Law and Gospel, with the analogy of God's two-handed reign.[11] Through God's "left-hand reign," God's power acts through the Law to curb, restrain, and lead people toward goodness and justice. Through God's "right-hand reign," God's power acts through the Gospel to draw, transform, and re-create people in heart, mind, and soul. Both "hands" serve God's intent to bring a rightly ordered life of peace and the common good.

Though distinct in function and purpose, the Law and the Gospel are not independent, and both flow from God's power and for God's purposes. God's left-hand reign should not be identified solely with political authority or the state. God's directives encompass culture, family, economics, and all aspects of daily life.

There is a substantive discussion of the appropriate interaction of these two strategies in the ELCA social message "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in Democracy" (www.elca.org/socialmessages, p. 4). The dangers of misuse are also described there. Misuse includes believing that God's two strategies are unrelated, that civic life and government are not God's concern, or that a particular nation, political strategy, or civil institution is identified with God's will or God's kingdom.[12]

Article 6 While God's people are called to do justice and love kindness (Micah 6:8), it is not always clear what that means in any particular situation. God's people approach the present world with watchfulness—that is, with abounding trust in God's reign and future and, at the same time, with measured realism and humility about human efforts, always fallible, to create a just society.

Through faith, God's church already takes part in the coming reign of God, announced by and embodied in Jesus. As the social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* explains, "[The church] still awaits the resurrection of the dead and the fulfillment of the whole creation in God's promised future. In this time of 'now … not yet,' the Church lives in two ages—the present age and the age to come." In this sense, "the Church is 'in' the world but not 'from' the world."[13]

Christians are simultaneously involved in God's work in the here-and-now and also in God's eternal work. It is unavoidable that Christians live in the here-and-now, with all its questions, ambiguities, and tensions. Some of those ways should be affirmed as better expressions of good than others and as more productive means toward creating well-being.

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[11] Other analogies and phrases also are used in the Lutheran tradition, and one common term has been "two kingdoms." However, in the New Testament, "kingdom" is reserved for the reign of God alone. The reformers' insight that God works through two different strategies is vital, and the reformers grounded this insight not in actual kingdoms but in Paul's eschatology of the two ages, in Adam and in Christ (Romans 5:12).

[12] "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020), 6-8, www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-messages.

[13] This description of the tension appears in more detail in the ELCA social statement *The Church in Society*, 2, www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

Neither the Law nor the Gospel allows the church to accommodate easily the ways civic life often unfolds. The presence and promise of God's reign make the church inevitably restless and discontented with society's continued brokenness and violence. We are called to work for a better world. This means we should support and commend civic and political efforts that bring greater measures of order, justice, and harmony. However, even those best efforts inevitably require revision and, within God's activity, improvement. Christians are simultaneously people of hope and courage, realism and restlessness.

Article 7 Since the Reformation, many of the historically dominant expressions of Lutheran theology and church structures have, despite some important exceptions, failed to make a priority of seeking the civic common good. The confessions commend civic good as "the righteousness of reason." They teach that "God requires the righteousness of reason … [and willingly should give it] the praises it deserves for our corrupt nature has no greater good than this."[14] They note that God even honors it with temporal rewards.

A desire to avoid "works righteousness" too often excused Lutherans for passivity and the failure to act in the public arena. We have not always acted to hold governments or each other accountable. An understandable desire for security and order has led many to remain complacent or even to support oppressive regimes and systems. At other times, some Lutherans have exhibited triumphalism or intolerance in taking political action.

This church acknowledges these past failures and is committed to renewed actions that turn toward holding civic leaders and those in positions of political authority accountable. Under normal circumstances, acting for accountability means making use of the tools of the U.S. democratic process. The concept of the consent of the governed implies an ongoing relationship between those in positions of authority and their constituents. Those in authority owe an account of how they are using that authority and the resources that have been entrusted to them.

On occasion, holding those in authority to account may call for engaging in nonviolent public protests. In some instances, acts of nonviolent civil disobedience may be justifiable.[15] Even when use of these tools is necessary, such actions must always be guided by an ethic of love and a spirit of upbuilding the common good.

Article 8 God provides multiple tools for striving toward social well-being. Because the Scriptures are the norm for faith and life, all Christian efforts are judged according to its central proclamation. The Lutheran theological tradition also looks to the insights from writings in the Book of Concord as faithful, if historically conditioned, interpretations of the Scriptures.[16]

Our church teaches that God also provides human reason as a gift to be used for seeking justice and social harmony. Lutherans have sometimes used the language of "natural law" to describe the shared values and ends that are given by Godto direct all human beings, individually and collectively.

[14] BC 2000, Apology, Article IV, 22-24, BC 2000, 124.

[15] See *For Peace in God's World* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1995), 20, www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

[16] The "Continuing Resolutions" section in the ELCA constitution calls Unaltered Augsburg Confession a "true witness" to the Scriptures (CBCR 2.05).

At its most basic, natural law refers to an inherent principle that God is to be worshiped, the good is to be done, and the bad is to be avoided. The Golden Rule expresses this succinctly as "In everything do to others as your would have them do to you;…" Matthew 7:12a) This explains the sentiment in the Large Catechism that the Ten Commandments as natural law are "written in the hearts of all [people]."[17]

However, the character of natural law has been misunderstood and has too often been weaponized against people deemed different, especially already marginalized and oppressed groups. This has been done by picking particular laws from the Scriptures and imposing them on others. This view misuses the function of Law in the Scriptures. Natural law is not a set of specific rules or unchanging social mores. The rightful attention to shared human principles can be only one part of the ongoing work of communal deliberation and conversation.

The Lutheran tradition appreciates human capacities as God's gifts. These include, for example, reason, emotion, experience, imagination, scientific fields of study .The Lutheran approach to thinking about civic life, then, employs principles of ethics and political concepts such as mutual self-determination and the common good. The Lutheran tradition recognizes that all human efforts are dimmed and distorted by sin. Nevertheless, these tools provide a common basis for Christians to work with others of goodwill toward the well-being of society.

The social teachings of this church are normed by the Scriptures and seek to employ the many gifts of human capacities to address contemporary social life. While official teachings govern and guide this church's positions on social questions, Lutherans recognize the possibility for continued rethinking and reconsideration through discernment as a community together.[18]

Article 9 As Lutherans participate in civic life in order to seek the well-being of all, we recognize that this work is neither unique to nor possessed by Christians alone. To "walk humbly" with God (Micah 6:8) must include seeking out the sound ideas, values, and contributions of all people, regardless of their religious tradition or worldview. The good of all must be discerned in common.[19]

Christians, as individuals or as the body of Christ in the world, have no guaranteed higher or better reasoning than people of other religions or worldviews. This means that Lutherans reject the claim, explicit or assumed by some, that Christians have revealed knowledge or unique insight into civic and political matters.

This does not mean that Christians have no contributions to make or that they should avoid drawing from their tradition, teaching, or faith language in speaking of public matters. God's grace, received in faith, empowers people to hear and act in cooperation with their neighbors for the common good. A sense of God's calling sharpens commitment to human dignity because we understand that all are created in God's image. It awakens a sense of God's biblical call for justice and peace.

The good news of Jesus changes hearts for compassion and care. Liberated from sin and the burden of seeking eternal salvation through our own efforts, we can join God's efforts to create and re-create the

[17] Large Catechism, third article of the Creed, Article 3, para. 67, BC 2000, 492.
[18] "Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns," 12, 19, www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/addressing-social-concerns.
[19] See "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019), www.elca.org/ecumenical.

institutions and communities of human social life. Sin remains, but Lutherans call upon the Scriptures, find aid in their theological heritage, and use human capacities and practices of discernment to seek the means to participate wisely and critically in the civic life God intends. Our baptismal vocation to serve God and neighbor is lived out with others in society as channels of God's work in civic places of responsibility.

II. God Calls All People to Robust Civic Participation

Article 10 The Lord's prayer "Your will be done on earth as in heaven" refers to the entire scope of God's will for creation. Yet it certainly includes that aspect of life in society that describes activities and institutions related to public life, from one's neighborhood to national and international affairs. Participation in civic life comes in many shapes and sizes. A few examples include coaching soccer at a community center, attending parent-teacher association meetings, participating in peaceful demonstrations, volunteering one's business acumen for a community development initiative, engaging in political activity, and participating in international "sister city" programs.

The social fabric of a society depends upon such prudent, vigorous, and broad participation in civic life. Such participation is a medium through which people deepen relationships, create opportunities, and hold one another accountable for public life. This makes the decline of civic participation in the United States at this time, in community organizations for example, especially troubling.[20]

Our church affirms the Lutheran teaching that anyone who seeks the community's well-being through civic participation is, knowingly or not, using the capacities God provides. There is no single or required way to live this out. The Christian faith celebrates the multitude of ways that God calls people into lives of service and community for the sake of the common good.

This statement assumes and draws upon elements of social teaching that relate to civic life found in previous ELCA statements and messages.[21] The particular calling to be an active and informed citizen in relation to political life is most fully articulated in the social message "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy."[22] It affirms, for example, the need to pray for civic and political leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2), the responsibility to vote, the importance of being active in the political sphere, and the need for collective action toward fair and compassionate government.

Article 11 Lutherans historically have encouraged individuals to use their individual gifts for civic and political service faithfully at the local, state, national, or international level. Examples include work in civil service, public safety, health care, or education. Other examples include military personnel, judges, legislators, and appointed officials. These and many others are essential in making possible the effective functioning of civic services. Those called to such public service are urged to work toward justice and the

[20] See, for instance, Peter Levine and William A. Galston, "America's Civic Condition: A Glance at the Evidence," Brookings Institution, September 1, 1997, www.brookings.edu/articles/americas-civic-condition-a-glance-at-the-evidence/, accessed October 13, 2023, and Union of International Associations, "Decline in Civic Participation," *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*, encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/decline-civic-participation, accessed October 24, 2023.

[21] See, for example, *The Church in Society*, which sets the foundation; elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

[22] "Government and Civic Engagement," elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

common good, and never for dominating power or gain for themselves, or for particular groups with which they identify to the exclusion of others.

Civil service is often lifted up on the national stage, but this church encourages all people to explore service at state, county, and municipal levels, including volunteer service on boards, agencies, and committees. It is critical to encourage and guide youth and young adults in this church to consider taking up such places of responsibility.

Christians are encouraged to take an initial stance of respect for neighbors who work in civil service at all levels—local, state, and national—and under the three branches of government. Unfortunately, in this society, there is a common caricature of government workers as lazy, incompetent, or troublesome bureaucrats. This image is grossly misleading. It misrepresents the complexities of civic service, including in government. From a Christian perspective, such caricature violates the Eighth Commandment, that is, bearing false witness against another.

Civic employees and volunteers, however, are not above reproach, and they may and do fail in their responsibilities. Nevertheless, the default stance toward them should be dignity and respect, not slander or suspicion. Not honoring local trash collectors, postal workers, or county officials for their good work is one way in which we fail to see their labor and service as God does.

At the same time, members of the public are expected to hold these civic servants and government officials accountable. Civic servants should do their jobs with integrity and fairness and in ways that serve the common good. Government institutions, programs, and policies must be held to high standards as a sign of their importance and impact. Courts must apply the law in accordance with precedent and with fairness, equality, and impartiality to preserve public trust. We should judge individual cases of failure carefully, avoiding generalizations that are unfair and that fail to help identify areas where improvement is genuinely needed.

Article 12 Congregations, synod-authorized ministries, campus ministries, and other recognized worshiping assemblies are centers to support civic participation precisely because they are to be grounded in the living Word of God's Law and Gospel. Rooted in Word and Sacrament, almost everything in worship, from the gathering to the sending, prepares us to join God's activity in civic life. The dynamic movement of the liturgy allows Christians to rest in God's mercy and be restored in hope but, at every turn, prepares them to be sent forth into the world to work for the community's good, both locally and beyond.

There are many examples. Besides preaching, the church's prayers lift up social concerns and ask guidance for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1). The peace of Christ is a sign of our unity in God and a reminder that we are sent to share this experience of peace with the world. The offering is collected to support the assembly and to share with other people in need, locally and around the globe.

There are many types of worshiping communities. They may be based locally or draw from broad regions. In all cases, as expressed in the ELCA constitution and social teaching, this church expects that each worshiping community will be engaged in forms of active civic participation as one element of life in Christ's church. This is one vital way in which God's people serve neighbors in human society.

Article 13 Religious communities and organizations must discern when and how to constructively engage in civic life. Religions can create divisions in civic life or contribute to mending the social fabric

and reconciling divided peoples. Being a source of healing requires faithful discernment of contexts and of what specific roles and actions are called for. This church urges people of all religions and worldviews to seek constructive roles to counter growing hyperpartisan polarization, distrust, and ill will.

The Scriptures, echoed by the ELCA constitution and our church's social teaching, lift up a moral vision for civic life that reflects both the depth of sin in human fallenness and the heights of hope in God's redemption. This church's moral vision does not mean we expect to create God's kingdom on earth—only God can do that. However, this moral vision does give witness to the biblical idea of God's intention for *shalom* and thereby encourages us to stand for both justice and reconciliation in this time of divisiveness and acrimony.

This moral vision is held in tension with the realism of human nature's fallenness but reminds us that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The moral vision also reminds us that, contrary to common assumptions and painful actions in civic life, all stand equally before God. There is no neighbor or stranger, no political ally or opponent for whom Christ did not die. As a community of inclusion, as a people of every race and tongue (Acts 2, Revelation 7:9), we are drawn by our civic engagement into wider inclusion. We are drawn into action so that all people may experience dignity and mutual self-determination.

The ELCA, as a member of Christ's church, has long committed itself to reconciliation and healing in communities and civic life.[23] This church, at every level, is called to respond with compassion and imagination, drawing from experience and innovating new ways to address civic challenges.

For example, social ministries in the community are a means of civic participation and are widely affirmed by this church. Care facilities, food pantries, housing programs, and refugee resettlement efforts are but a few examples of responses found in individual congregations or in ministries affiliated with Lutheran Services in America. This church has a responsibility, working with all people of goodwill, to mediate conflict and to advocate just and peaceful resolutions while supporting institutions and policies that seek the well-being and power of all.

Article 14 Discerning the best course of action requires considering many different facets of any situation. Because we recognize that every person is one for whom Christ died, this church has a special responsibility to seek to provide safe spaces for challenging conversations. A safe space does not mean a space where all agree. The responsibility for safe space means providing space where all are honored and valued regardless of what they believe. This is true even as worshiping communities disagree or struggle together to discern the common good.

In the contemporary polarized social environment, the practice of communal moral discernment is an evangelical witness to God's intention that humans respect others and to the good use of reason. Fulfilling a wide spectrum of callings and coming from a diversity of experiences, Christians will often disagree passionately on social questions. Yet because they share common convictions of faith, they are free, indeed obligated, to deliberate together on the challenges they face in the world. This is especially true when consensus is difficult or not reached. United in baptism with Christ and all believers, Christians are empowered to welcome and celebrate their diversity and to remain in conversation.

[23] *The Church in Society*, 4, elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

Since the 1991 adoption of the social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, the idea of our church as a safe space for discernment has been formally part of the ELCA's identity as a community of moral deliberation. It is an identity that our church continues to grow into. As a church, we recognize our many failures to live out this identity. At the same time, we give thanks that we may renew and build upon this heritage.

Article 15 The ELCA serves God and neighbor in civic life through its members and congregations but also through its synods and the churchwide organization. These long-standing commitments are named in the ELCA constitution and were first addressed in the 1991 social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. Some examples, from that document, illustrate our church's ongoing civic contributions as part of our social witness: [24]

- Supporting church-related economic, educational, and social ministry organizations in their service to human need.
- Speaking on timely, urgent issues on which the voice of this church should be heard and which have clear and specific grounding in ELCA social teaching.
- Working with and on behalf of the poor and those who suffer, and using moral persuasion to advocate that political and economic decision-making bodies develop policies that advance justice, peace, and care of creation.
- Providing for federal chaplains in military and federal prisons.
- Supporting the Lutheran Office for World Community at the United Nations.

Article 16 This church has long affirmed that one means of discipleship involves civic participation as a prophetic presence. With Mary, the mother of Jesus, the church sings of God's action to bring down the proud and lift up the lowly (Luke 1:51-53). The church hopes to follow Jesus, who boldly declared a calling to proclaim good news to the poor, release for the incarcerated, healing for the sick, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 42:7). The prophetic role envisions and points us toward a better future of well-being.

The prophetic role toward justice-seeking, advocacy, and social change in all forms of civic life require care, patience, and wise distinctions. Civic participation as prophetic presence may be controversial, and worshiping communities need to take time and care to discern and identify common parameters for such action whether in service, in advocacy, or toward social change.

This prophetic role includes "the obligation to name and denounce the idols before which people bow, to identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate in hope with poor and powerless people."[25] As one aspect of the church's ministry, this obligation belongs to all members through our baptismal vocation, irrespective of offices or roles within the church.

Such ministry may include exhorting civic leaders and institutions when they abuse those they are to serve or when they overreach their authority. This church says, with Martin Luther, that "to rebuke" those in authority "through God's Word spoken publicly, boldly and honestly" is "not seditious" but "a praiseworthy, noble, and ... particularly great service to God."[26]

[24] *The Church in Society*, 8-9, contains the full list; see elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

[25] *The Church in Society*, 4, elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

[26] *Ibid*., 4. The source is Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 82" (1530) in "Selected Psalms II," *Works*, vol. 13, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan et al. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956).

Theologically it is important to recognize that the exertion of social power when addressing or challenging civic life is part of this church's work under the Law, the left-hand reign of God (articles 5 and 20). Though the church's message of the Gospel is sure, we cannot know what the outcomes of exerting social power in public actions will be. We must consistently evaluate whether neighbor justice, especially for the marginalized, is being served by the prophetic presence of this church.

Article 17 Faith-based advocacy is one way to work toward a civic life that better reflects God's vision for a more just and reconciled world. Advocacy comes in many forms, from institution-based efforts to more local practices sometimes called "faith-based organizing."[27] At whatever level, it often means pressing civic leaders or public-policy makers to respect the needs and dignity of all people and our common home, with special care for the vulnerable. Advocacy comes from the Latin *vocare* (to call), the root word for both "voice" and "vocation."

Advocacy at whatever level can be a stewardship of the ELCA's voice and is grounded in the ELCA's constitution, which directs the ELCA to: [28]

- Empower members to engage with systems and processes to promote the well-being of the human community and creation in the public square, local and federal government, and the international community.
- Advance justice in response to human suffering, marginalization, and exclusion.
- Promote equality, justice, and respect for the value of every person to reduce the systemic injustices impacting communities and societies.
- Exercise corporate social responsibility through environmental, social, and justice principles to create a just and sustainable society.

The ELCA's corporate witness is governed by ELCA social teaching,[29] and advocacy occurs in both domestic and global accompaniment with people and communities. Likewise, this corporate witness is enriched and strengthened through ecumenical and interreligious collaboration.[30] The united witness of the faith community builds and depends upon relationships of trust and communal discernment.

Faith-based organizing at the local level is born from relationships of service and solidarity. It is an expression of both individual discipleship and our life in community together. It grows most forcefully out of ministries among people and communities that have been denied their human dignity or are seeking greater justice. It supports and amplifies these voices. Though sometimes forms of advocacy are described as providing "a voice for the voiceless," we must be careful to identify and support opportunities for people to speak for themselves.[31]

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[27] For more on ELCA faith-based organizing, see www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/organizing-for-mission/upcoming-events.

[28] ELCA Constitution 16.12.D21, 118.

[29] The ELCA's corporate witness is expressed, for instance, in the work of the Witness in Society team. See elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church.

[30] Such collaborations are specifically encouraged in the ELCA's ecumenical and interreligious policy documents. See "A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1991) and "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019), (especially commitments 7, 8, and 9), www.elca.org/ecumenical.

[31] One fuller treatment on this topic is Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel's *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

Organizing people of varying interests to advocate for the common good may require different practices in different contexts. Building relationships and sharing vision can involve letters, calls, and meetings with elected leaders and their staff. It can involve invitations for them to visit communities and ministries. It involves building public awareness in ways that include editorials, rallies, and protests; earned and paid media; public testimony; and community organizing.

Using the trust of one-to-one relationships, faith-based organizers seek to spur action by building coalitions mostly in local contexts. Faith-based community organizing roots itself in shared values and commitments, in congregations and in other institutions, often across denominations and religious boundaries. Faith-informed advocacy can play a transformative role in a polarized political world by bringing people together to work toward the common good in the public square.

Article 18 Ethical discernment and action to love and serve the neighbor through civic life have multiple facets. One vital facet is participation in government and politics, which are essential dimensions of civic life. Civic life and service are not equal to government and political activity, but when rightly understood and practiced, political activity is necessary and good. It is important, then, to distinguish between ethics and politics, and this church teaches that civic or political concerns should be guided by ethical teaching.

Ethics involves careful discernment about what is right, good, or fitting. It asks what we ought to do or not do, what we should value or not value, and who we should be or not be within community. In other words, ethics seeks to reflect on what we will seek to be and do to form a community of well-being. ELCA social statements are ethical documents that provide this church's teaching for addressing such topics, which include civic and political life.

The word "politics" (*polis* is Greek for "the people") often is used today to express disgust with dishonest practices, grabs for exclusive control, lies, and deceptions. It is used to describe authority being used in a sinful way. Such practices are sinful and are real dangers that this society must confront. However, the Lutheran tradition teaches that God creates humans as political beings and is the creator and ultimate source of the political sphere.

"Politics," then, as used in this statement, describes a necessary and positive aspect of human life. It describes negotiating how the benefits, burdens, rights, and responsibilities of living in a society are shared. Politics, in this sense, happens whenever two or more people are gathered to live in community together. This includes life in the family and the church! Politics describes the activity in which each person's interests and the well-being of the community are navigated and negotiated. Politics is a good and, in fact, essential dimension of human well-being.

Politics is always complicated and messy because it involves diplomacy, compromise, ambiguity, persuasion, and decision. The reality is that living in community requires negotiations, sometimes scrappy ones, about the ongoing (re)distribution of resources, rights, responsibilities, opportunity, and access for all members of society as needed to form a healthy community. It includes legislation, enforcement, judicial evaluation, community planning and organization, advocacy, and distribution of goods and services (such as postal delivery, overseas aid, etc.).

Politics and ethics are necessarily related. Ethics discerns; politics implements. For example, ethics presents the principle of self-determination as a primary value of a healthy political community. Government and political activity can be evaluated by how well they foster mutual self-determination for each community in a society and whether power is available to and produced for all members of that

society, especially those from vulnerable or minority populations (articles 23 and 22).

Article 19 The two millennia that separate us from Jesus' social context make it difficult to appreciate the political dimensions of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was not political in the sense of affiliating with a particular political party or leadership circle. He did not negotiate or legislate civic laws or regulations. Still, Jesus' teaching, such as his instructions to care for the poor and marginalized (Luke 4:18-19, Matthew 5:3-10), challenged socioeconomic norms and social systems and had political implications. His critique of political leaders (Luke 13:32) brought him into tension with the authorities of his day.

Further, when the early Christians claimed that "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9), they were making a claim with a political implication: Caesar is *not* Lord. Some Scripture passages, then, may be both theological *and* political statements (Acts 10:36, Philippians 2:11). They make a political claim in the sense that all government is accountable to God and that Christians should not give primary loyalty to any government.

If Jesus is Ruler (Lord), then no nation, constitution, government, or official can have our primary loyalty. God's commandments and demands to serve the neighbor have singular priority for Christians. God's rulership is not to be associated with a particular person or worldly structure such as a government, nation, or political movement. As with Jesus, the call to love the neighbor and do justice pushes us into engagement with society rather than out of it.

Only with appropriate attention to the political can we exercise neighbor love and serve neighbor justice to hold government accountable, oppose social oppression, seek various kinds of liberation, and work toward the common good. Political engagement in this sense is a means of channeling God's love through civic participation.

In this sense, then, addressing issues in the political arena *is* an element of Christian calling. This is true both for the individual and for our church in its corporate witness. But whereas individual Christians will engage politically, often *through* political parties, the institutional church itself is not to be a partisan community. When the church addresses social issues, some people may interpret, criticize, or even rebuke it as being partisan. However, this church seeks careful discernment and clear criteria for participating in God's work in the political sphere, criteria that transcend partisanship (see "Government and Civic Engagement," articles xx and xx and Section V).[32]

Article 20 All the baptized must wrestle with the relationship between their faith, the church, and civic life as they live out their responsibilities to "care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace."[33] This church's involvement in civic life is primarily borne out in the lives of its members as they embody discipleship in their communities and relationships. Consistent with the testimony of the Scriptures and the Lutheran tradition, the ELCA is clear in its teaching that all Christians share in the calling to civic and political participation. This church strongly affirms this shared calling of all the baptized.

However, rostered ministers (such as bishops, pastors, deacons) face particular opportunities and challenges in light of their offices and their public roles. Suggesting guideposts for the responsible relationship between the rostered minister's office and public role in society is easier on paper than

[32] "Government and Civic Engagement," 9-13, elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

[33] *ELW*, 228. These are two of the responsibilities entrusted to the baptized.

providing precise "how-to" through the treacherous terrain created by hyperpolarized political battles. Nevertheless this church's theological commitments offer principles to guide rostered ministers as they serve both the church and society.

Rostered ministers are entrusted with proclamation of Christ's gracious and redemptive work, with the public ministry of the Word. In this they are called to proclaim both Law and Gospel. They provide biblical, theological, and spiritual care and moral guidance through preaching, prayer, teaching, advocacy, accompaniment, and service. This living Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can transform lives as Christ begins to take shape in people of faith.

In terms of God's Law, Lutheran theology teaches (Article 5) that its theological use (second use) convicts us of our sins, and that includes naming participation in social and structural evils. Preaching and teaching the civil use (first use) focuses on questions about whether a society—individually and corporately—is failing to achieve the well-being of all. In terms of Gospel, God's love frees us from the fear of death and condemnation so that we might serve the neighbor, including through civic participation.

In rostered ministry, deacons, pastors, and bishops are expected to connect the Christian faith with contemporary issues, and theology with life. The ELCA's model constitution for congregations states that they are "to speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, advocating dignity, justice, and equity for all people."[34]

They, therefore, have the responsibility to represent a church community's life experiences and perspectives, woven together with their leadership experiences and training. This makes their work political, as was true of Jesus (Article xx). It does not license partisanship, for example, in telling members which candidates or political parties to vote for or belong to (see Article xx).

Even as the opportunities and responsibilities of rostered ministry are a blessing, the office of preaching presents genuine earthly challenges because of its dual character. Therefore, ministers in the church wrestle with several dangers that are made all the more complicated because of increasing political polarization (articles xx and xx).

On the one hand, in their proper work, ministers can be tempted to forget that theirs is an office of the Word, instituted by God for the specific purpose of cultivating faith.[35] This work occurs through the proclamation of the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They, likewise, can be tempted to neglect their role to admonish and exhort toward Christ's way of life. If this proper role is forgotten or neglected, ministers fail to discharge the ministry that is unique to the church.

On the other hand, in their significant work (alien work) of ministry to address public issues, there are dangers of both pride and despair. On the one side, ministers can be tempted by presumption, a certainty that would claim too much knowledge, religious righteousness, or authority in speaking to civic

[34] Model Congregation Constitution C9.23; this wording is found in the purpose statements of all three expressions of the ELCA.

[35] The Augsburg Confession, V, teaches that the office is instituted by God "so that we may obtain faith." BC 2000, 41.

and political issues.[36] On the other side is the temptation toward resignation or quietism, such that complacency replaces courage and commitment.

Despite these challenges, this church holds that rostered ministers are charged to speak on public issues faithfully, bound by Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions and governed by ELCA official social teaching. They are representatives of this church and of their church communities. This charge is especially critical when the political climate has made it increasingly difficult for the church to live out its "prophetic presence." That is, this church holds that it has an "obligation to name and denounce the idols before which people bow, to identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate in hope with poor and powerless people."[37]

Rostered ministers should take seriously the broader context and community setting in offering guidance and discernment as they work together with their church communities to determine how to participate in civic life. Rostered ministers need to have a deep understanding of their community and give priority to relationships of mutual understanding even while asking probing and challenging questions. They are accountable to the wider church and the church communities they serve in a way that prioritizes serving in love over being served.

At the same time, rostered ministers need the love and care of the communities they serve. Participants in our church communities have a responsibility to faithfully hear, respect, and support their rostered leaders as they appropriately discern how to address public issues. Such responsibility in the mutuality of Christian love calls for Spirit-led counsel, challenge, encouragement, and care of rostered ministers as they seek to fulfill their public role in both church and society. Participants must keep in mind that rostered leaders face particular risks if they belong to historically marginalized communities or serve in uncomfortable contexts. The community should be intentional in providing care for their safety and well-being.

The Christian Church's faith and baptismal calling remind both lay and rostered ministers of our fundamental unity in the life, resurrection, and eternal promises of Christ. Living out this unity in word and deed is a shared responsibility between rostered and lay people.

III. Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government

Article 21 The Lutheran Confessions affirm political authority and political activity[38] in principle as one way the Triune God protects and coordinates the complex web of social and economic relationships for human well-being. Over time, Lutherans have come to understand, though, that we are called to live with a cautious watchfulness about all forms of government because some provide better measures of well-being than others. Further, we have come to recognize more fully how sin permeates not simply individual action but every human system and structure.

In the Lutheran theological tradition, the key question asked about government is how well it serves God's purposes of justice and good order, especially in caring for the most vulnerable members of the community.

[36] Article 28 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession challenged claims by those with ecclesial offices to possess holy knowledge and privilege for political affairs of their time. BC 2000, 289.
[37] *The Church in Society*, 4.
[38] Apology, XVI, BC 2000, 231.

Such discernment about political authority reaches as far back as the Reformation, as evident in Luther's catechisms and many writings of the reformers.[39] The Large Catechism says, "It would therefore be fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned with a loaf of bread instead of a lion or a wreathe of rue [a medicinal herb], or if a loaf of bread were stamped on coins."[40] Rather than conquering more land or gaining more wealth, the role of government should be focused on ensuring that each person receives all the necessities for daily well-being.

Because government is an indispensable structure of society, Lutherans historically have granted respect and obedience to good civil authorities and institutions, in line with Romans 13. At the same time, the Lutheran tradition also maintains that there is a responsibility to assess and call individuals and institutions to account. The Lutheran heritage contains examples of leaders denouncing the misuse of those institutions and also cooperating with them toward the common good. How power is understood and used is key to this assessment.

Article 22 Human social life is an arena of multiple forms of power. This church teaches that an essential assessment of any use of power, whether in law, policy, or action, is whether it extends God's power for people and groups. This assessment is especially important with respect to those who have been denied power historically or marginalized by social systems.

As the Creator of all that is, God *is* sovereign. But God's sovereignty brings forth creatures who are not God, giving them power and sustenance. God's power creates creatures' power rather than depriving them of it (Article xx). Divine, self-giving power is always and everywhere plural. That is, divine power produces not one center of power but multiple transmissions of power.

That view of power is central to the Lutheran notion of justification by grace alone (Article 5). God's declaration of justification is God's sovereign act, but that sovereign act is communicated to us through faith. On earth, the point and power of justification is to fulfill and heal sinners through faith, i.e. to give sinners power to become what they were created to be. God's sovereign act is the beginning "moment" of power but is not fulfilled power.[41] Similarly, the power of the Lord's Supper for Luther *is* the healing and strengthening of the recipient.

God's dominion satisfies the needs of every living creature (Psalm 145). Divine power is not the usual political model of power. The common political understanding equates power with the ability to control and dominate. It is nonplural; that is, it seeks more for itself and less for others. This is the type of power referred to by the famous maxim "power corrupts." This distorted power of domination and control

[39] For example, Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther's pastor, was deployed to several European government bodies to advocate for and help draft laws creating community chests, a welfare net to assist the poor; see *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation*, eds. Carter Lindberg and Paul A. Wee (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016). For other examples, see Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, 2nd ed., trans. Thia Cooper (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 70-132.

[40] Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, IV, para. 75, BC 2000, 450.

[41] There were some during the Reformation period who took the idea of justification by grace alone through faith to mean that they had no obligations to society or their neighbors. In other words, they understood God's sovereign act to be the end of God's power for them, not its beginning. Luther, among others, vehemently opposed this distortion and consistently held that the point of one's Christian freedom was for love of *neighbor*; the purpose of the gift of faith was to free one to improve the world. Like God's creative power, faith's power is fulfilled not by hoarding it (which Luther says marks unbelief, not faith) but by increasing the power of others.

stands in contrast with divine sovereignty, which is fulfilled in creating and increasing the equitable power of God's creatures.

As such, all power can be assessed by its adherence to the divine creative and self-giving purpose. It can be assessed by the extent to which power is distorted and misused for the sake of domination and exploitation. This is true whether in government, civic interaction, organized religion, business, law enforcement, or the family.

To the extent that human power is directed solely or primarily toward the control or domination of others, it is a sinful distortion of God's power. It is sin when power, which is meant to fulfill other creatures, is used instead to destroy the independent power of others, intentionally or unintentionally. Power exercised as domination hollows out those who are subject to it, whereas those in control lose the vitality that allows them to adapt.

Like all power, governmental power is good in principle but subject to systemic distortions and sinful impulses. This statement discusses systemic distortions in several places (articles 4 and xx). Those in government, like all people, are sinners and are subject to limitations of knowledge, however well-meaning, and the temptation to not acknowledge limits.

As a result, government may often seek its own advantage or that of its most influential constituencies at the expense of many of its people. This is especially likely if one thinks of politics and civic engagement as primarily a collection of warring interest groups engaged in a zero-sum game of wins and losses. This view distorts power into a contest of domination and control.

There are circumstances that do require the use of dominating power to defend against those who are doing significant harm, such as another government. In certain circumstances, even war might be legitimate—for example, to defend one's country against existential threats or to oppose totalitarian regimes. Under such circumstances, dominating power can be justified in good conscience to counter immense harm.[42]

Even in those cases, however, Christians and others believe constraints must be observed. For example, noncombatants and former combatants, including those from the enemy's side, should be treated with care, as God's creatures, not as mere objects of control or domination.

Article 23 The lodestar of divine power implies additional criteria for assessing government action. God's self-giving creative and sustaining power gifts human creatures with agency, the ability to set their own course. The gifts of power therefore include a presumption for self-determination. (However, this presumption for self-determination has little to do with the ideology of "individualism," that is, that the interests of the individual ought to have priority.)

Thus, an important criterion for assessing government action is whether it extends the self-determination of the people—and thus *their* power. Practically, this means that the necessary starting point for considering what is good for others should be what those others believe is good for them.

[42] *For Peace in God's World*, 13, elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements. Theologian Paul Tillich calls this idea "the strange work of love to destroy what is against love"; see *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 49.

This has implications, for example, in deciding which *level* of government, if any, properly acts in a given situation. In many instances a national government is needed. In other instances, a national government may be far removed from certain local realities. Likewise, local or state governments may be more removed from the effects of their actions on those outside their authority. Distance may increase the possibility for error in determining what will lead to another's well-being and what will damage others' self-determination and power. This is not a value judgement but simply a description of the limits of government, even in a representative democracy.

These possibilities, in turn, mean that both those in government and those they govern must ask what level of government is most appropriate and how best to design policies that foster self-determination. That is also why it is important to create opportunities to participate and be heard for those who will be most directly affected by those decisions.

A presumption is, however, not a rule, and self-determination is not an absolute value. That is one difference from an ideology of individualism in which the individual's desires and beliefs are given priority and sheer autonomy. Self-determination is a *presumption*, a guardrail. Sometimes laws and regulations must oppose what people believe to be their own good. Individuals and groups can mistake what is good for them.

The presumption for self-determination is especially necessary when what seems good for "my group" significantly harms others and their self-determination. This is because self-determination already includes a norm of reciprocity. As a *universal* presumption deriving from God's creative and sustaining power, it gives priority to others' self-determination as well. Self-determination's mutuality, and its grounding in divine power, distinguishes this view from individualism.

Accordingly, this church stresses that self-determination *always* includes mutual, plural self-determination, which is also the sharing of power. It does *not* mean doing whatever one wants at the expense of others. Self-determination is necessarily mutual self-determination. This can be understood as a form of the Golden Rule: Extend to others their self-determination as you wish to have it extended to you.[43]

Both the model of divine power and the consequent political presumption of self-determination include a criterion of fostering multiple transmissions of power, i.e. plurality. Both are indispensable elements for thinking through the nature and purpose of governments, including those of the United States.

Article 24 In the United States, the Constitution, ratified in 1788, provides the federal framework for what political authority may and may not do with respect to its citizens and other governmental and nongovernmental institutions.[44] It provides for a national government consisting of three authorities with distinct roles and power sharing—executive, legislative, and judicial. It reserves certain matters to the states and others to citizens of the country regardless of the state in which they live. It also acknowledges Indigenous sovereign governments.

[43] Christians look to Matthew 7:12 as the Golden Rule; other traditions have a comparable standard in their writings.

[44] For one comprehensive discussion of the Constitution's history, including its uniqueness and history of amendments, see Akhil Reed Amar, *America's Constitution: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2005).

The U.S. Constitution was not utterly unique. There are precedents in human history for what we recognize as "democracy" or "a republic." The Constitution was not even the first governing framework of the fledgling United States. That distinction belonged to the Articles of Confederation, adopted by the Continental Congress in 1777 and ratified by the 13 states in 1781.[45]

Within a few years, it became clear that the young country likely would not survive under the Articles of Confederation. There was no effective executive power to enforce the national Congress' decisions, and the nation was in danger of defaulting on its debts. The states had separate, often conflicting, policies, which sometimes were aimed at other states, as well as separate currencies. These and other deficiencies produced a failure that gave rise to the Constitution.

The Constitution *was* unique in crucial ways. The 1788 Constitution makes no mention of God or religion except to prohibit requiring religious tests for holding federal office. And for the first time in recorded history, the governing document of a people had to be ratified by the people it would govern rather than be imposed by a monarch, a sovereign state, or religious authority (Article xx).

The Constitution also strives against the monopolization of sovereignty and pure self-interest by instituting checks and balances across institutions and with the states. The structure of the new government was explicitly designed to combat extreme self-interest, which the drafters had experienced both under a parliamentary monarchy and among the states included in the Articles of Confederation.

It was controversial to provide for a strong executive, as the Constitution did. Because of that, the framers limited the executive branch, reserving certain matters for the legislature or the judiciary. Similarly, the Constitution provides for an executive not elected by Congress, to limit Congress' power and influence. In addition to reserving some areas of authority for states, the Constitution provided all states with equal representation in the U.S. Senate to combat the fear that the larger states would ignore or destroy the vitality of smaller states. The courts were established to settle disputes and interpret laws. The authority of the courts was also checked by certain legislative and executive means.

The Constitution is both grounding and aspirational. It serves as an example *and* points this society to values and practices that the nation has not yet fulfilled. Its preamble clearly expresses this government's purpose and provides a reference for assessing national faithfulness to that purpose:

> We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.[46]

These aspirations provide secular standards for evaluating government and also give specificity to the Christian question "Is the neighbor's well-being served by government?"

[45] For an excellent discussion of the Articles of Confederation and their context, see George William Van Cleve, *We Have Not a Government: The Articles of Confederation and the Road to the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[46] Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble.

Article 25 The most radical feature of the Constitution is its first three words: "we the people." Never before had those who would be governed been required to vote their government into effect, to "ordain and establish" it. "The people" determine how they will be governed, and this sets up a preference for self-determination that is inherent in the constitutional process, as much as or more so than in the Constitution itself.

The subsequent history of amendments to the Constitution makes this preference for mutual self-determination more explicit. At the time of ratification, "the people" was largely limited to free white men. Many states also imposed a property-owning qualification on the right to vote. Slavery was recognized and accepted by the Constitution. Indeed, slaveholding states received additional congressional representation through the constitutional clause counting enslaved people as three-fifths of a person, even though those states denied them legal personhood and the vote.

Most members of Indigenous nations, who were not granted U.S. citizenship until 1924, had no say in representation. Though American Indian sovereignty is recognized in the Constitution, that commitment was blatantly ignored as states and the federal government violated treaty after treaty, and it remains a source of struggle today.

The preference for self-determination was thus partly realized in the Constitution and partly unrealized. Amendments to the Constitution have tended to make that aspiration more effective by reducing the number of groups who were "governed" without their "consent," by expanding the right to vote.

Regarding people of African descent, the Reconstruction amendments essentially said that the 1787 Constitution's "grand bargain" to preserve slavery got wrong who "we the people" should be. Later amendments granted the right of additional citizens to vote: women (1920) and young adults ages 18-20 (1971). Levying any tax as a condition to vote was prohibited (1964). Every amendment related to who is included in "we the people" has expanded who may participate in mutual self-determination. However, there remain patterns of obstruction to restrict exercise of these rights.

Like the theological presumption for mutual self-determination (Article 21), the Constitution's "we, the people" has little in common with an ideology of individualism. The sovereignty of the people is a collective sovereignty and includes mutual self-determination. A core purpose of the protections of individual rights in the Bill of Rights and elsewhere is to strengthen "we the people." The protection of individual and minority rights, in the constitutional conception, is necessary for a healthy collective.

Article 26 The framers of the Constitution recognized that self-dealing by states under the Articles of Confederation was already destroying the country and the states themselves. Humans continue to demonstrate, in greater or lesser measure, the tendency to want to dominate and control, to seek our advantage over our neighbor, not for their interests but, in the end, for our own. Theologically, this tendency is part of the meaning we Lutherans recognize when we teach that even the justified are also sinners.

Article 22 explains how government is subject to the same impulses. Accordingly, governmental action should be subject to the presumption that those governed have a right to identify what they see as their needs. Here, too, that presumption can be overcome, and government can act coercively upon those who are subject to it, particularly when those subjects are needlessly damaging others' capacity for self-determination. That assessment is the source of much criminal law, for example.

As the government acts to prevent harmful behavior, the priority should be seeking to produce and share power in ways that promote the common good. Examples of this communication of power and well-being include compulsory school attendance, Social Security, and regulations to incentivize accomplishing social goals.

A few of the questions to assess a government at federal, state, and local levels include: Has this act opened room for the self-determination of those in its jurisdiction? Has this coercive authority adequately protected valuable mutual self-determination to a reasonable extent? Has this regulatory authority made the operation of the economy smoother so that those affected can live their lives more fully? Has this action assisted or encouraged those who want to participate in civic life to do so? Will the act do these things in the future? Does it effectively rectify failures of the past, especially failures to include the marginalized?

All of these illustrate the criteria for whether, on balance, an action has increased or will increase the power, mutual self-determination, and well-being of those affected by a government. The answers to these questions provide the means for people of faith, and others, to join important civic conversations about what is taking place in U.S. civic and political life.

Article 27 The 1788 Constitution made a firm decision for religious neutrality, thus allowing each person and group to practice the religion of their choice, or none. Article VI reads: "No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." That was a radical choice because 11 of the 13 states at that time had religious qualifications for public officials. The same neutrality regarding religion was expressed in the very first words of the First Amendment to the Constitution (Section IV), ratified as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

The Constitution's choice to forbid religious tests was historically novel and has had momentous consequences. For example, neither Thomas Jefferson nor Abraham Lincoln had any institutional religious affiliation. A religious test would have left the country without their service and that of others from non-Christian faith traditions or no faith tradition. The United States opened public offices to people of all religions, as well to the nonreligious, and limited the ability of government to interfere with self-determined religious choice.

Article 28 The religious diversity and neutrality of both the original Constitution and its First Amendment (see Section IV) contradict past or present claims that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation. In 1796, George Washington's administration made an official statement on the subject as part of an international treaty: "The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion."[47]

Many people involved in the movement for U.S. independence and the ratification of the Constitution had devout Christian faith, though others did not. The dominant religious practice of the times was certainly Protestant, as evidenced by the Christian ethos still present in our social fabric. However, it must be recognized that many who lived in and contributed to the establishment of the United States were not Christian and were instead people of various religions and worldviews.

[47] Article 11 of the Barbary Treaties, signed at Tripoli on November 4, 1796. Treaties are binding acts of state and help articulate a country's self-understanding on the international stage. Text accessed September 1, 2023, avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp.

The ELCA gives thanks for many of the ways in which God worked through Christian individuals and in that ethos. In this sense, it is possible to speak of Christianity as contributing to the founding of this country and to claim that the original U.S. ethos was influenced by Christianity. However, this church rejects the baseless claims that the U.S. was founded on specifically Christian beliefs or that the U.S. Constitution is a result of special revelation, thus establishing a Christian nation. The Constitution established that the nation's sovereign is "we the people," not "we the faithful" or "we the Christians."

IV. Religion and the First Amendment

Article 29 The First Amendment to the Constitution begins: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It indicates that the vitality of religious life arises from the self-determination of the people in the broad plurality of civil society, not from the government.

The first clause ("no law respecting an establishment of religion") is known as the Establishment Clause. The second clause ("no law … prohibiting the free exercise thereof") is known as the Free Exercise Clause. The two clauses work together to protect religious liberty for all people in our pluralistic society, though federal, state, and local governments have, at times, fallen short in that protection.

The Establishment Clause is cut from the same cloth as the Constitution's prohibition against religious tests for public office. Government is not the church, and the church is not the government. The intent of the Establishment Clause clearly is that government must not promote a particular faith or religion in general. Some recent decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court at the time of this writing, however, cast doubt on the continuing strength of that limitation on government.[48]

As discussed in Article 30, this church reaffirms the need for strong boundaries that limit government involvement in the core activities of religion—worship, instruction in faith, and proselytizing. Such boundaries are needed to prohibit excessive government entanglement in religious institutions, provided that religious exercise does not harm the legitimate interests of the broader community. For example, the government has no authority to decide who is fit to be a minister or teacher of a faith. Nor does the government have the competence to declare which of the rival factions in a religious body represents the correct expression of that faith.

Government by the people means there is no favored religion. However, as discussed in Article 32, our church holds that the free exercise of religion is not an absolute right and does not give faithful individuals or religious organizations license to harm others. Individuals and organizations have the right to determine the meaning of their religious commitments, but their exercise of such commitments does not create a right to impose significant harm on the neighbor.

Article 30 Religious worship, teaching, and proselytizing belong solely to religious institutions. Those activities, and the institutions that support them, are distinct from the exercise of civil authority. The government's authority extends only to secular matters, not to the relationship between people and the sacred.

[48] For example, see *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 U.S. 507 (2022), allowing a coach to lead public prayer after a high school football game, and *Carson v. Makin*, 596 U.S. 767, 806-810 (2022), in which a dissenting opinion analyzes Supreme Court decisions since 2017 that have diverged from the court's historical position that the Establishment Clause prohibits governments from funding religious activities.

By imposing a limit on the government's involvement with religion and religious institutions, the Establishment Clause protects both government and religion. Without this limit, political actors could use their offices and the government's powers to advance their faith—either to enhance that faith or to expand the government's claim over the people.

For example, the government threatens the principle of nonestablishment whenever it displays religious symbols. A government-sponsored display of such symbols may be permissible if it sends a message about the history of a particular community. It would violate the principle of nonestablishment, however, if it intended to convey a message of religious truth. Courts in individual cases must closely scrutinize government-sponsored displays of religious symbols to discern the intended message and protect nonestablishment.[49]

Similarly, government violates the principle of nonestablishment when it attempts to use public schools for evangelism or religious instruction. The Supreme Court has long held that required prayer or Bible reading in public schools is unconstitutional religious activity.[50] Though now being challenged in some state legislatures and courts, the principles of nonestablishment and pluralism preclude the government from promoting or coercing such activity.

Government funding of religious activity also impacts Establishment Clause concerns. Article xx of this statement explains this church's position that there is a need for cooperative work between faith-based social welfare programs and the government. In those contexts, the government pays religious organizations for services of a secular character. If the government were to pay those organizations to provide worship or religious instruction, such funding would violate the principle of nonestablishment.[51] For this reason, this church opposes requiring states to provide equal funding for religious education.

Finally, the nonestablishment principle forbids courts and government officials from deciding certain "essentially religious" questions. These include which faction of a divided congregation holds the correct interpretation of its faith, or whether a religious leader deserves employment at a congregation even if the congregation has fired them.[52] Each of these contexts calls for "ecclesiastical abstention," or deference to the religious institution's governing structure. While ecclesiastical abstention does not insulate religious bodies from all judicial scrutiny, it bars the government from challenging a religious organization's internal governance or religious decisions.[53]

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[49] For example, see *American Legion v. American Humanist Association*, 588 U.S. 19 (2019), in which a cross-shaped World War I monument on public land was found not to violate the Establishment Clause.

[50] See *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

[51] For this reason, many state constitutions expressly prohibit public funding of houses of worship or places of religious instruction. Though direct public funding may be prohibited, churches and religious organizations qualify for exemption from federal income tax under Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3). In addition, property tax exemptions for houses of worship do not violate the Establishment Clause. *Walz v. Tax Commission of the City of New York*, 397 U.S. 664 (1970).

[52] See *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, 565 U.S. 171 (2012), which found that federal discrimination laws do not apply to religious organizations' selection of religious leaders.

[53] See *Watson v. Jones*, 80 U.S. 679, 733 (1871) and *Serbian Orthodox Diocese v. Milivojevich*, 426 U.S. 696, 714 (1976).

Through all these examples, this church embraces the principle of nonestablishment of religion by civil government and recognizes that its application requires judicial and political prudence. The Supreme Court's interpretation of this principle now emphasizes the importance of "history and tradition" in that application.[54] This church believes that an assessment of our nation's "history and tradition" must encompass the principle of nonestablishment even though we may not always agree about specific applications.

Article 31 The Free Exercise Clause works together with the Establishment Clause to protect and promote religious diversity in the United States. Prohibiting the establishment of a religion clears the ground for a plurality of religious faiths, as well as the absence of religious faith. The Free Exercise Clause opens space for self-determination, protecting the right of all people to decide what they believe and how as well as whether they express those beliefs within a religious community. It also guarantees the right of religious communities to gather as they choose for worship and religious instruction, and to select their own leaders and organizational form.

Bolstered by the First Amendment's protection of the right to free speech, the Free Exercise Clause also protects the right of individuals to bring their beliefs into political discussion and decision-making, and of religious communities to engage in public debate according to their religious convictions. A prohibition on expressing religious beliefs in political debate would have deprived the U.S. public of much of the basis for the abolition of slavery and for the civil rights movement, to name just two examples.

In addition, the Free Exercise Clause bars the government from discriminating against believers and religious communities because of their faith. History includes examples of the government directly targeting some faiths for hostile treatment.[55] Some recent claims of religious discrimination, however, involve subtle forms of allegedly different treatment for believers or religious entities.

Under the Free Exercise Clause, as under the Establishment Clause, religion is constitutionally special. Sometimes there are such significant differences between religious and secular organizations that they are not truly comparable. In that case, different treatment is appropriate. Other times, a religious activity is truly being singled out or treated differently from the activities of comparable secular organizations, which is not permissible.

This issue often arises in cases involving distribution of government funds. For example, as explained in Article xx, this church believes that, because religious education involves faith formation, there is a fundamental difference between secular public education and religious education such that it should be permissible for the government to fund secular public education without funding religious education.[56]

In contrast, it should not be permissible for governments to deny organizations funding merely because they are religious. For example, a state program violated the Free Exercise Clause by denying a grant to a

[54] See *American Legion v. American Humanist Association*, 588 U.S. 19 (2019).

[55] See *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520 (1993).

[56] Nevertheless the Supreme Court determined that states prohibiting use of school vouchers for religion-based private schools violate the Free Exercise Clause. See *Carson v. Makin*, 596 U.S. 767 (2022). In addition, at the time of this writing, the Supreme Court agreed to decide whether a state may fund a proposed religious charter school. See *Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board, et al. v. Drummond*, Docket Nos. 24-394/396 (2025).

religious school for playground resurfacing while providing grants to similarly situated nonreligious schools.[57]

The constitutionally protected right of free exercise is different from Christian freedom. For Lutherans, Christian freedom is given through Christ and arises solely from God's promise of salvation. This is an eternal freedom from condemnation by the demands of God that no human fulfills. It is a gift of God received by faith and does not depend on any specific political arrangement.

Christian freedom is a matter of the Gospel whereas the right of free exercise of religion is a matter of human law. Christian freedom has only indirect legal significance for organizations and individuals in the civil realm. However, it gives us the positive freedom to love God and neighbor.

This church affirms that Christian freedom includes the presumptive duty to obey civil law. There are exceptions, such as circumstances when the law has become tyrannical and abusive, especially to the most vulnerable. Then love may require something other than obedience to civil law. But in normal situations, Christians obey for the sake of good civil order—or, in other words, for the sake of the neighbor.

Article 32 Though the Free Exercise Clause offers stout protections for the right of people and religious communities to worship, practice, teach, and share their faith as they see fit, that right is not absolute. Religiously motivated conduct may violate the laws and regulations that structure our complex society.

When a conflict between religiously motivated practices and civil law occurs, the government should try to accommodate those practices. However, religious accommodations should not damage important public interests, including the civil rights of others.

The ELCA's predecessor churches[58] adopted the then-prevalent legal standard of "strict scrutiny"[59] to define the balance between a religious accommodation and countervailing public interests. Under that standard, the government must accommodate a believer's religiously motivated practice if that practice is "substantially burdened" by government rules, unless the government can show that denial of the requested accommodation is the "least restrictive means" of protecting a "compelling state interest."[60] At the time our predecessor bodies adopted that language, courts in such cases tended to be quite deferential to the government despite using the language of strict scrutiny.

In the 1990 decision *Employment Division v. Smith*, the U.S. Supreme Court moved away from strict scrutiny entirely and held that the Free Exercise Clause did not require accommodations from neutral,

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[57] See *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*, 582 U.S. 449 (2017).

[58] See https://resources.elca.org/?_categories=faith-and-society&_subcategory=social-teachings-predecessor-churches.

[59] Courts review laws and government actions using the "strict scrutiny" standard—the highest and most stringent standard of judicial review—when they appear to infringe upon fundamental constitutional rights, including free exercise of religion. See *U.S. v. Carolene Products Co.*, 304 U.S. 144, 152 n. 4 (1938); *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398 (1963); and *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).

[60] A state interest (also known as a government interest or a public interest) is "compelling" if it is essential or necessary rather than a matter of choice, preference, or discretion. See *Palmore v. Sidoti*, 466 U.S. 429, 432 (1984). Examples of compelling state interests include protection of public health and safety, regulation of violent crime, national security, and military necessity.

generally applicable laws.[61] In response, the ELCA, together with its ecumenical partners and a broad coalition of groups from across the religious and political spectrum, advocated for adoption of the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). This statute restored the "strict scrutiny" test as to federal government action.[62] Many states followed suit with similar laws. The "strict scrutiny" standard continues to apply in important federal statutes and case law and in the constitutions or statutes of some states.[63]

More recently, the Supreme Court has moved away from its earlier deference to governmental authority and interpreted in literal terms the federal statutes that use the "strict scrutiny" standard to provide religious accommodations. These decisions focus almost exclusively on the burden imposed on religious exercise and pay scant attention to "important governmental interests"[64] or the interests of others harmed by the requested accommodation.[65]

The ELCA affirms the need for a standard that balances religiously motivated conduct with public interests, including the protection of other individuals' civil rights. This church urges legislators and the courts to fashion legal standards that respect the importance of religiously motivated conduct. In contrast with the "strict scrutiny" standard adopted by the ELCA's predecessor churches, this church affirms an intermediate standard. Such a standard would require accommodation only if the proposed accommodation would *not* harm important (rather than compelling) public interests, impose significant burdens on others, or significantly impair the government's efforts to serve the interests of those burdened.

This standard leaves room for judicial interpretation. However, it offers a starting point that better reflects the necessary balance among respect for the wide diversity of religious practices in our pluralistic society, respect for the government's interests in protecting and promoting the public welfare, and respect for the interests of others in the community.

Article 33 Citing the First Amendment, some people, including religious individuals, mistakenly believe that religious commitments and claims stemming from religious values are out of bounds in public life. This can include claims that there should be no interaction with or funding of religious organizations by the government, or that discussion of government policies or political matters should never happen within assemblies of believers.

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[61] In this case, a state was allowed to deny unemployment benefits to a Native American person fired for violating a state law that criminalized peyote use even as part of a traditional religious ceremony. See *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990).

[62] See Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb et seq.; *City of Boerne v. Flores*, 521 U.S. 507 (1997); and *Gonzales v. O Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal*, 546 U.S. 418 (2006).

[63] For example, see Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc et seq. Also, at the time of the drafting of this social statement, a majority of U.S. states have adopted some version of RFRA.

[64] A government interest is "important" when the interest is more than a legitimate goal or objective but is less than a compelling interest. See *Craig v. Boren*, 429 U.S. 190 (1976). For example, when a government action limits certain types of free speech or makes gender-based classifications that could violate constitutional equal protection rights, the government must show that its action furthers an important government interest (such as regulating the time, place, and manner of speech in a public forum or remediating past societal discrimination) by means that are substantially related to that interest.

[65] For example, see *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, 573 U.S. 682 (2014), which exempts privately held for-profit corporations from federal laws affecting employees, based on the religious objections of their owners.

Some invoke a "wall of separation" between church and state to deny the place of religious voices in the public square. This phrase, however, is not in the Constitution[66] and should not be substituted for what the Constitution actually says. The First Amendment does not prohibit or discourage the application of religious convictions to public life. The Establishment Clause applies only to the government and those acting as officers of the government. It does not require religious individuals or communities to withhold their beliefs from public life.

As Christians, we know from experience that religion plays a central role in our identity; the same is true for people who are part of other religious or spiritual traditions. If nonestablishment or "separation of church and state" meant that religious commitments should not enter public life, religious people would be uniquely harmed. Not only would this conflict with the Free Exercise Clause, but it would also uniquely disadvantage religious people in that they—and they alone—would be unable to bring their most deeply held convictions to bear on public issues.

If people of all faiths could not bring their highest convictions to consideration of civic questions, public life would be impoverished. History points to the specifically religious invocations of many slavery abolitionists and participants in the civil rights movement, for example. Moreover, many public officials turn to their religiously formed moral sources in considering critical decisions for local, state, and federal governments.

The proper relationship of personal religious commitment to political and civic life cannot, then, be reduced to a wall of separation between "church" and "state." Rather, religious commitment must be guided in civic life by the constructive relationships that religious organizations hold with political bodies. The next section addresses the character and boundaries of such constructive relationships.

V. Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations and Political Authority

Article 34 As God's people pray for God's will to be done on earth, it is necessary to set forth ELCA teaching about the constructive relationship of religious organizations to political authority. The U.S. Constitution, including the First Amendment, neither prohibits religious institutions from actively engaging in civic and political life nor requires them to do so. The Constitution leaves those decisions largely to religious institutions themselves.

The basis for the ELCA's understanding of this church's relationship with government is twofold. First, this church teaches a scriptural responsibility before God to join divine activity toward the well-being of society. It is God who gives the church a responsibility to address society's issues under the aspect of God's Law while also conveying the good news of mercy and life to individuals. Yet in this approach, there is always a creative tension because God's church is "in" the world while not "from" the world.[67] Second, as a corporate body in society, this church corporately takes to heart God's gift of an earthly sovereignty that resides in "we the people."

[66] This famous metaphor seems to have originated with Roger Williams but was most famously used by Thomas Jefferson in his personal writings.

[67] *The Church in Society*, 3, elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements. As the church (the ecclesiastical estate) interacts with the state (the political estate), it is not the Gospel (narrow sense) but the Law that it is called to speak. This is the civil or first use of the Law.

The theological conviction of responsibility before God and the reasoned conviction about the consent of the governed intersect to undergird a productive relationship. The ELCA constitution expresses this understanding as a calling to "work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor, maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of functional interaction."[68]

Article 35 The phrase "work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor" makes clear that the church should engage political authority actively and flexibly. Theologically speaking, "work with" depends upon a dynamic Lutheran understanding of God's two reigns, especially the left-handed reign by which God's work in society is carried out primarily through a just use of the law. This church holds that the Triune God, our all-encompassing source and commitment, is at work in society and calls the church, and all religious organizations, to join in public action relying upon their best understanding of God's intention for creation and society

This church also understands "work with" as grounded in the foundational commitment that sovereignty in the United States rests in "we the people." Both individuals and corporate bodies in the U.S. find their purpose summed up in the preamble to the Constitution: "to promote the general welfare."[69] These constitutional underpinnings encourage those who live in this country and all organizations and institutions to work with governing authorities toward that end.

Living in the U.S. implies a promise and opportunity to seek the welfare of all residents through every aspect of civic life. This does not imply that this church's relationship with political authority is cozy. Often, to be sure, "working with" affirms the mutual endeavor of addressing human needs. Sometimes, however, "working with" entails critical challenges to government, such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people and creation.

Article 36 The phrase "maintaining institutional separation of church and state" does not point to a "wall of separation" between public (government) and private (religious) arenas. Rather, the integrity of the institutional relationship depends on understanding proper and distinct jurisdictions.

On the one hand, theologically, such a distinction is congruent with the Lutheran understanding of how God works differently in the church and in the state (see articles xx and 35). Beyond common human faculties, religious faith does not provide revelatory or other special knowledge regarding the practical policies or means for government's work (Article xx). On the other hand, "institutional separation" also follows the logic of the U.S. Constitution. It points to preserving the integrity and distinction of both political authority and religious institutions, based on their distinctive purposes, organizational principles, and competencies (articles xx-xx).

While institutionally distinct, religious organizations and institutions share spaces of mutual concern and action with government. The ELCA therefore holds that this relationship should be one of "functional interaction." That is, it is a critical engagement governed by institutional boundaries, created, on the one side, by the faith-based purpose and competence of religious faith and institutions and, on the other side, by the secular purpose and competence of government.

[68] "Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2022), 4.03.n., www.elca.org/constitution.
[69] See constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble.

Religious organizations, then, cross the boundaries of their role when they campaign for parties or candidates or assert specific legislation or policies as "God's plan." Religious communities are mistaken when they identify a particular political movement as God's or claim divine revelation for the Constitution or identify the U.S. national experience with salvation history.

For these reasons, this church, unlike some Christian churches, teaches that it is not the church's role to endorse candidates or parties. The ELCA also recognizes the legal soundness of the Johnson Amendment[70] in prohibiting religious bodies or their representatives from verbally or financially supporting candidates or parties. Individual parishioners may, of course, advocate specific candidates and parties based on religious values and reasoned criteria but should not claim to do so as spokespeople for a church.

At the same time, this dynamic, critical engagement approach *encourages* religious organizations to champion values in the public sphere for the sake of society's good. The ELCA teaches that religious communities may speak publicly about their values to express support for policies and legislation that seem the best among competing legislation or policy. This church, for example, actively assesses and advocates for policies that affect those who are hungry (Matthew 25:35).

Article 37 In the work of functional interaction, churches and other nonprofits in the U.S. have become increasingly dependent on aid from public entities. The ELCA continues to support the prime criterion that government support for faith-based social services is appropriate only when they, as religious-based organizations, serve people without expectation about or regard to their faith. ELCA ministries, such as chaplaincy in armed services, correctional institutions, hospitals, and other care facilities, meet this criterion, as do ELCA social ministry organizations.

The ELCA view asserts a complicated protection that enables support of good government while insisting on the important distinction between religion and civil authority. To maintain the distinction, the ELCA holds that:

- Government must not fund programs that discriminate between religions in providing their services and benefits.
- Government must not fund programs that require recipients to participate in religious activities as a condition of receiving a public service.
- Government must treat program service providers equally—on religious and other grounds—and selection of funded service providers must be based solely on outcomes identified in publicly available criteria.

This dynamic, function-driven interactionist relationship[71] has guided constructive, beneficial interactions between the ELCA and political authority. Our church will continue to be so guided. As a church, we also commend this approach as salutary, both theologically and practically, for consideration by other religious bodies in their interaction with political authority in the U.S.

Article 38 The ELCA understanding of civic life and faith affirms healthy forms of patriotism. Patriotism is to love one's country, to pray for its well-being, to be committed to its success, to have a sense of pride

[70] The Johnson Amendment is a provision in the U.S. tax code, since 1954, that prohibits all 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates.

[71] The designation "function-driven interactionist approach" is found in Roger A. Willer, "Religious Organizations and Government: An Ecclesial Lutheran 'Take,'" *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 62:1, spring 2023.

in it, to criticize it, and to work for its reform when necessary. All of these can be elements of how Christians and their communities live out discipleship as individuals and in corporate bodies.

There are also unhealthy expressions of patriotism. They actually are distortions of true patriotism and can be dangerous for the country and for vulnerable populations within it. Such forms of unhealthy patriotism attribute to the country, to a political party, to certain individuals, or even to a racial or ethnic group a veneration, worship, loyalty, or trust owed to God alone (Mark 12:17). Christ's church cannot condone elevating a country or anything else to the place that belongs only to God, because this is succumbing to idolatry. This statement rejects unhealthy forms of patriotism, including those related to any form of religious nationalism.[72]

At the time of this writing, there is a peculiar form of unhealthy patriotism gaining traction in the United States—Christian nationalism. Christian nationalist belief seeks to fuse selected Christian ideas about what should be the national way of life with a comprehensive cultural framework.[73] That framework incorporates highly selective narratives, practices, symbols, and value systems. For example: "In a Christian nation, social power is placed in the service of the Christian religion."[74] Christian nationalism explicitly seeks to implement such a legislative framework. Yet, this "turns God into a mascot for the state."[75]

In hardline strains of Christian nationalism, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens. This privileging of white, U.S.-born Christians is connected to our country's violent practices of white superiority, such as Jim Crow laws or the hundreds of years of Black African slavery.

Such belief in an intrinsic moral and intellectual superiority of white European Christian civilization has been used to justify as natural and right that white Christians, especially males, should be in power. Such views about race, ethnicity, sex, social/economic class, and religion deny that one's birth in the nation or one's great contributions and service to the country are enough for a resident to be considered a "true American." It distorts who is considered to be a true citizen of the nation.

A comparison of any strain of religious nationalism, including Christian nationalism, with the actual teachings of Jesus and of the Holy Scriptures reveals that these values are not Christlike. Christian nationalism, in particular, perverts the Christian message by cherry-picking texts that interpret the Scriptures in ways that connect religion to domination.

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[72] A variety of religious nationalisms exist in the U.S. and globally. Many are addressed in "The Problem of Religious Nationalism, in the US and Globally: A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches - National Council of Churches," nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness/the-problem-of-religious-nationalism-in-the-us-and-globally-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches. The presence in the United States of Christian Zionism is one example. See "Hope for the Future: A Study Document for Renewing Jewish-Christian Relations," lutheranworld.org/resources/document-hope-future, and the "Christian Zionism" issue of *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, May 2007, learn.elca.org/jle/issue/may-2007-christian-zionism, as helpful starting points.

[73] *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (London: Oxford University Press, 2020) is one well-supported social science source on Christian nationalism.

[74] Cited from Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022), 208. The sentence after the quote summarizes a longer section of the book.

[75] Amanda Tyler, *How to End Christian Nationalism* (Broadleaf Books, 2024), 69.

Christian nationalism fuses an imagined conception of a Christian nation with a false vision of God's ultimate will. It confuses the kingdom of God with a particular government. Jesus rejects identification of earthly structures with God's kingdom or will: "My kingdom does not belong to this world" (John 18:36). Lutherans teach that the kingdom of God is not a nation, not a particular culture, not a racial grouping, not a form of government, and not even a denomination or a religion (Article xx).

For theological reasons, the ELCA rejects Christian nationalism as a distortion of the Christian faith that crosses the line into idolatry. This church also realizes that Christian nationalism contradicts the U.S. motto, *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). It effectively substitutes "we the (self-declared) true American-Christians" for "we the people." It is an unhealthy form of patriotism that harms this country, divides it, and especially endangers the well-being of vulnerable members of our society.

VI. Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life

Article 39 As we pray to discern God's will for today, our church addresses particular issues in contemporary civic life through its social teaching. Since 1988, social statements have addressed nearly every facet of contemporary life: economics, criminal justice, science and human power, war and the military-industrial complex, sexuality and family, health care, and others (visit www.elca.org/socialstatements).

ELCA social messages have spoken to civic and political concerns such as human rights, terrorism, and community violence (www.elca.org/socialmessages). ELCA social policy resolutions, adopted by ELCA assemblies, have addressed narrow policy questions. Some, for instance, speak to voter apathy, racially motivated restrictions to voting, and gerrymandering (resources.elca.org/?_categories=faith-and-society).

The issues addressed in this section do not revisit questions the ELCA already has addressed and therefore is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather these articles supplement the existing teaching of this church on selected contemporary questions.

Article 40 Among the most troubling contemporary hindrances to healthy civic life in the United States at this time is hyperpartisan polarization because it undercuts the search for collaborative solutions and significantly damages individuals and the social fabric. The U.S. political system depends on the presence and work of partisan activity. Different interests and perspectives are normal, and the party system itself provides an avenue for organizing, educating, and advocating for issues of political concern.

Except for a few instances, such as the Civil War, however, this partisanship did not bar cross-party work, collegiality, or friendships. Parties commonly formed coalitions, made compromises, and could work together toward their varied yet overlapping views of the common good. Working together often forged more effective ideas than working alone.

At the time of writing, a quite different hyperpartisanship is increasingly evident. Political identity now is often closely linked with other identifications such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, race, urban or rural residence, cable news preference, and even what restaurants and stores are frequented. These constellations of identification, or "mega-identities,"[76] are becoming supreme. The many commonalities

[76] The term "mega-identities" has been used by several writers, but for more see Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).

that once connected people despite their political affiliation are increasingly overwhelmed by these rigid, us-versus-them identities. Often they harm relationships between colleagues, friends, and family.

These mega-identities take partisanship to new levels—to hyperpartisan polarization. They are reinforced by cable news preference, social media echo-chambers, the assertions of elected officials, and other factors. They are reinforced by a "nationalization" of issues and an oversize focus on those issues. Local political campaigns are overwhelmed by outside money, and though there may still be vibrant, democratic discussion of, for example, zoning policy at the local level, that discussion gets little play in the media.

The result is a polarization in which loyalty to hyperpartisan identities becomes absolute. This loyalty is supposedly because of one's family safety, protection from "them," and the survival of "our way of life." This hyperpartisan polarization is practiced as "zero-sum power," as a winner-take-all struggle for domination. Those with alternative perspectives are designated as enemies rather than fellow members of the public with a different view.

Many people today cynically assume that such polarization is unavoidable. It is certainly a reality, and many accept such outsize loyalty and harsh practices as necessary, or even right and good. However, such hyperpartisan animosity destroys the fabric of a nation and the lives of those in it, especially people already marginalized.

This statement contends that a different approach is both possible and necessary. A productive commonality of purpose is possible, one in which all can participate. There is a path forward that is not motivated primarily by fear of others or belief in the greater purity of one's own group. It is a path different from rancorous attack and hyperpartisan animosity. These are vices to be confronted, both within the church and within the wider society.

This alternative approach is primarily not about tolerance but about respectful engagement. Article 14 describes how practicing discernment together is a gift for civic life and a witness to God's love because it models how people with opposing views can give priority to the practice of careful listening and respect.

For Christians, our identity in Christ as forgiven sinners undercuts polarization and urges love for every person as a creature of God who is not to be dominated and whose well-being we should try to improve. Our Christian identity encourages us to take seriously both our well-considered perspectives *and* the limitations of our knowledge, thoughtfulness, empathy, and goodwill. Our identity in Christ encourages a posture of prayer for those who disagree and careful listening to others whose well-considered perspectives may be quite different from our own.

The presumption of democracy and the criterion of mutual self-determination likewise require a starting point of respect and listening (Article xx). These are comparable to the values articulated in the U.S. Constitution—truly democratic values, commitment to diversity, and the public good of all. The objective should be a common search for constructive ways to enhance the well-being of human society and all creation.

On that basis, the ELCA calls for an end to practices that contribute to hyperpartisan polarization. Both as a society and as a church, we must end any winner-take-all mindsets, which approach our common life together as if it were a highly competitive sporting event. Political opponents are not enemies simply

because they have different opinions of what constitutes the best course forward on a specific issue or because they travel in different social circles.

It is possible to face difference without aggression and with an eye to the common good. It is even possible to close huge gaps through an exchange of values and ideas that changes *all* participants for the better. The solutions found in collaboration are often better, as most of us know from personal and social experience. Civic, including political, experience should not be an exception.

Article 41 In this current polarized context, civic thought and opinion leaders as well as information sources bear a particular responsibility to foster constructive debate and solutions. Though this is the responsibility of each of us, individuals and groups look to thought and opinion leaders and to various information sources to negotiate life in a fast-paced, information-saturated society. Most of us look to both certified and unconventional experts, and both are influential in shaping the values and behaviors of the public.

Civic thought leaders do not always see themselves as such, but leadership comes in many forms and exists in many forums. Elected and publicly appointed officials are obvious leaders. However, civic thought leaders include community league coaches, social media influencers, news reporters, religious ministers, activists, think tank staff, and the heads of nonprofit and volunteer organizations.

A healthy society requires such leaders to be models of vigorous and constructive participation. To bring people together, these leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse that hinders conscientious listening among neighbors. Civil disagreement about issues and the interpretation and relative importance of facts is understandable, but inflammatory rhetoric and personal attacks have no place in the public arena. Our society needs to be a place of informed public dialogue that enables people to hear one another and find solutions.

The ELCA commends leaders who model constructive practices, which are essential to honest analysis and creative solutions to social problems. Likewise we denounce "hateful, deceptive, violent speech that has too readily found a place in our national discourse."[77] Our church also encourages associations, think tanks, and other sources of analysis and information to seek to understand cultural and political differences rather than deride them. All of these are necessary steps toward building political accommodation and encouraging fact-based negotiation.

Article 42 The saying is hundreds of years old that "falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it,"[78] but it is widely acknowledged that the spread of lies, rumors, and ignorance in civic life has reached new levels today in media of all types. It is especially acknowledged as acute in social media activity.[79]

[77] In 2024, the ELCA Conference of Bishops issued a common statement on the need to speak the truth; see www.elca.org/news-and-events/8247.

[78] This saying is attributed to satirist Jonathan Swift, Anglican cleric (1667-1745).

[79] In one study, researchers found that falsehoods were 70% more likely to be reshared on a social media platform (X, formerly Twitter) than true statements. Moreover, humans were *more likely* to repeat or amplify a false statement than automated bots were. See "Study: False News Spreads Faster Than the Truth," MIT Sloan School of Management, March 8, 2018, mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/study-false-news-spreads-faster-truth. Another study (www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/september-2022/) of the TikTok app found "for a sampling of searches on prominent news topics, almost 20 percent of the videos presented as search results contained misinformation."

Healthy civic engagement depends on clear distinctions between fact and all forms of falsehood, ranging from partial misstatements to intentional disinformation to outright lies. The reach of media and the lack of clarity about the origins of its information, especially posts in social media, all necessitate stronger self-regulation in all media. This urgency increases significantly given the ability of artificial intelligence (AI) to convincingly conjure utterly false information, images, and video.

The Eighth Commandment directs people of faith to exert efforts against bearing false witness. The Small Catechism teaches that "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." Our church, then, encourages us all to ask, in every personal interaction and on social media, whether our words or those we repeat represent the best possible understanding of our neighbor.

We should be "innocent as doves" when interpreting the intentions of our neighbor but "wise as serpents" (Matthew 10:16) when discerning what information we encounter in any media. We should not share:

- Sensationalist headlines.
- Insulting memes.
- Information whose source we cannot verify.
- Information from sources whose purpose or chief likely effect is to stir up anger or hatred and to undermine, rather than foster, our civic unity.

For the sake of U.S. civic life, the ELCA calls upon media and social media platforms to:

- Align their policies and procedures worldwide with the most comprehensive and rigorous online safety regulations provided by U.S. law.
- Regularly assess and publicly disclose the extent to which platforms may foster violations of civil and human rights.
- Protect users by labeling AI-generated content.
- Allow oversight of operations in human rights hotspots.
- Allow transparency in algorithms and advertisements.
- Regularly assess, report on, and address hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation, removing these as quickly as possible through fact-checking.

Article 43 In the political arena, money plays a commanding role. Individuals, corporations, lobbyists, PACs, super PACs, nonprofits, industry trade groups, and interest groups spend money to influence political campaigns. Contributions are spent in a variety of ways, including political advertising to influence public opinion on candidates and ballot measures. Public officials are generally required by law to report on their personal finances to ensure that ethical guidelines are followed. However, so-called "dark money" is increasingly present. It is widely suspected to have an outsize influence on elections, public policy, and political discourse.

The U.S. Supreme Court has held that financial contributions by individuals and groups to political campaigns are a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment.[80] The ELCA acknowledges that publicly accountable financial contributions are both legal and basic to campaigning. They demonstrate a level of commitment consistent with a donor's views. Historically, laws often have included reporting requirements for disclosure of a contributor's name, address, and occupation. Individuals who choose to

[80] See, e.g., *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).

engage in contributing are expected to adhere to the appropriate laws and consider the implications such disclosures could have with their employer(s) or other entities.

Though some federal, state, and local laws continue to regulate the sources and contribution limits for elections, it is widely recognized that recent Supreme Court opinions have altered the system of campaign finance.[81] As a result, the expansive influence of money in elections and politics has become an ever more dominant feature of public life.

The ELCA affirms that every citizen should have the opportunity to play a free and active part in the functioning of our communities. However, the ability to be heard should not be effectively limited to those individuals, organizations, or corporations that have above-average financial wealth and resources at their disposal.

Democracy is threatened if those with the most disposable income have the dominant voice with politicians while those with less are effectively silenced. Free speech does not include the right to drown out the speech of one's neighbors. To do so is to obstruct equitable roles for all participants in a society.

This church urges state and federal lawmakers to adopt legislation that sets limits on campaign and other political contributions. Likewise, legislation is needed to increase transparency in our elections and political processes through financial reporting by public officials, including the judiciary, about all contributions and gifts. It is up to legislators to take steps that lead to the transparency of overpowering corporate and super PAC money that distorts the political debate and influences our representatives. Our church urges policies and reforms that help to:[82]

- Increase transparency and public awareness of campaign contributions and financial reporting by public officials.
- Hold corporations publicly accountable for lobbying of trade associations that contradicts their publicly proclaimed standards.
- Expand access for citizens across the economic spectrum to run for political office.
- Reduce the power of wealth to shape political debate and media influence, including through political advertising.

Article 44 ELCA teaching has long held that it is the proper concern of government to regulate aspects of social life to provide for the safety and well-being of its people. This church also recognizes that sometimes government policies, statutes, regulations, and judicial opinions harm well-being more than they promote it. Harm results from poorly conceived and implemented policies and from intentional actions that discriminate against some in favor of others.

There is a critical distinction between fallible structure and structured oppression. Government is fallible because it is made up of humans. It has not served its purpose when its goals, policies, and programs are poorly designed or implemented, or cause undue waste or hardship. In contrast, government becomes oppressive when its goals, policies, and programs are designed or transformed into vehicles for oppressing the neighbor—such as voter suppression laws or gerrymandering.

[81] For example, in *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010), the U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed that corporations are protected by the First Amendment's right to free speech and that statutes restricting corporations' independent expenditures are unconstitutional.

[82] For more, see the ELCA document at resources.elca.org/advocacy/money-in-politics/.

All public servants have a duty to ensure that government remains true to its purpose of protecting and fostering the common good. Public partnerships between nonprofits (which include all faith-based organizations) and the private sector can be means to enhance the work of both partners when dedicated to the common good. Finally, when government goes astray, members of the public have an obligation to seek reform through the procedures of democratic self-rule.

It is not possible for this church, or any civic actor, to identify a complete set of ethical norms that apply in all cases for discerning failures in civic and political life. Some criteria for discernment are elaborated on in the articles of this statement and in previous ELCA social messages and social statements.[83]

However, at a minimum, discernment regarding these everyday but weighty questions should strive to include the perspectives of those affected as well as fair representation of those served. That is the starting point for mutual self-determination and deciding whether the neighbor is being well served.

Article 45 The ELCA has worshiping communities in Washington, D.C., and several of the U.S. territories, e.g., Guam, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The ELCA's Caribbean Synod, in fact, consists largely of several of these territories. This fact and the lives of millions of people in these areas urge our church to discern the responsibility of the United States for these areas under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Congress as possessions or unincorporated territories. The ELCA recognizes that issues pertaining to the relationship between these territories and the wider U.S. society are manifold and complex, but they must not be ignored.

Many view the political relationship between the U.S. government and its unincorporated territories as problematic because of the inherent inequality between the territories and the states. There is also the specter of continued colonialist relationships in which territories lack any real power for self-determination. Territories get a representative in Congress with voice but no vote, despite residents being required to sign up for military selective service or having a long and distinguished record of service to the U.S. Territorial residents pay taxes but do not have equitable representation. Many believe that the U.S. Congress has actually undermined the democratic processes in the territories.[84]

This church recognizes complicating factors. One of those is the legacy of racism, since the vast majority of local residents in all the territories belong to racially minoritized groups—historically Black, Indigenous, Latiné, and Pacific Islander people.

The relationship between U.S.-based churches and the territories is also complicated because the churches were complicit in colonizing territories, exploiting them economically, and stripping their ancestral inhabitants of their religious and spiritual traditions.[85] The goal of converting people to Christianity was deeply entangled with expansionist ideology. As Lutherans, we believe that the Holy Spirit brings faith to people—it should not be forced or coerced by human action.

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[83] "Government and Civic Engagement," 13, or see various social statements as they address economic life, health care, and other issues, at www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

[84] A case in point is the Promesa law (see oversightboard.pr.gov/debt/) imposed on Puerto Rico as a condition to adjust the commonwealth's debt. Its Board of Fiscal Control, appointed by the U.S. Congress, has power to veto laws passed by the duly elected members of Puerto Rico's local legislature as well as the power to block initiatives from the duly elected governor.

[85] See José David Rodríguez, *Caribbean Lutherans: The History of the Church in Puerto Rico* (Fortress Press, forthcoming).

Churches bear a responsibility to help repair the harm done. Intentional, humble listening is the starting point for the principle of mutual self-determination and the first step on the path toward justice and healing. This process of careful listening can be difficult and challenging. However, when rooted in a people's sincere willingness to understand one another, it can lead to new possibilities for reparation, healing, and wholeness.[86]

This church urges its members, its ecumenical partners, and others of goodwill to foster and facilitate processes of listening and accountability between the territories and those in positions of power over them in the U.S. government. Consistent with the principle of mutual self-determination (Article 22), the ELCA also is committed to advocating for equality in government representation for the District of Columbia[87] and U.S. territories, and for their economic and social equity.

Article 46 American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians are U.S. citizens with unique, historical relationships to the U.S. Federally recognized tribes have sovereignty as Tribal Nations, and the U.S. federal government has a federal trust responsibility with those nations.[88] This sovereignty and the federal trust responsibility are based variously on treaties, the U.S. Constitution, and Supreme Court decisions.

In these histories, treaties and other legal guarantees repeatedly were *not* honored by European settlers and those who followed as they swept across the North American continent. Native people have endured horrid racial, social, and economic oppression that constitutes some of the most shameful chapters in American history. The ELCA, with others in this country, recognizes that this dreadful history must be acknowledged, the status of Native Americans in the United States protected, and efforts at reconciliation and justice increased.[89]

There are many layers to the history, but all must recognize that it is grounded in the Doctrine of Discovery, which originated in 15th-century papal bulls.[90] The doctrine was introduced into United States law by U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall in *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823). This decision stipulated that the discovery of territory previously unknown to Europeans gave the discovering nation title to territory against all other European nations, and that this title could be perfected by possession.

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[86] This is illustrated by the Truth and Healing Movement, launched by the ELCA with the American Indian and Alaska Native people. For more information, visit www.elca.org/truthandhealing.

[87] The ELCA holds "that equitable voting representation in Congress be granted to the citizens of the District of Columbia." Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Social Policy Resolution CA01.07.62, "Congressional Voting Representation for the District of Columbia" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001), resources.elca.org/faith-and-society/dc-congressional-voting-spr01/.

[88] The federal Indian trust responsibility is a legal obligation under which the United States "has charged itself with moral obligations of the highest responsibility and trust" toward Indian tribes (*Seminole Nation v. United States*, 316 U.S. 286 [1942]). This obligation was first discussed by Chief Justice John Marshall in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. 1 (1831), www.bia.gov, accessed February 10, 2025.

[89] "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to American Indian and Alaska Native People" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2016), 2, tinyurl.com/ywt42njz.

[90] Several papal bulls in the 15th century established the doctrine, which legally codified land acquisition, colonialism, and religious intolerance. One easily accessible discussion of the complex meaning and history may be found in en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine (accessed November 19, 2023).

Though global in origin, this principle undergirded the actions of people who made claims on Native lands in North America.[91] Justified by this doctrine, the settlers who moved across North America, including predecessors of this church, claimed Indian lands as their own property.

The legal doctrine was plainly rooted in Christian discourse. The ELCA has acknowledged that the doctrine "created a theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. Today it continues to support those evils and injustices found in our church, U.S. law, and legal interpretation."[92]

The ELCA has joined other religious bodies in explicitly repudiating this European-derived doctrine, calling it an "improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword."[93] This church has acknowledged and called for repentance of its complicity in the colonialism that continues to harm tribal governments and tribal members.[94]

Early in its life, the ELCA named and acknowledged the sovereignty of federally recognized Tribal Nations and committed to speaking out for their just treatment.[95] This social statement reaffirms this church's stance on the importance of that sovereignty. It calls for and commits this church to support just policy in treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, religious freedom, and other matters that affect the civic well-being of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

In particular, this statement calls upon the U.S. federal government, its agencies, and its residents, along with all other governments, to:

- Honor the legal trust relationship the U.S. federal government has with Tribal Nations or federally recognized tribes, acknowledging their sovereignty, self-determination, and self-governance.
- Be guided by concern for truth, justice, reconciliation, visibility, equity, and healing as central to these sovereign relationships.
- Prioritize consultation with Tribal Nations that ensures equity and honors parity with them.
- Give particular attention to policies and legislation that uphold sovereignty and increase Native American self-determination.
- Support efforts to increase voter registration and access to polling places and early voting while opposing state efforts to raise barriers to the ballot box.
- Engage in careful listening and consultation with Native Americans on matters with environmental impact that affect their original and sovereign land.

Article 47 Comprehensive, honest civics education is an essential element for revitalized civic life. It provides the building blocks of a society. The ELCA has addressed the social institution of education in the United States and is on record that schools "ought to teach the principles and virtues of living

[91] "Declaration," 2.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., citing Augsburg Confession, XXVIII, Latin text, BC 2000.
[94] ELCA Social Policy Resolution CA16.02.04., "Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery," www.elca.org/our-work/congregations-and-synods/ministries-of-diverse-cultures-and-communities/indigenous-ministries-and-tribal-relations/repudiation.
[95] ELCA Social Policy Resolution CA91.5.28., "1992: Year of Remembrance, Repentance, and Renewal."

together in responsible freedom in a democratic society, which includes respect for the diverse cultures and beliefs of their students."[96]

To have a strong democracy, members of the public must know how civic institutions are supposed to function and how they are called to participate. A comprehensive, honest civics curriculum therefore must teach the whole story of U.S. history in all its aspirations, successes, and failures. It should emphasize the values inherent in the U.S. Constitution. It should draw upon what the community holds in common and explore in a fair and impartial way those issues on which the community is divided.

Essential to that is both factual accuracy and including works of the many groups that have been part of the American story. The ELCA encourages curricula that promote understanding of the full history of U.S. government operations and cultures; it opposes legislation that prevents students from a full engagement with those stories.

Article 48 No single solution will reduce the increasingly fevered polarization of the U.S. or repair the damage that endangers our social fabric and democratic republic. One fundamental element is a renewed, constructively grounded, and thoughtful commitment to civic life across this nation. Hyperpartisan polarization is, in part, the result of individuals withdrawing from widespread participation in civic life. This church holds that the return to a robust civic engagement as a public good is both our calling as Christians and our responsibility as residents of this country.

The social message "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy" addresses at greater length the nature and purpose of a healthy civic engagement, especially in relation to citizenship.[97] Among other elements, that message teaches that civic engagement takes numerous forms—informed voting, attendance at public meetings, holding public office, political party involvement, policy advocacy, community organizing, and nonviolent protest.

The message points out that civic engagement arises both from concern about disorder and injustice and from hope for the well-being of all. It affirms elements of a healthy civic engagement such as democratic self-governance, support for public servants, and well-crafted policies that foster justice, racial and social equity, and reconciliation. The ELCA urges its members and all residents of this society to contribute to and urge robust civic participation.

Conclusion

Article 49 "Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread." As Jesus taught the disciples, so we pray in this church. We do so in concert with Christians down through the ages and into the future who, in the Spirit, are witnesses to God's will for just peace and well-being. We do so in faith, understanding that God's creative power is shared throughout all creation and is given to human beings to use in civic life for the good of all.

May we walk humbly with you as we strive for justice, kindness, and peace in human society. May we as your church live wisely by the civic use of the Law in joining your purpose toward *shalom*. May we, as

[96] *Our Calling in Education* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007), 26-27, elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

[97] "Government and Civic Engagement," 14, elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-statements.

your people, join all others of goodwill in the work of government as gift, aspiration, and responsibility to serve the common good of "we the people." May we, as your forgiven ones, be empowered by your gracious Word and Sacraments to boldly and courageously seek the good of the neighbor through our participation in civic life.

Glossary

These terms are **underlined** when used the first time in a statement article.

Alien work: *See "proper work" below.*

Book of Concord: A collection of writings from 1580 that were subscribed to by some 80 royal and municipal governments. It was published on the 50th anniversary of the 1530 Augsburg Confession and is generally understood as an authoritative, confessional set of documents for the Evangelical/Lutheran movement across the globe. The most widely affirmed writings include the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, and Luther's two catechisms. The ELCA accepts the entire book as authoritative.

Christian nationalism: A cultural framework that idealizes and advocates fusion of highly selected Christian beliefs with U.S. civic life. This nationalistic ideology holds, among other things, that the U.S. Constitution was divinely inspired, that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United States, and that this nation holds a uniquely privileged status in God's eyes. Proponents range from those who believe the U.S. legally should be declared a Christian nation (approximately 21% of the U.S. population) to those involved in more virulent strains that are openly racist, patriarchal, and antidemocratic.

Church: Has multiple meanings that are largely dependent on context. Fundamentally "church" is the event of God's saving presence wherever two or three are gathered (Matthew 18:30). In the Lutheran tradition, this event is specifically identified with God's commands and promises in the proclamation of the Word and distribution of the Sacraments. In its widest sense, the word applies to the universal (catholic) body of Christ, describing all believers. "Church" is used to designate denominations (the ELCA, for example) but also local congregations, as in "going to my church." In this statement regarding civic life, "this church" or "our church" refers to the ELCA as a body that is part of the Church Catholic.

Civic life: Activities and institutions in society that are not primarily individual or that occur within a family/household or private space. An activity is civic when it is in a public space, whether in one's neighborhood, state or nation, or beyond.

Common good: Has various definitions but is used here to denote what benefits a society in terms of justice and peace for all people and creation. It conveys the belief that the purpose of government is to seek these outcomes for the well-being of all members of the public.

Community of moral deliberation/discernment: A concept established in the first ELCA social statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, as an element of the ELCA's identity to which our church is called to grow. The concept envisions the whole community praying for one another, studying Scripture, and wrestling together toward moral understanding and action. This approach to doing ethics is bottom-up rather than top-down. Romans 12:2 speaks of discernment, and Reformation writings such as the Smalcald Articles present the idea as a mark of the church, that of "the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters."

Confessions: Has wider meanings in Scripture and historical theology but, in this study, designates the ELCA's authorized teaching standard of the Book of Concord.

Corporate social responsibility: The means by which a corporation, nonprofit, or other organization intentionally specifies its contributions or responsibilities toward the well-being of society, especially in economic decisions. The Corporate Social Responsibility program of the ELCA, for instance, decides ELCA investment policy in socially responsible ways, as guided by ELCA social teaching. This program also enables dialogue between this church and representatives of the businesses with which it deals regarding the social implications of company practices.

Dark money: Campaign contributions in which the source of the money is not disclosed to the public but silently influences political discourse, election outcomes, and public policy.

Discernment: The practice of evaluating multiple factors in an issue to find an appropriate response that seems God-pleasing. It generally implies active theological or ethical reflection involving study, prayer, and dialogue. It seeks wisdom through God's Spirit as understood through a community process (Romans 12:1-2). (See also "Community of moral deliberation/discernment.")

Doctrine of Discovery: Several papal bulls in the 15th century established this doctrine, which legally codified for European countries and settlers land acquisition, colonialism, and religious intolerance in relation to Indigenous people.

Establishment Clause: The first clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It states that government "shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion." This means that government cannot establish a state/national religion or impose any form of worship or devotion upon members of the public. It does not mean that a person's religious commitments cannot or should not enter into or influence their public life in the form of political activity or broader civic engagement. (See also "Separation of church and state" and "Free exercise of religion.")

Ethics: The science and art of asking "How then shall we live?" or "What is the good?" Ethics implies extended reflection and dialogue toward critically considering, defining, negotiating, and determining what ought to be or what ought to be done. It is a practice done both by individuals and as a community. It often involves analyzing a current, accepted moral idea to determine its rationale or ways it should be altered. The terms "ethics" and "morals" are somewhat different but are often used interchangeably. (See "Morality.")

Faith: Has many meanings and uses, even in a religious context, but the fundamental Lutheran understanding teaches that faith is a trusting response to and relationship with God. This relationship of trust is expressed through means such as active participation in religious communities and attention to key teachings of the church universal.

Free Exercise Clause: The second phrase in the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law … prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]") focuses on the relationship between faith and public/civic life. The first clause, prohibiting establishment of a state religion, clears the ground for the faithful to determine their own best way of exercising faith in their own public life. (See "Establishment Clause" and "Separation of church and state.")

God's sovereignty: Has had multiple meanings in Christian thinking but fundamentally describes God's

supreme power or God's rule and reign over and in the universe. This statement speaks theologically of God's sovereignty as the source of all power and thus of political sovereignty. Both power and sovereignty are fundamental to civic life. (See "Power.")

Justice: Generally refers to an underlying sense of fairness, right treatment, and reciprocity. This statement emphasizes the aspects of justice related to civic life and government. These include fair and equal treatment under the law, ending oppression based on power differences, and, as emphasized in the Scriptures, a right and wholesome relationship with God and within community.

Law and Gospel: Expresses a key Lutheran emphasis that God's Word and work in human society occur under different means. "Law" is understood to have two forms: (1) as a directive and corrective for society (first, or civil, use) and (2) as judgment on sin (second, or theological, use). "The Law" is a summary term for God's directives for human living, such as the Ten Commandments. "The Gospel" is the good news of God's mercy, received in faith on account of Jesus Christ.

Luther, Martin (1483-1546): German priest, theologian, author, and professor. Luther was a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation and is the namesake of Lutheranism.

Mega-identity: An interlocking set of social identifications: ethnic, religious, urban/rural, conservative/liberal. When these identifications cohere in a set that is semifixed and loaded with huge emotional stakes, they become a mega-identity that walls off people from others, especially those who don't share the same characteristics or beliefs.

Morality/morals: Originates from the Greek word *mores*, which designated the binding customs of a culture or society related to what is good or right. It designates an existing or already negotiated moral structure. In every society, certain actions, goals, and character traits are considered moral, immoral, or some combination thereof, according to established norms. "Ethics" and "morals" often are used interchangeably. (See "Ethics.")

Neighbor: Has multiple references but suggests a member of one's community. However, because humans live in multiple communities, the term can refer to a person in one's neighborhood or town, region, international community, or even ecological community.

Neighbor justice: Seeking to meet neighbors' needs for equality and equity in public life. Though rooted in the biblical directive to "love your neighbor as yourself," the term expresses how faith is active in love, seeking justice in relationships and in the structures of society.

Partisanship: Strong loyalty or blind adherence to a specific party, group, set of beliefs, or person.

Polarization: As used in this study, a partisanship so strong that partisans are rigidly set apart from other groups, whose beliefs and views are considered utterly opposite and most often inferior, dangerous to society, and unworthy of consideration. There is no value of or respect for "those people." In everyday speech, such polarization is often expressed in the saying "my way or the highway."

Politics: Comes from the Greek word *polis,* meaning the city or place of the people. As used here, designates the activities of deciding how to govern and order life in community. Politics in this sense is the activity through which people exercise decisions about "who gets what, when, where,

and how" to fulfill the purpose that all may flourish. It is the necessary art of guiding or influencing government to seek the common good. (See "Common good.")

Political: That which relates to political activity. (See "Politics.")

Power: All power is grounded in God, who is all-powerful and whose sovereignty creates, sustains, and redeems creatures who are not God. Divine power is not a possession but a gift that aims to create power for others. Power is not merely sovereignty or the capacity to control. To the extent that acts of power, whether political or otherwise, are reduced to such control, they distort and pervert power because sovereignty is not an end in itself. Rather, power reaches its end in the gift of power to and for the fulfillment of others. In Luther's theology, this understanding of divine power is central to his theology of creation, justification by grace, and the Lord's Supper.

Proper versus alien work: "Proper" and "alien" are best known among Lutherans in connection to the distinction between the "proper work" of God in justifying sinners and the "alien work" of God in condemning sinners. However, these terms are theologically useful in related, if more general, meanings because the word "alien" comes from the Latin *alius*, meaning "other." In this statement, the distinction is made in terms of the calling of rostered ministers. The unique "proper work" of the ministry of the Word is defined in the historic Lutheran tradition and in our Confessions in terms of the proclamation of Christ's mediatorial and redemptive work, including justification, sanctification, and eternal life. At the same time, rostered ministers of the Word also necessarily engage in other kinds of work; these works can helpfully be described as "alien work."

Religious diversity: The state of affairs in which more than one religion is accepted within a society. In the United States, the term generally indicates a situation in which the society sees the value of each person having their own religious beliefs and practicing them openly and safely. This includes the freedom to practice no religion.

Rostered ministers: In the ELCA, includes all the ordained such as bishops, pastors, chaplains, and deacons.

Self-determination: Most basically, the ability of people or communities to determine their own objectives and actions in the mutuality of common life, with minimal external compulsion. In terms of political authority, it means that people have the right to freely choose their government within the collective life of a society.

Self-governance: The ability of people to play a fundamental role in the functioning of their government.

Separation of church and state: Often used as shorthand for the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, which forbids state-sponsored religion. However, this applied meaning of the phrase is contested. For example, many people believe it means that religious convictions or religious institutions should have no legitimate role in social or political life. The ELCA constitution, on the other hand, endorses institutional separation with functional interaction and argues that the church as a civic body must avoid partisanship but engage in civic life because God calls people of faith to join God's activity there.

Shalom: Hebrew word used in the Scriptures to denote God's intent for whole, healthy, peaceful,

joyous, just relations among all elements in God's creation. It is often translated as "peace," but it means far more than mere peace of mind or absence of violence. In the Scriptures, *shalom* indicates universal well-being and wholeness—a state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed. Though the term appears in what Christians call the Old Testament, it also has a long, rich history as a central and complex concept within Judaism that Christians should acknowledge and respect.

Sin: Expresses the human proclivity for being in opposition to God. Sin is variously described as disobedience, lack of trust, self-centeredness, pride, or complacency, among other things. Sin occurs in an individual's thoughts and actions but also is expressed in organizations, institutions, and systems. In the last three cases, it is often termed "structural" or "systemic" sin.

Solidarity: A kinship within all of nature that issues from God's creative activity. The term expresses the contention that the interests of the entire community of life should be legitimate concerns when decisions are made and actions evaluated.

Sovereignty: Can be used in various ways but, in this statement, refers to ultimate authority in a particular arena.

Systemic sin: A theological theme recognizing that social and political systems are developed by humans and that, because of this, the sin embedded in them is greater than the sin of any individual action. For instance, consider a society in which a racial minority has dramatically less access to political power because of laws or widespread discrimination and, therefore, has less chance of living and thriving.

Theology: Can indicate academic or abstract reflection but, in this study, generally refers to faithful reflection about anything related to God. Every person of faith, therefore, engages in theology when expressing thoughts about God, the church, God in relation to civic life, etc.

Theology of the cross: Refers to a theology that sees "the cross" (that is, divine self-revelation) as the only source of ultimate knowledge concerning who God is and how God saves. Identified with the writings of Martin Luther, it contrasts with the "theology of glory," which places great emphasis on human capacity and human reason to know who God is and what God wills.

Three estates: Used to designate the fundamental structures in human society (originally in Christian Europe). During the Reformation period, the three overarching social functions (estates) were identified as (1) the church, (2) the government, and (3) the family (which included all of society's economic functions). The concept remains useful as a teaching about God's active involvement in society and human roles therein, but it must be understood in contemporary terms.

Two kingdoms: A traditional theological term described more accurately by other terms from the Reformation. (See "Two reigns, hands, or regimens of God.")

Two reigns, hands, or regimens of God: Refer to Lutheran teaching that distinguishes between God's activity in the world through secular means and God's gracious activity through explicitly gracious means in the church. God's "right-hand reign" conveys the tangible power of God's love and forgiveness to people of faith, which stirs us to forgive others, to express mutual love and care, and to strive for justice. God's "left-hand reign" works through secular roles, structures, and institutions to protect and foster the social well-being of the people and creation. The ELCA teaches that both of God's two reigns (hands,

ways, regimens) are necessary for governing creation and that they are interrelated.

Vocation: In this statement, a calling from God that comes as both gift and responsibility. The ELCA understands baptismal vocation as fundamental; it is God's saving call, lived out in joyful response through service to the neighbor in daily life. This overarching vocation is expressed in multiple callings (or specific vocations) such as being a responsible citizen, parent, student, worker, etc.

Word: Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom God's message to us, as both Law and Gospel, reveals God's judgment and mercy. The ELCA constitution holds that the Word is expressed in creation and in the history of Israel but is centered in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament are the written Word of God in the sense that they are inspired by God's Spirit as the writers tell the story and announce God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Through them, God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

Works righteousness: As conceived during the Reformation period, describes the practice or belief that some level of right activity, belief, or character is required to achieve righteousness in God's eyes. The Lutheran tradition encourages people to seek righteousness (right action, character, and relationship) in civic life but emphasizes the biblical teaching that no works righteousness can achieve God's salvation (Romans 3:21). Righteousness is given by God's mercy as a gift on account of Christ and is received by faith.

Implementing Resolutions

Resolved:

1. To urge members of this church to pray, participate in, and advocate for civic life in the United States that reflects God's activity and call, which seek both the well-being of all people and a creation marked by justice and peace;
2. To encourage members to draw inspiration from the ELCA social message "Government and Civic Engagement: Discipleship in a Democracy," which highlights the call to embrace daily our baptismal vocation through active participation in self-governance;
3. To reaffirm and encourage use across our church of other existing social teaching and policy documents that promote robust and wise civic participation, such as those that address matters of voting, campaign finance, public service, nonviolent protest, and the like;
4. To recognize with deep appreciation the commitments and efforts by those in this church—including but not limited to churchwide organization teams such as Witness in Society and Building Resilient Communities, as well as the many church-related social ministry organizations and educational institutions—that contribute to healthy civic life through service, advocacy, or education;
5. To call upon all members of this church to intentionally evaluate the dangers of polarization and the threats posed by disregard for democratic practices and self-government;
6. To encourage ELCA worshiping assemblies and ministries to build bridges, foster reconciliation, practice communal discernment, provide opportunities for difficult conversations, and address polarization constructively in their communities;
7. To encourage synod leaders, in collaboration with other appropriate bodies, to explore creating or expanding state public policy advocacy in their domains as part of the ELCA Witness in Society network, similar to those already existing in several states;

8. To direct the churchwide office, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, theologians, and ethicists, rostered leaders, and elected lay leaders, to develop guidelines and protections consistent with this social statement regarding the roles in civic life of representatives of this church who have official responsibility to preach, teach, and lead on behalf of our church;
9. To call upon the publishing and educational ministries of this church, including but not limited to Augsburg Fortress Publishers, to consider the need for civics education curricula, civic participation guidance, and related theological reflection, and to create these in multiple formats, including multimedia and online;
10. To call upon the publishing and educational ministries of this church, including but not limited to Augsburg Fortress Publishers, to explore the need for resources dedicated to nonviolent resistance and peaceful engagement in civic life, with special concern for materials dedicated to religious and political histories, liturgical guidance, and training for rostered and lay leaders;
11. To direct the Witness in Society team of the churchwide organization and to call upon all expressions of this church in their advocacy efforts to support and advocate for policies and laws consistent with this social statement, and to give sustained attention to the fresh convictions and commitments found here in the creation of programs and projects;
12. To direct the Ecumenical and Inter-religious Relations team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop to share this statement as a resource for dialogue, discernment, and collaboration with ecumenical and interreligious partners toward the well-being of all people and creation from within the U.S. context;
13. To urge faculty, staff, and administrators of ELCA-related colleges, universities, and seminaries to renew and emphasize education toward callings in public service, and to model and encourage dynamic civic participation among their students;
14. To direct appropriate units in the churchwide organization, coordinated by the Office of the Presiding Bishop, to establish or oversee processes for implementation of these resolutions, with an initial report to the fall meeting of the ELCA Church Council in 2027.