ELCA Social Statement on Faith and Civic Life
Participant Material
Greater Milwaukee Synod

Session 1 – Our Calling as Christians to Engage in Civic Life

Purpose
Given the complexity of political issues and the polarization and division that we regularly feel around what we call politics, we may want to tune out and avoid any engagement in civic life. This session will explore our baptismal calling and the meaning of our faith for engagement in civic life.

Definitions
- Civic Life, page 80
- Common Good, page 81
- Vocation, page 87

Articles 3, 5-11 (pages 12-14, 15-23)

Article 3, page 12-14
- "Vocation to share God's work toward the well-being of creation." (p. 12)
    - activities of "cooperation, conversation, and social coordination" (p. 13)
    - created "relational beings who live in social and political communities" (p. 13)
- Baptismal Liturgy to "serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth" (p. 13).
- "God acts through the basic structures of government, church, family, and economy, and humans have varied responsibilities in each. . . . serving in civic life as 'channels of God's work'" (p. 13).

Article 5, pages 15-16
- God's two-handed reign: "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" (p. 16).

Article 6, pages 16-17
- Living in the ambiguity of our times, "we are called to work for a better world" (p. 17).
- "We should support and commend civic and political efforts that bring greater measures of order, justice, and harmony," being open to revising as needed (p. 17).

Article 7, pages 17-18
- Acknowledgment of failure to hold governments accountable and to remain complacent or supportive of oppressive systems (p 18).
- Nonviolent public protests and civil disobedience may be necessary in upholding the common good (p. 18).

Article 8, pages 18-19
- "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" (p. 19), working with others for a just society.

Article 9, pages 19-20
- "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" (p. 20).

Article 10, pages 20-21

- Social fabric depends on multiple ways of participating in civic life as participation builds relationships and "collective action toward fair and compassionate government" (p. 21).

Article 11, pages 21-23

- Importance of public sector work at all levels of civic life and need to respect civil servants and hold them accountable to serve the common good.

Small Group Discussion on Articles

- Share your story of participation in civic life. What has been good and what have been the challenges?
- How do you respond to the concepts that civic engagement is a response to living out your baptism and part of your Christian vocation?
- The statement focuses on our work as Christians to seek the common good and strive for a just society. How does that work take meaning for you?
- Article 7 names a particular civic responsibility to hold government accountable and to participate in nonviolent public protests as needed to uphold the common good. How do you respond?

Small Group Discussion on Video

- What did you hear or notice in the interview about the motivation to actively participate in civic life?
- In what ways do you support or interact with local civil servants to hold them accountable?
- What thoughts or reflections about participation in civic life are you taking with you from this discussion?

Assignment: Read Articles 2, 4, 22-26 (pages 11-12, 14-15, 35-43)

Session 2 – Our Christian Understanding of Power

Purpose

This session examines God's expansive, life-giving power alongside the human distortion of power that oppresses. We also discuss the intended sharing of power as defined in the U.S. Constitution.

Definitions

- God's sovereignty, pages 82-3
- Power, page 84
- Self-determination, page 85
- Shalom, page 86
- Systemic sin, page 86

Articles 2, 4, 22-26 (pages 11-12; 14-15; 35-43)

Article 2, pages 11-12

- "*Shalom* describes God's intention in creation for an abundance of peace, well-being, goodness, truth, beauty, justice, freedom, joy, wholesomeness, and love, all woven together. . . . 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" (p. 11).

- God as source of all power, which is given freely to all to "serve God, creation, and their fellow humans" (p. 11).
- "God's purpose and power always move toward the divine promise of the well-being of all people" (p. 12).
- "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" (p. 12).

Article 4, pages 14 -15

- Lutheran understanding of sin in failing to love and trust God above all else and "an excessive focus on the self at the expense of the neighbor. . . , damaging the well-being that God intends for all creation" (p. 14).
- "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" (p. 14).
- Sin in past social structure of slavery and current recognition of continuing impact of white supremacy (p. 14).
- "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. . . . 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" (p. 15).

Article 22, pages 35-37

- "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" (p. 35).
- "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" (p. 36).
- "Dominating power, including war, can be justified in some circumstances when people are experiencing significant harm or suffering under a totalitarian regime.

Article 23, pages 37-39

- God's creative power grants agency for people to determine their own lives and what is best for them, and therefore, have the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them.
- Self-determination must be grounded in mutuality that recognizes the need for self-determination of others, rather than grounded in individualism; it is based in sharing of power.

Article 24, pages 39-41

- The Constitution includes checks and balances across federal branches and between the national and state levels to combat self-interest and, it defines the purpose of the government to provide for the well-being of all.

Article 25, pages 41-42

- The Constitution, with its amendments, establishes self-determination of "we the people" through the right to vote.

Article 26, pages 42-43

- "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" (p. 43).
- People of faith join civic and political conversations in asking questions of impact and the inclusion of voices for self-determination of those affected by decisions.

Small Group Discussion on Articles

- How does the meaning of God's power and sovereignty challenge our human understanding and manifestation of power?
- Article 4 states: "It also is sin when human beings completely avoid civic life and thereby do not work to serve neighbor justice through it" (p. 15). What does this statement mean for you and your engagement in civic life today?
- What does it mean that self-determination is to be grounded in mutuality? What does that look like in civic life?
- Articles 24-26 address the purpose and power of government as stated in the Constitution. Where and how do you see this purpose and use of power currently lived out or not lived out?

Small Group Discussion on Video

- What did you hear or notice in the interview about the (mis)use of power and its meaning and impact on one's life and the life of a community?
- Share your story of feeling included or excluded from "we the people" and/or how you have experienced the impact of government power to enhance or harm you and those you know.
- What thoughts or reflections about the use of social and political power are you taking with you from this discussion?

Assignment: Read Articles 12-14, 16-20 (pages 23-25, 26-34)

Session 3 – Faith-Based Advocacy and Politics

Purpose

When and how religious communities and rostered ministers address issues that are seen as political can cause disagreements in church communities. This session explores the meaning of politics, the prophetic role of the church, faith-based advocacy, and the role of congregations and rostered ministers in speaking and acting politically.

Definitions

- Community of moral deliberation/discernment, page 81
- Discernment, page 81
- Politics, page 84

Articles 12-14, 16-20 (pages 23-25; 26-34)

Article 12, page 23

- Worship prepares the assembly to go forth as God's people and be active in civic life.
- "[T]his church expects that each worshiping community will be engaged in forms of active civic participation as one element of life in Christ's church" (p. 23).

Article 13, pages 23-24

- "Religious communities and organizations must discern when and how to constructively engage in civic life" (p. 23), recognizing each person as a child of God, working toward wider inclusion, and serving and advocating for the common good.

Article 14, page 25

- Congregations are places for moral deliberation and have "a special responsibility to seek to provide safe spaces for challenging conversations. A safe space does not mean a space where all agree" (p. 25).

Article 16, pages 26-27

- The prophetic role of the church requires care and wise discernment in naming sin in social structures, seeking justice, engaging in advocacy, and working for social change.

Article 17, pages 27-28

- "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" (p. 27).
- "Faith-based organizing at the local level . . . 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" (p. 28).
- "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" (p. 28).

Article 18, pages 29-30

- "Civic or political concerns should be guided by ethical teaching" that seeks to discern "what is right, good, or fitting" (p. 29).
- Politics is the complicated and messy activity of people negotiating how to live together for the well-being of the community.
- "Ethics discerns; politics implements" (p. 30).

Article 19, pages 30-31

- Jesus' ministry was political in advocating for the poor and marginalized and challenging social norms and systems and those in authority.
- The proclamation of "Jesus is Lord" was a political statement that God is ruler over all; our primary loyalty is to God and not to a particular earthly power.
- Need to participate in the political arena to live out Jesus' call to love our neighbor and seek justice. "Addressing issues in the political arena [then] is an element of Christian calling" (p. 31).
- While individuals may participate politically within political parties, "the institutional church itself is not to be a partisan community" (p. 31).

Article 20, pages 31-34

- While all Christians are called to participate in civic life, rostered ministers hold a particular role in proclaiming the Word and ministering to God's people; naming systemic sin; and speaking publicly to connect faith and contemporary issues.
- In preaching and teaching the way of Jesus, rostered ministers speak and act politically, but they are not to be partisan in supporting candidates or political parties.
- Rostered ministers need to discern their context as they seek to speak faithfully on civic and political issues and advocate for the poor and marginalized.
- Church communities need to support and care for their rostered leaders in their public role in mutual discernment in addressing public issues.

<u>Small Group Discussion on Articles</u>

- How do you react to the statement in Article 12, page 23, that "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?"

- Share how your congregation engages in civic life, moral deliberation, faith-based advocacy, and/or faith-based organizing.
- In what ways do you see the prophetic role of the church and/or ethical teaching in your congregation?
- This statement names Jesus' ministry as political in seeking justice and challenging sin in social norms and structures. What meaning does the example of Jesus have for rostered ministers in their public role?

Small Group Discussion on Video

- What did you hear or notice in the interview about the need and challenges for faith-based advocacy?
- Where or how have you engaged in advocacy, and/or what hinders you from participating in advocacy and moral deliberation in working for social change?
- What thoughts or reflections about the need for discernment and engagement in advocacy are you taking from this session?

Assignment: Read Articles 21, 34-37 (pages 34-35, 52-56)

Session 4 – Relationship Between Church and Government

Purpose

This session examines the relationship between church and government, recognizing the call to participate in and support civil authority as it works to ensure care for the general welfare, especially the most vulnerable, while also recognizing the responsibility of the church to hold civil authority to account when it fails to uphold the common good.

Definitions

- Separation of church and state, pages 85-86
- Three estates, page 87
- Two kingdoms, page 87
- Two reigns, hands, or regimens of God, page 87

Articles 21, 34-37 (pages 34-35; 52-56)

Article 21, pages 34-35

- "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. . . . [T]he role of government should be focused on ensuring that each person receives all the necessities for daily well-being" (p. 35).
- Lutheran tradition calls for support of civil authority but also call it to account when it falls short in serving the common good.

Article 34, pages 52-53

- The church's relationship with government includes
    - Responsibility to participate in God's work for the well-being of all;
    - Responsibility to participate as a corporate body in "we the people."

Article 35, page 53

- ELCA constitution "phrase 'work with civil authorities in areas of mutual endeavor' makes clear that the church should engage political authority actively and flexibly," . . . to join in "promot[ing] the general welfare" (p. 53).
- Our faith calls us "to join in public action relying upon [our] best understanding of God's intention for creation and society." . . . in "the mutual endeavor of addressing human needs" (p. 53).
- "Sometimes, however, 'working with' entails critical challenges to government, such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people and creation" (p. 53).

Article 36, pages 53-55

- "[While] political authority and religious institutions [have] distinctive purposes, organizational principles, and competences, . . . religious organizations and institutions share spaces of mutual concern and action with government. . . . [and] therefore hold [a] relationship . . . of 'functional interaction'" (p. 54).
- "This church, unlike some Christian churches, teaches that it is not the church's role to endorse candidates or parties" (p. 54).
- The ELCA supports the Johnson Amendment that prohibits churches and religious leaders from supporting specific candidates or parties; individuals may support candidates and parties, but not speak for the church.
- Religious organizations are encouraged "to champion values in the public sphere for the sake of society's good" (p. 55).

Article 37, pages 55-56

- "Government support for faith-based social service organization is appropriate only when they . . . serve people without expectation about or regard to their faith" (p. 55).

<u>Small Group Discussion on Articles</u>

- Based on the definitions of terms and the explanations in these articles, how do you understand the role of the church and the role of the government and their interaction?
- Article 35 states, "Sometimes, however, 'working with' entails critical challenges to government, such as advocating for change in policies and programs that harm people and creation." What can help you discern when to critically challenge government and advocate for change?
- How do you distinguish between the need for the church and its leaders to champion values of God's purposes for justice and the prohibition against supporting particular candidates or political parties?
- As we have engaged in this study of the social statement, has your understanding changed of your role in civic life and/or the role of your congregation and the larger church? If so, how?

<u>Small Group Discussion on Video</u>

- What did you hear or notice in the interview about finding a place to stand on issues that seek the common good, while avoiding support for a candidate or party?
- What is an issue important to you that you support and advocate for that is based in your faith values?
- What thoughts or reflections are you taking from this session regarding the roles of government and church and their interaction?

<u>Assignment</u>: Read Articles 24, 27-33, 38 (pages 39-41, 43-52, 56-58)

Session 5 – The First Amendment and Christian Nationalism

Purpose

The role of religion in government, the place of prayer in schools, and the meaning of patriotism can be issues of debate and dissension. This session will explore the meaning of clauses in the First Amendment that relate to freedom of religion alongside the growing threat of Christian Nationalism.

Definitions

- Christian nationalism, page 80
- Establishment Clause, page 82
- Free Exercise Clause, page 82

Articles 24, 27-33, 38 (pages 39-41; 43-52; 56-58)

Article 24, pages 39-41; Article 27, pages 43-44

- "The 1788 Constitution makes no mention of God or religion except to prohibit requiring religious tests for holding federal office" (p. 40).

Article 28, page 44

- "In 1796, George Washngton's administration made an official statement on the subject [of the founding of the U.S. as a Christian nation] as part of an international treaty: 'The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion" (p. 44).
- The Constitution established that the nation's sovereign is 'we the people,' not 'we the faithful' or 'we the Christians'" (p. 44).

Article 29, pages 44-46

- The Establishment Clause in the First Amendment states that there can be no law establishing or promoting a particular faith or religion.
- The Free Exercise Clause states that there can be no law that prohibits the free exercise of religion.
- Free exercise of religion has limits in not harming the neighbor or the broader community.

Article 30, pages 46-47

- The nonestablishment principle is threatened when the government displays religious symbols or promotes prayer or Bible in schools.

Article 31, pages 47-49

- The Free Exercise Clause "protect[s] and promote[s] religious diversity" (p. 47), ensuring the right of people to practice the faith of their choice or no faith, with no discrimination from the government based on religion.
- Under the Free Exercise Clause, individuals can bring their beliefs into public debate and advocacy.

Article 32, pages 49-51

- Importance of maintaining a balance between Free Exercise and ensuring that religious practice does not damage the civil rights of others.

Article 33, pages 51-52

- The nonestablishment principle does not mean that individuals cannot bring their beliefs into public life.

Article 38, pages 56-58

- Patriotism can take healthy and unhealthy forms. Healthy patriotism of love and support for country becomes unhealthy when a political party, individual, or racial or ethnic group is elevated to a place of veneration.
- Christian Nationalism is an unhealthy form of patriotism that centers Christian ideas as the definition for the national way of life.
- "In hardline strains of Christian nationalism, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens" and are the ones who should be in power (p. 57).
- For theological reasons, the ELCA repudiates Christian nationalism as a distortion of the Christian faith that crosses the line into idolatry" (p. 57).

Small Group Discussion on Articles

- Article 28 addresses claims that have been made defining the U.S. as a Christian nation. What thoughts and responses do you have to the discussion in this article?
- What meaning do the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause have for how we value one another of all religions and recognize diverse religious symbols and holidays?
- What messages of Christian beliefs do you see as important to our shared public life?
- How does Christian nationalism distort "the Christian faith [and] cross the line into idolatry?"

Small Group Discussion on Video

- What did you hear or notice in the interview about the dangers of Christian Nationalism?
- What does it mean to you to be part of a country where all belong? What is lost if some are not seen as American enough or not fully included in "we the people?"
- What thoughts or reflections are you taking with you from this session?

Assignment: Read Articles 40-44, 48 (pages 58-66, 70-71)

Session 6 – Hyperpartisan Polarization and Need for Constructive Engagement

Purpose

Our lives become easily divided from others based on the news we listen to or watch, the social media we read, and the people with whom we engage. As a country, we have been experiencing more and more polarization and entrenchment of opinions. The church can be a place where we find our common identity as children of God and can engage in respectful dialogue.

Definitions

- Mega-identity, page 83
- Partisanship, page 84
- Polarization, page 84

Articles 40-44, 48 (pages 58-66, 70-71)

Article 40, pages 58-61

- Contemporary issue of hyperpartisan polarization "undercuts the search for collaborative solutions and significantly damages individuals and the social fabric" (p. 58).
- U.S. party system gives voice to different perspectives and approaches to issues and is basic to political life. Parties have historically "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" (pp. 58-59).

- Political identities often now are connected with personal demographic identities that create an us-versus-them mentality that supersedes commonalities and harms relationships. The "mega-identities" are reinforced by news channels, social media, and political leaders and lead to hyperpolarization that sees those with different positions as the enemy without room for interaction and discussion.
- Our Christian identity, grounded in God's love, gives us room for respectful engagement through careful listening and respect across differing perspectives.
- The goal of a democratic society is to welcome differing voices to work together for the enhancement of the common good.

Article 41, pages 61-62

- The ELCA recognizes the importance of thought leaders who model respect, listening, and healthy public dialogue.

Article 42, pages 62-63

- Current media sources challenge the ability to discern fact, misinformation, and lies.
- "The Eighth Commandment directs people of faith to exert efforts against bearing false witness" and calls us to "represent the best possible understanding of our neighbor" (p. 62).
- "We should be 'innocent as doves' when interpreting the intentions of our neighbor but 'wise as serpents' when discerning what information we encounter in any media" and refrain from sharing sensational, misleading, or incorrect information and hurtful comments (p. 62).

Article 43, pages 63-65

- Importance of awareness of the influence of money and corporations and the need for support and advocacy for legislation to limit campaign contributions and increase transparency in financial reporting.

Article 44, pages 65-66

- Recognition of the need to hold government accountable and work for change when structural barriers or policies or programs do not serve the common good or limit access for some.

Article 48, pages 70-71

- Commitment to civic engagement is necessary to reduce hyperpartisan polarization and is central to us as citizens and to our calling as Christians.

<u>Small Group Discussion on Articles</u>

- How has hyperpartisan polarization impacted your life and relationships? Are there people from whom you have been distanced?
- Identify a person you know who stands in a different place from you politically. Imagine how you could approach that person and invite them into a conversation.
- What are the dangers of polarization in our country and how is disregard for democratic practices threatening our common life together and our future as a nation?
- In what ways are you pulled into cycles of misinformation or labeling those who think differently, and how do you work to examine sources to seek facts?

<u>Small Group Discussion on Video</u>

- What did you hear or notice in the interview that speaks to opportunities to bridge the chasm of polarization?
- What opportunities could your congregation provide to evaluate the dangers of polarization and to engage in difficult conversations?

- What thoughts or reflections are you taking with you from this discussion?

Thank people for participating. Continue the conversation!

This study guide was authored by Joyce A. Caldwell, PhD, on behalf of the Greater Milwaukee Synod, ELCA.