

## BIBLE STUDY: Living Into Our Faith in Action

This single-session Bible study and discussion guide can be used by adults or older teens, as individuals or in small groups, for consideration of civic commitment as people of faith.

• BIBLE PASSAGE • QUOTE • REFLECTION • PRAYER • SONG • DISCUSSION QUESTIONS •

### BIBLE PASSAGE

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:14-17).

### QUOTE

“God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.” —*Summary of Martin Luther’s arguments in his [Church Postil](#) writings as phrased by Gustaf Wingren.*<sup>1</sup>

### REFLECTION

By Christopher Vergara, vice president, ELCA Metropolitan New York Synod

In our Lutheran tradition, deeply rooted in the teachings of Martin Luther and enriched by the enduring wisdom of Scripture, we find a profound call to serve our neighbors. Luther’s assertion that he “will do nothing in this life except what I see will be necessary, advantageous, and salutary for my neighbor, because through faith I am overflowing with all good things in Christ” (from [On the Freedom of a Christian](#)) resonates powerfully with the practical exhortation in James 2:14-17, which challenges us to embody our faith through tangible actions. Together, these teachings underscore that our faith finds its fullest expression in civic engagement and service to others, not as a means of achieving salvation, but as a natural outgrowth of our belief in Christ.

Luther’s writing reminds us that our service is fundamentally about responding to the needs around us, rather than performing acts to gain favor with God. He emphasizes that God does not require our service; instead it is our neighbors who do. This perspective aligns seamlessly with the passage from James, which starkly critiques the notion of a faith devoid of works. James illustrates this with a scenario in which offering kind words to a person in need, without addressing their physical requirements, is futile. Thus both Luther and James compel us to move beyond a passive faith, encouraging us to engage actively in the lives of those around us.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Gustaf Wingren’s [Luther on Vocation](#). The quote is found on page 10, in the section “The Kingdom of Heaven” in the chapter “Earth and Heaven.”

<sup>2</sup> Some of us in Lutheran circles have heard of tension between Martin Luther and the book of James. Yet our author is making a distinction between a work being good and a work being meritorious, which is supported in Lutheran teaching when it comes to service. “Luther may have critiqued James but wasn’t opposed to the idea that ‘true’ faith was expressed in works

## Living Into Our Faith in Action *continued*

For members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), this call to action is a vital aspect of our faith journey. Our engagement in civic life — whether through volunteering, advocacy or community service — is not about playing the role of a savior to our neighbors. Instead it is about living into the faith that we profess. We do not engage in these acts to earn salvation; rather our salvation through Christ empowers and inspires us to serve. Through this service we embody the grace we have received and become a living testimony of God's love in action.

“Our engagement in civic life - whether through volunteering, advocacy, or community service - is not about playing the role of a savior to our neighbors. Instead, it is about living into the faith that we profess.”

Civic engagement, therefore, becomes a natural extension of our faith. When we see our neighbors struggling — whether they lack food, shelter or support — it is our faith, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that compels us to act. This action is not motivated by a desire for personal glory or divine reward but by the transformative love of Christ within us. As Lutherans, we understand that our righteousness before God comes solely through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet this faith is never static. It propels us into the world to be instruments of God's mercy and justice.

In practical terms this means actively participating in initiatives that seek to uplift the marginalized, support the vulnerable and promote justice in our communities. It might involve advocating for policies that address systemic inequalities, volunteering at a local shelter or simply being present for a neighbor in distress. Each act of service, no matter how small, reflects our faith in action.

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Moreover, this commitment to service is a powerful witness to the world. In a society often characterized by division and indifference, our collective efforts to serve others stand as a testament to the inclusive and transformative love of God. By living out our faith in the public sphere, we not only meet the immediate needs of our neighbors but also embody the hope and compassion that our faith teaches.

As Lutherans, we understand that our civic engagement is deeply rooted in the conviction that faith and works are inseparable. Inspired by Luther's teachings and the Scriptural exhortation in James, we recognize that serving our neighbors is not about earning salvation or assuming a messianic role. Instead it is about faithfully responding to the grace we have received, allowing our faith to be a living, active force for good in the world. In doing so, we honor God and make manifest the love of Christ in our communities, fulfilling our call to serve with mercy and compassion.

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toward the neighbor,” reflects Dr. Ryan Cumming, ELCA program director for Theological Ethics, Community Engagement and Education.

## Living Into Our Faith in Action *continued*

**PRAYER** *Peace Prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi*

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is discord, union;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.*

*Grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.  
Amen.*

### SONG

*"For the Healing of the Nations" The music can be found in [Singing Our Prayer: Companion to Holden Prayer Around the Cross](#).*

*"God's Work, Our Hands" This hymn can be found at [elca.org/Resources/GWOH-Sunday#Hymn](http://elca.org/Resources/GWOH-Sunday#Hymn).*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Grace is experienced in many different ways. How might someone experience the grace of God if we embody "God's love in action" in how we interact with others?
2. What might the author mean by "static" faith? What message might the community see when encountering a follower of Christ whose faith could be described as "static"?
3. How might your actions, guided by faith, impact "a society often characterized by division and indifference"?
4. How is hope communicated by actions of volunteering, advocacy or community service?
5. Can you share examples of how your faith community has been "a living, active force for good in the world" in volunteering? In advocacy? In community service? What is the strength of each?
6. What need of a neighbor you accompany in your life or faith community could benefit from volunteering, advocacy or community service?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Christopher Vergara grew up in a Spanish-language Pentecostal church in New York City. With a strong emphasis on Christian education from his single immigrant mother, he attended Martin Luther School in Queens, N.Y., and Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Ind., where he first embraced the Lutheran tradition. After returning to New York City to attend the Juilliard School, he became an active member of St. Peter's Church.*

*Currently Vergara is vice president of the Metropolitan New York Synod, where he has also served on the Synod Council and Executive Committee, chaired the AMMPARO/Sanctuary Ministry and led the synod's Advocacy Taskforce. For the ELCA churchwide expression he currently serves on the Nominating Committee and has been on the Memorials Committee. He has received the Outstanding Friend of*

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