



Participant's Guide

Understanding *Faith and Civic Life*

A six-week study guide
on the ELCA's social
statement for
congregations and
communities

*A Collaboration of
Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania (LAMPa)
and
Theological Ethics, Office of the Presiding Bishop*





Overview

Week 1: Foundational Teaching: God Acts for the Well-being of All Through Civic Life

Main Takeaway: God has created all people in God's image, for the purpose of living in shalom. Sin disrupts God's purposes, but the Bible makes clear that God's work toward shalom still seeks an earthly approximation when society is dedicated to the well-being of all. God's work happens both in the church and in civic life – complicated in both by sin and in different ways. We come closer to God's intention for well-being when we repent of sin that divides and open ourselves to serving our neighbors.

Week 2: God Calls All People to Robust Civic Participation

Main Takeaway: By virtue of our baptism, all Christians are called into the vocation of discipleship, and active participation in civic life is a key element of that vocation. The calling to active civic life is supported in faith communities formed by worship and word, which also are called to be places of "constructive moral discernment."

Week 3: Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government

Main Takeaway: No earthly political system even comes close to being like the reign of God. At the same time, God expects human powers to be used for the well-being of all. The vision put forth in the U.S. Constitution aspires toward a pluralistic community governed "by the people" for the well-being of all. We can engage in efforts toward achieving the ideals of the Constitution and in this way serve God's purpose toward the well-being of all.

Week 4: Religion and the First Amendment

Main Takeaway: The Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment work together to promote and protect religious diversity and freedom. They do not prohibit individuals of faith from participating in public life; neither do they allow the exercise of one religion to impede the rights of others.

Week 5: Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations and Political Authority

Main Takeaway: This church affirms working "with" government authorities, while maintaining institutional separation in a critical functional interaction. Our church believes this enables us to be a better voice proclaiming and working toward God's expectations for the well-being of society. This church proposes that this a balanced approach appropriate for all religious organizations in a pluralistic society. This church encourages healthy patriotism and repudiates Christian nationalism since it inappropriately fuses a selective and imagined conception of a Christian nation with a false vision of God's favoritism for Christian people in this country.

Week 6: Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life

Main Takeaway: Being rooted in our own identity as created in God's image and acknowledging that truth for all people enable us to address a number of contemporary concerns in civic life – especially hyper partisanship and the just and proper use of media.



Introduction

Dear Church,

The Holy Spirit sometimes has uncanny timing! When the social statement of faith and civic life was called for at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, we knew that issues of politics, faith, discipleship, and the Constitution were becoming deeply divisive questions in our church and society. Yet we could not have known how much more these issues and questions are today. We have been anticipating this social statement for many years, and we believe engaging in these questions and topics are crucial for the church and for people of faith as we see the fabric of our civic life together further disintegrating.

The social statement taskforce and the Theological Ethics team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop have done an amazing job putting together this social statement. It is comprehensive, thoughtful, rooted in our Lutheran theology and ultimately, our deeply held values of loving God and loving our neighbors. We hope you will take time to read the whole social statement!

AND, we know that sometimes social statements get adopted and our congregations never really engage in their good work. We did not want that to happen! The stakes are too high for this statement to merely sit on a shelf or a website unread. We believe it is only by engaging, grappling with these hard topics with the people we worship with, as a “community of moral discernment,” that we can address the immense needs of the world around us in this moment.

That is why we created this 6-week study guide, for you and your congregation or community to use now! The Theological Ethics team in the Office of the Presiding Bishop will eventually put together a much more comprehensive and deeper dive, which we hope you will partake of when it’s ready. But we have heard from pastors, deacons, and lay leaders the need to start talking, learning, praying together now. We hope this curriculum helps you do just that.

Each session involves “Table Setting,” where the facilitator will walk through definitions and theological concepts, and a “Table Talk” where the group engages in discussion around a question based on those themes. Some sessions include extra activities or videos for thought. All are rooted in scripture, ending with the question “What is God calling you to do, be, or change?”

That is our ultimate hope - that God will continue to call us and transform us and the world so we might better love one another and seek the well-being of all.

In Christ,
LAMPa Staff



Week 1: Foundational Teaching:

God Acts for the Well-being of All Through Civic Life

“Shalom describes God’s intention in creation for an abundance of peace, well-being, goodness, truth, beauty, justice, freedom, joy, wholeness, and love. 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.” (Article 2, page 11)

Objectives

- (Optional) Outline the process a social statement undergoes in the ELCA.
- Introduce key scriptural, confessional, and theological vocabulary terms for understanding the foundation of a Lutheran understanding of faith and civic life.
- Begin to deepen participants’ understanding of shalom, and how God’s intention for society’s well-being can be a framework for approaching civic life.
- Highlight the connection between the civic duty to seek the well-being of all and our discipleship calling of “striving for justice and peace in all the world.”

Outcomes

Through discussing the foundations of the ELCA’s commitment to being a community of moral deliberation, and through the introduction of a scriptural and confessional framework, participants will build a foundation for deeper understanding of key themes in this statement and feel empowered to engage in civic life as a baptismal and vocational call to all disciples, for the sake of the well-being of all.

Expected Pre-Work

Read the Annotated Guide to Content for Introduction and Section 1 (Articles 1-9) of the social statement on *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*, pages 1-3.

Materials

Participant Guide and/or Handouts

Slides

Copy of the Social Statement, *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*

(Digital versions are available at: www.elca.org/socialstatements. Complimentary print copies also are available. You can order paper copies in bundles of 5 at <https://store.elca.org/>)

Timeline (~55-65 minutes)

Introductions (5 minutes)

Community Guidelines/Covenant (5 minutes)

Opening Scriptural Grounding (5 minutes)

How does the ELCA adopt a Social Statement? (Optional) (10 minutes)

Setting the Table – Theological and Ethical Themes (15 minutes)

Table Talk for Today – Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)



Handout for Session 1:

God Acts for the Well-being of All Through Civic Life

Matthew 6:9-15

“Pray, then, in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

may your name be revered as holy.

May your kingdom come.

May your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

- *What words, phrases or images stand out to you?*
- *What is God calling you to do, be, or change in the hearing of this passage?*

Table Talk for Today

How are you active in civic life? What does “civic life” mean for you? Where might God be calling you to be more active?



Week 2: God Calls All People to Robust Civic Participation

"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 a 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." (Article 19, pages 30-31)

Objectives

- Continue building an understanding of our participation in civic life as both a human and a baptismal vocation.
- Define ethics and politics, and the interplay of the two as ways in which we engage in civic life.
- Illustrate how worship is designed to support and motivate our civic life and consider how congregations and worshipping communities can be safe places for moral discernment.

Outcomes

Through continued reflection on how participating in civic life is a human endeavor and baptismal vocation, participants will be able to articulate how "politics," "ethics," and "moral discernment," are important pieces of our life together as worshipping communities.

Expected Pre-Work

Read the Annotated Guide to Content on Section 2 (Articles 10-20) of the social statement on *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*, pages 3-4

Materials

Participant Guide and/or Handouts

Sticky notes, writing materials

Slides

Copy of the Social Statement, *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*

Timeline (~55 minutes)

Introductions and Community Guidelines/Covenant Reminder (5 minutes)

Opening Scriptural Grounding (10 minutes)

Setting the Table – Theological and Ethical Themes (10 minutes)

Worship as Preparation for Civic Life Handout (10 minutes)

Table Talk for Today – Group Discussion (10 minutes)

ELCA Advocacy and Witness in Society – How to Get Involved (5 minutes)

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)



Handout for Session 2: God Calls All People to Robust Civic Participation

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

- **What words, phrases, or images stand out to you?**
- **What do Jesus’ words have to do with the well-being for all people?”**
- **What is God calling you to do, be, or change as you hear this passage?**

Table Talk for Today

What is the proper kind of attention to civic & political matters in a congregation? Does a congregation need to agree on everything in order to engage in civic life? Why should congregations, and the church more broadly, be a necessary and safe place to have these conversations? What are examples of how members and leaders in a congregation can create a safe place for these conversations?



Handout for Session 2:

Worship as Preparation for Civic Life

In Article 12, the social statement outlines some ways in which the worship liturgy “prepares us to join God’s activity in civic life.” In pairs or as a group, brainstorm some ways in which we see how that happens in each piece of the liturgy.

How does each piece of worship help us better engage with the world around us?

Gathering

Confession and Forgiveness OR Thanksgiving for Baptism

(Kyrie)

(Hymn of Praise)

Apostolic Greeting and Prayer of the Day

Word

First Reading

Psalm

Second Reading

Gospel

Sermon

Hymn of the Day

Creed

Prayers of the People

Passing the Peace

Meal

Offering

Holy Communion

The Lord’s Prayer

Blessing and Prayer After Communion

Sending

Announcements (Your congregation might do this somewhere else!)

Benediction

Sending Hymn

Dismissal



Week 3: Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government



“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.” (Article 21, page 35)

Objectives

- Define all power as stemming from God’s sovereign, creative, self-giving power.
- Understand human and political power, when directed solely or primarily toward the control or domination of others, is a sinful distortion of God’s power.
- Determine a criterion for assessing human and political power based on its adherence to the divine creative and self-giving purpose of seeking the well-being of all.
- Recognize the radical, pluralistic ideals of the U.S. Constitution, especially in its opening words - “We the People.”
- Correct the idea that the U.S. government is founded on the Christian religion.

Outcomes

Participants will understand how all power stems from God’s creative, self-giving power and how to assess if a government is using power in accordance with striving for the well-being of all. Participants will be able to articulate how proper use of power is based on the presumption of mutual self-determination, sharing and creating power, and serving the most vulnerable in society.

Expected Pre-Work

Read Annotated Guide on Content for Section 3 (Articles 21-28) of the social statement on *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*, pages 5-6.

Materials

Participant Guide and/or Handouts

Writing Utensils and Post-Its (optional)

A copy of the Social Statement *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*
Slides

Timeline (~55 minutes)

Introductions and Community Guidelines/Covenant Reminder (5 minutes)

Opening Scriptural Grounding (10 minutes)

Setting the Table – Theological and Ethical Themes (10 minutes)

“We the People” And the Constitution (10 minutes)

Table Talk for Today – Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)



Handout for Session 3: Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government

Psalm 46:6-11

The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

Questions for Reflection

- What words, phrases, or images stick out to you?
- What are the characteristics of power shown here?
- What is God calling you to do, be, or change in the hearing of this passage?



Handout for Session 3: Assessing the U.S. Constitutional Form of Government

Reflection on “These United States: A History of the Constitution”

- Was anything new to you or surprising in this video?
- How did this video compare to Articles 24-25 of the social statement?
- How would you articulate the ideals of the U.S. Constitution?

Table Talk for Today

How do you assess the success of the local, state, federal government in serving the well-being of all? How can you tell if government (at any level) is doing what we hope it does?



Week 4: Religion and the First Amendment

“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.” (Article 29, pages 44-45)

Objectives

- Understand that the U.S. Constitution has a strong foundation of religious neutrality, thus allowing each person and group to practice the religion of their choice, or none.
- Define the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment.
- Articulate the value of protecting religious diversity, and the difference between Christian freedom and religious liberty.
- Appreciate the balance of a commitment to important public interests and rights and allowing for religious practices, while dismantling the myth of a “wall of separation.”

Outcomes

Participants will come to understand the First Amendment as extending the Constitution’s commitment to self-determination and religious neutrality. They will be able to articulate that popular (mis)understandings of the separation of church and state and the way the First Amendment can and should be applied to public life.

Expected Pre-Work

Read the Annotated Guide to Content for Section 4 (Articles 29-33) of the social statement on *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*, page 6.

Materials

Participant Guide and/or Handouts

Writing Utensils and Post-Its (optional)

Copy of the Social Statement, *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*
Slides

Timeline (~55 minutes)

Introductions and Community Guidelines/Covenant Reminder (5 minutes)

Opening Scriptural Grounding (10 minutes)

Setting the Table – Theological and Ethical, and Constitutional Themes (10 minutes)

Watch: BJC and James Talarico on displays of the 10 Commandments (15 minutes)

Table Talk for Today – Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)



Handout for Session 4: Religion and the First Amendment

1 Corinthians 10:23-32

“All things are permitted,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are permitted,” but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage but that of the other. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s.” If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you and for the sake of conscience—I mean the other’s conscience, not your own. For why should my freedom be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage but that of many, so that they may be saved.

Questions for Reflection

- What words, phrases, or images stick out to you?
- What is Paul saying about interacting with people of different religious practices?
- What is God calling you to do, be, or change in the hearing of this passage?

Table Talk for Today

Where does exercise of religious belief have boundaries? Where does exercise of government have boundaries regarding religion?



Week 5: Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations and Political Authority

“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.” (Article 37, page 55)

Objectives

- Examine the longstanding commitment of the ELCA to work with civil authorities while maintaining institutional separation of church and state in a relation of critical functional interaction.
- Identify safeguards for this constructive relationship, including the Johnson Amendment.
- Learn the difference between healthy patriotism and the idolatry of Christian nationalism.

Outcomes

Participants will be able to articulate the ways in which religious organizations and political authorities can and should work together, for the sake of the common good, without violating the commitment of institutional separation. They will feel empowered to name the dangers of the idolatry of Christian nationalism, especially as it is differentiated from healthy patriotism.

Expected Pre-Work

Read Annotated Guide to Content for Section 5 (Articles 34-38) of the social statement on *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*, page 7

Materials

Participant Guide and/or Handouts

Writing Utensils and Post-Its (optional)

Copy of the Social Statement, *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*
Slides

Timeline (~55 minutes)

Introductions and Community Guidelines/Covenant Reminder (5 minutes)

Opening Scriptural Grounding (10 minutes)

Setting the Table – Theological and Ethical, and Constitutional Themes (10 minutes)

Watch: Christian Nationalism and Who is A Real American (10 minutes)

Table Talk for Today – Group Discussion (15 minutes)

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)



Handout for Session 5: Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations and Political Authority

Matthew 4:1-4, 8-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ ”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Questions for Reflection

- What words, phrases or images stick out to you?
- What is Jesus’ reaction when the devil offers him the praise of earthly kingdoms?
- What is God calling you to do, be, or change in the hearing of this passage?



Handout for Session 5: Constructive Relationships Between Religious Organizations and Political Authority

Reflecting on “Christian Nationalism and Who is a Real American?”

- When have you been the recipient of generosity or charity from someone who was different from you?
- Who are neighbors or loved ones in your life who might not fit into a Christian nationalist idea of who is a “real” American?
- What are some common ideas about the Constitution or the founding that contribute to the forces of Christian nationalism? How would you counter or reframe those?

Table Talk for Today

How would you describe the difference between healthy patriotism and Christian nationalism?



Week 6: Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life and Implementing Resolutions

“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.” (Article 40, page 60)

Objectives

- Understand the current context of hyperpartisan polarization as damaging to individuals and the social fabric.
- Identify ways to counter this hyperpartisan polarization through addressing misinformation and prioritizing compassionate listening to all, especially the perspectives of those affected by policies.
- Deepen our commitment to robust civic engagement – including but not limited to informed voting, public witness, and community organizing.

Outcomes

Participants will be able to articulate our current struggles with hyperpartisan polarization, and the contributing harms of misinformation and attempts to limit civic engagement. They will learn theological and civic commitments the ELCA has made to counter those harms and will begin to form commitments they can make as individuals and communities to further their vocation as disciples engaged in civic life.

Expected Pre-Work

Read the Annotated Guide to Content for Section 6 (Articles 39-49), pages 8-9, and the Implementing Resolutions of the social statement, pages 89-91.

Materials

Participant Guide and/or Handouts

Writing Utensils and Sticky Notes (optional)

A Copy of the Social Statement, *Faith and Civic Life: Seeking the Well-being of All*
Slides

Timeline (~55 minutes)

Introductions and Community Guidelines/Covenant Reminder (5 minutes)

Opening Scriptural Grounding (10 minutes)

Setting the Table – Selected Contemporary Concerns (10 minutes)

Table Talk for Today – Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Implementing Resolutions (15 minutes)

Closing Order of Confession and Forgiveness (5 minutes)



Handout for Session 6: Selected Contemporary Concerns in Civic Life and Implementing Resolutions

From Luther's Small Catechism

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

What does this mean?

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

Questions for Reflection

- What words, phrases or images stick out to you?
- What does it mean to interpret our neighbor's action "in the best possible light"?
- What is God calling you to do, be, or change in the hearing of this passage?

Table Talk for Today

How do we avoid contributing to hyperpartisanship in society & in our congregation?



Implementing Resolutions



For yourself:

1.

2.

3.

For your congregation/community:

1.

2.

3.



LAMPa offers this curriculum as a gift to the church.

To find out more about this ministry, go to:

www.lutheranadvocacy.org

To learn more about ELCA social teaching, go to:

elca.org/socialstatements



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